

# The will of the people

## Notes towards a dialectical voluntarism

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By 'will of the people' I mean a deliberate, emancipatory and inclusive process of collective self-determination. Like any kind of will, its exercise is voluntary and autonomous, a matter of practical freedom; like any form of collective action, it involves assembly and organization. Recent examples of the sort of popular will that I have in mind include the determination, assembled by South Africa's United Democratic Front, to overthrow an apartheid based on culture and race, or the mobilization of Haiti's Lavalas to confront an apartheid based on privilege and class. Conditioned by the specific strategic constraints that structure a particular situation, such mobilizations test the truth expressed in the old cliché, 'where there's a will there's a way'. Or, to adapt Antonio Machado's less prosaic phrase, taken up as a motto by Paulo Freire, they assume that 'there is no way, we make the way by walking it'.<sup>1</sup>

To say that we make the way by walking it is to resist the power of the historical, cultural or socio-economic terrain to determine our way. It is to insist that in an emancipatory political sequence what is 'determinant in the first instance' is the will of the people to prescribe, through the terrain that confronts them, the course of their own history. It is to privilege, over the complexity of the terrain and the forms of knowledge and authority that govern behaviour 'adapted' to it, the purposeful will of the people to take and retain their place as the 'authors and actors of their own drama'.<sup>2</sup>

To say that we make our way by walking it is not to pretend, however, that we invent the ground we traverse. It is not to suppose that a will creates itself and the conditions of its exercise abruptly or *ex nihilo*. It is not to assume that the 'real movement which abolishes the existing state of things' proceeds through empty or indeterminate space. It is not to disregard the obstacles or opportunities that characterize a particular terrain, or to deny their ability to influence the forging of a way. Instead it is to remember, after Sartre, that obstacles appear as such in the light of a project to

climb past them. It is to remember, after Marx, that we make our own history, without choosing the conditions of its making. It is to conceive of terrain and way through a dialectic which, connecting both objective and subjective forms of determination, is oriented by the primacy of the latter.

Affirmation of such relational primacy informs what might be called a 'dialectical voluntarism'. A dialectical voluntarist assumes that collective self-determination – more than an assessment of what seems feasible or appropriate – is the animating principle of political action. Dialectical voluntarists have confidence in the will of the people to the degree that they think each term through the other: 'will' in terms of assembly, deliberation and determination, and 'people' in terms of an exercise of collective volition.

I

The arrival of the will of the people as an actor on the political stage over the course of the eighteenth century was itself a revolutionary development, and it was experienced as such by the people themselves. To assert the rational and collective will of the people as the source of political authority and power was to reject alternative conceptions of politics premised on either the mutual exclusion of society and will (a politics determined by natural, historical or economic necessity), or the primacy of another sort of will (the will of God, of God's representative on earth, or of his semi-secular equivalent: the will of an elite entitled to govern on account of their accumulated privileges and qualifications).

If the French and Haitian revolutions of the late eighteenth century remain two of the most decisive political events of modern times it's not because they affirmed the liberal freedoms that are so easily (because unevenly) commemorated today. What was and remains revolutionary about France 1789–94 and Haiti 1791–1803 is the direct mobilization of the people to claim these universal rights and freedoms, in direct confrontation with the most powerful vested interests

of the day.<sup>3</sup> The taking of the Bastille, the march upon Versailles, the invasion of the Tuileries, the September Massacres, the expulsion of the Girondins, the innumerable confrontations with ‘enemies of the people’ up and down the country: these are the deliberate interventions that defined both the course of the French Revolution, and the immense, unending counter-revolution that it provoked. The Haitian revolutionaries went one step further and forced, for the first time, immediate and unconditional application of the principle that inspired the whole of the radical enlightenment: affirmation of the natural, inalienable rights of all human beings.<sup>4</sup> The campaign to re-pacify the people has been running, in different ways in different places, ever since.

The events of 1789–94, and the popular mobilization that enabled them, continue to frame our most basic political choice – between empowerment or disempowerment of the will of the people. In Robespierre’s France ‘there are only two parties: the people and its enemies’, and ‘whoever is not for the people is against the people.’ Despite the well-known limits of his own populism, Thomas Jefferson found a similar distinction at work in every political configuration: there are ‘those who fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes’, and there are ‘those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them’ and consider them the ‘safest depository of their own rights’.<sup>5</sup> In spite of all that has changed over the past two hundred years, the alternative remains much the same: either an insistence on the primacy of popular self-determination, or a presumption that the people are too crude, barbaric or childlike to be capable of exercising a rational and deliberate will.

Different versions of this choice have come to the fore every time there is an opportunity to confront the system of domination that structures a specific situation. The will, as Badiou notes, is an essentially ‘combative’ process.<sup>6</sup> Haiti, Bolivia, Palestine and Ecuador are some of the places where in recent years the people have managed, in the face of considerable opposition, to formulate and to some extent impose their will to transform the situation that oppresses them. Responses to such imposition have tended to follow the Thermidorian model. The mix of old and new counter-revolutionary strategies for criminalizing, dividing, and then dissolving the will of the people – for restoring the people to their ‘normal’ condition as a dispersed and passive flock – is likely to define the terrain of emancipatory struggle for the foreseeable future.

## II

In a European context, philosophical expression of a confidence in the will of the people dates back to Rousseau, and develops in different directions via Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Marx.<sup>7</sup> Over the course of this trajectory the category of the people expands from the anachronistic idealization of a small homogeneous community towards an anticipation of humanity as a whole. The more it approaches a global universality the more difficult it becomes, of course, to conceive of the people in terms of a naively immediate or self-actualizing conception of will. Kant’s abstract universalization makes too sharp a distinction between determination of the will and its realization; Hegel goes too far in the other direction.

I will assume here that the most fruitful way to begin thinking a dialectical voluntarism that might eventually draw on aspects of both Kant and Hegel is to start with a return to Rousseau and his Jacobin followers, notably Robespierre and Saint-Just, supplemented by reference to more recent interventions that might be described in roughly neo-Jacobin terms. Rousseau’s conception of a general will remains the single most important contribution to the logic at work in a dialectical voluntarism. Unlike Rousseau or Hegel, however, my concern here is not with a people conceived as a socially or ethically integrated unit, one that finds its natural horizon in the nation-state, so much as with the people who participate in the active willing of a general will as such. Such a will is at work in the mobilization of any emancipatory collective force – a national liberation struggle, a movement for social justice, an empowering political or economic association, and so on. ‘The people’ at issue here are simply those who, in any given situation, formulate, assert and sustain a fully common (and thus fully inclusive and egalitarian) interest, over and above any divisive or exclusive interest.

The gulf that separates Marxist from Jacobin conceptions of political action is obvious enough, and in the first instance a dialectical voluntarism has more to learn from the latter than the former. Nevertheless, what is most fundamental in Marx is not the ‘inevitable’ or involuntary process whereby capitalism might seem to dig its own grave, but rather the way in which it prepares the ground upon which the determined diggers might appear. ‘The emancipation of the working classes’, stipulates the well-known opening sentence of the rules Marx drafted for the First International, ‘must be conquered by the working classes themselves’.<sup>8</sup> Even Marx’s most non-voluntarist work is best described as an effort to

show 'how the will to change capitalism can develop into successful transformative (revolutionary) activity', or as an effort 'not only to make History but to get a grip on it, practically and theoretically'.<sup>9</sup> (A similar argument, as Adrian Johnston, Tracy McNulty and several others point out, might be made in relation to Freud and Lacan.<sup>10</sup>) The concentration of capital and the intensification of exploitation and misery which accompanies it lead not to the automatic collapse of capitalism but to a growth in the size, frequency and intensity of 'the revolt of the working-class'. It is this class which, as anticipated by the Paris Communards, will carry out the deliberate work of 'expropriating the expropriators'.<sup>11</sup> Once victorious, this same class will preside over the establishment of a mode of production marked above all by the predominance of autonomy, mastery and freedom. The newly 'associated producers [will] regulate their interchange with nature rationally and bring it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by some blind power.' They will thereby enable affirmation of human creativity and 'energy [as] an end in itself'.<sup>12</sup> Understood as the real movement which abolishes the existing state of things, communism, we might say, forces the conversion of work into will.

The optimism that characterizes such an approach is still emphatic in Gramsci (who seeks 'to put the "will", which in the last analysis equals practical or political activity, at the base of philosophy'<sup>13</sup>) and in the early writings of Lukács (for whom 'decision', 'subjective will' and 'free action' have strategic precedence over the apparent 'facts' of a situation<sup>14</sup>). Comparable priorities also orient the political writings of a few more recent philosophers, like Sartre, Beauvoir and Badiou. Obvious differences aside, what these thinkers have in common is an emphasis on the practical primacy of self-determination and self-emancipation. However constrained your situation you are always free, as Sartre liked to say, 'to make something of what is made of you'.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, however, it is difficult to think of a canonical notion more roundly condemned, in recent 'Western' philosophy, than the notion of will, to say nothing of that general will so widely condemned as a precursor of tyranny and totalitarian terror. In philosophical circles voluntarism has become little more than a term of abuse, and an impressively versatile one at that: depending on the context, it can evoke idealism, obscurantism, vitalism, infantile leftism, fascism, petty-bourgeois narcissism, neocon aggression, folk-psychological delusion ... Of all the faculties or capacities of that human subject who was

displaced from the centre of post-Sartrean concerns, none was more firmly proscribed than its conscious volition. Structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, by and large, relegated volition and intention to the domain of deluded, imaginary or humanist-ideological miscognition. Rather than explore the ways in which political determination might depend on a collective subject's self-determination, recent philosophy and cultural theory have tended to privilege various forms of either indetermination (the interstitial, the hybrid, the ambivalent, the simulated, the undecidable, the chaotic...) or hyper-determination ('infinite' ethical obligation, divine transcendence, unconscious drive, traumatic repression, machinic automation...). The allegedly obsolete notion of a *pueblo unido* has been displaced by a more differentiated and more deferential plurality of actors – flexible identities, negotiable histories, improvised organizations, dispersed networks, 'vital' multitudes, polyvalent assemblages, and so on.

Even the most cursory overview of recent European philosophy is enough to evoke its general tendency to distrust, suspend or overcome the will – a tendency anticipated, in an extreme form, by Schopenhauer. Consider a few names from a list that could be easily expanded. Nietzsche's whole project presumes that 'there is no such thing as will' in the usual (voluntary, deliberate, purposeful...) sense of the word.<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, over the course of his own lectures on Nietzsche, comes to condemn the will as a force of subjective domination and nihilist closure, before urging his readers 'willingly to renounce willing'.<sup>17</sup> Arendt finds, in the affirmation of a popular political will ('the most dangerous of modern concepts and misconceptions'), the temptation that turns modern revolutionaries into tyrants.<sup>18</sup> For Adorno, rational will is an aspect of that Enlightenment pursuit of mastery and control which has left the earth 'radiant with triumphant calamity'. Althusser devalues the will as an aspect of ideology, in favour of the scientific analysis of historical processes that proceed without a subject. Negri and Virno associate a will of the people with authoritarian state power. After Nietzsche, Deleuze privileges transformative sequences that require the suspension, shattering or paralysis of voluntary action. After Heidegger, Derrida associates the will with self-presence and self-coincidence, a forever futile effort to appropriate the inappropriable (the unrepresentable, the equivocal, the undecidable, the differential, the deferred, the discordant, the transcendent, the other). After these and others, Agamben summarizes much recent European thinking on political will when he effectively equates it with fascism pure and simple.

Even those thinkers who, against the grain of the times, have insisted on the primacy of self-determination and self-emancipation have tended to do so in ways that devalue political will. Take Foucault, Sartre and Badiou. Much of Foucault's work might be read as an extended analysis, after Canguilhem, of the ways in which people are 'de-voluntarized' by the 'permanent coercions' at work in disciplinary power, coercions designed to establish 'not the general will but automatic docility'.<sup>19</sup> Foucault never compromised on his affirmation of 'voluntary insubordination' in the face of newly stifling forms of government and power, and in crucial lectures from the early 1970s he demonstrated how the development of modern psychiatric and carceral power, in the immediate wake of the French Revolution, was designed first and foremost to 'over-power' and break the will of people who had the folly literally to 'take themselves for a king';<sup>20</sup> nevertheless, in his published work Foucault tends to see the will as complicit in forms of self-supervision, self-regulation and self-subjection. Sartre probably did more than any other philosopher of his generation to emphasize the ways in which an emancipatory project or group depends upon the determination of a 'concrete will', but his philosophy offers a problematic basis for any sort of voluntarism. He accepts as 'irreducible' the 'intention' and goals which orient an individual's fundamental project, but makes a sharp distinction between such intention and merely 'voluntary deliberation' or motivation: since for Sartre the latter is always secondary and 'deceptive', the result is to render the primary intention opaque and beyond 'interpretation'.<sup>21</sup> Sartre's later work subsequently fails to conceive of a collective will in other than exceptionalist and ephemeral terms. Badiou's powerful revival of a militant theory of the subject is more easily reconciled with a voluntarist agenda (or at least with what Badiou calls a *volonté impure*<sup>22</sup>), but suffers from some similar limitations. It's no accident that, like Agamben and Žižek, when Badiou looks to the Christian tradition for a point of anticipation he turns not to Matthew (with his prescriptions of how to act in the world: spurn the rich, affirm the poor, 'sell all thou hast'...) but to Paul (with his contempt for the weakness of human will and his valorization of the abrupt and infinite transcendence of grace).

Pending a more robust philosophical defence, contemporary critical theorists tend to dismiss the notion of will as a matter of delusion or deviation. But since it amounts to little more than a perverse appropriation of more fundamental forms of revolutionary determination, there is no reason to accept fascist exaltation

of an 'awakening' or 'triumph of the will' as the last word on the subject. The true innovators in the modern development of a voluntarist philosophy are Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, and the general principles of such a philosophy are most easily recognized in the praxis of people like Robespierre, John Brown, Fanon, Che Guevara... It is to such people that we need to turn in order to remember or reconceive the true meaning of popular political will.

### III

On this basis we might enumerate, along broadly neo-Jacobin lines, some of the characteristic features of a will of the people:

1. The *will* of the people commands, by definition, voluntary and autonomous action. Unlike involuntary or reflex-like responses, if it exists then will initiates action through free, rational deliberation. As Rousseau puts it, the fundamental 'principle of any action lies in the will of a free being; there is no higher or deeper source .... Without will there is no freedom, no self-determination, no "moral causality"'.<sup>23</sup> Robespierre soon drew the most basic political implication when he realized that when people will or 'want to be free they will be'. Sieyès anticipated the point, on the eve of 1789: 'every man has an inherent right to deliberate and will for himself', and 'either one wills freely or one is forced to will, there cannot be any middle position'. Outside voluntary self-legislation 'there cannot be anything other than the empire of the strong over the weak and its odious consequences'.<sup>24</sup>

An intentional freedom is not reducible to the mere faculty of free choice or *liberum arbitrium*.<sup>25</sup> If we are to speak of the 'will of the people' we cannot restrict it (as Machiavelli and his successors do) to the passive expression of approval or consent.<sup>26</sup> It is the process of actively willing or choosing that renders a particular course of action preferable to another. 'Always engaged', argues Sartre, freedom never 'pre-exists its choice: we shall never apprehend ourselves except as a choice in the making'.<sup>27</sup> Augustine and then Duns Scotus already understood that 'our will would not be will unless it were in our power'.<sup>28</sup> Descartes likewise recognized that 'voluntary and free are the same thing', and finds in the 'indivisible' and immeasurable freedom of the will our most fundamental resemblance to divinity.<sup>29</sup> Kant (followed by Fichte) then radicalizes this voluntarist approach when he defines the activity of willing as 'causality through reason' or 'causality through freedom'.<sup>30</sup> Will achieves the practical liberation of reason from the constraints of experience and



objective knowledge. As Kant understood more clearly than anyone before him, mere familiarity with what is or has been the case, when it comes to ethics and politics, is ‘the mother of illusion’.<sup>31</sup> It is the active willing which determines what is possible and what is right, and makes it so. As the French Revolution will confirm, it is as willing or practical beings that ‘people have the quality or power of being the *cause* and ... *author* of their own improvement’.<sup>32</sup>

From a voluntarist perspective, the prescription of ends and principles precedes the calculation, according to the established criteria that serve to evaluate action



within a situation, of what is possible, feasible, or legitimate. To affirm the primacy of a prescriptive will is to insist that in politics all external (natural, sociological, historical, unconscious, technical...) forms of determination, however significant, are nonetheless secondary, as are all forms of regulation and representation. ‘To will’, as Badiou puts it, is ‘to force a point of impossibility, so as to make it possible.’<sup>33</sup> The guiding strategic maxim here, adopted in situations ranging from Lenin’s Russia in 1917 to Aristide’s Haiti in 1990, was most succinctly stated by Napoleon: *on s’engage puis on voit*. Those sceptical of political will, by contrast, assume that apparently voluntary commitments mask

a more profound ignorance or devaluation of appetite (Hobbes), causality (Spinoza), context (Montesquieu), habit (Hume), tradition (Burke), history (Tocqueville), power (Nietzsche), the unconscious (Freud), convention (Wittgenstein), writing (Derrida), desire (Deleuze), drive (Žižek)...

2. The will of the *people* involves collective action and direct participation. A democratic political will depends on the power and practice of inclusive assembly, the power to sustain a common commitment. As many of his readers have pointed out, what

distinguishes Rousseau from other thinkers who (like Plato or Montesquieu) likewise privilege the general over the particular is his insistence that only active *willing* can enable an inclusive association, an association with an actively ‘common interest’.<sup>34</sup> What ‘generalises the public will is not the quantity of voters but the common interest which unites them’,<sup>35</sup> and what sustains this interest is the common will to identify and accomplish it.

The assertion of a general will, needless to say, is a matter of collective volition at every stage of its development. The inaugural ‘association is the most voluntary act in the world’, and to remain an active participant of the association ‘is to will what is in the common or general interest’. In so far (and only in so far) as they pursue this interest, each person ‘puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme control of the general will’.<sup>36</sup> Rousseau’s analogy is familiar: ‘As nature gives each man an absolute power over his limbs, the social pact gives the body politic an absolute power over all of its members; and it is this same power which, when directed by the general will,

bears the name of sovereignty.’ Defined in this way, ‘the general will is always on the side most favourable to the public interest, that is to say, the most equitable, so that it is necessary merely to be just to be assured of following the general will.’<sup>37</sup>

As a matter of course, such a will can only remain sovereign in so far as its willing remains general, rather than particular. The general interest will prevail only if the will to pursue it is stronger than the distraction of particular interests; reflection on how best to strengthen it, how best to ‘carry the self into the common unity’, is Rousseau’s most obsessive concern. The legislator who aspires to assist the ‘founding of a people ... must, in

a word, take away man's own forces in order to give him new ones which are alien to him, and which he cannot use without the help of others'.<sup>38</sup>

To say that a general will is 'strong' doesn't mean that it stifles dissent or imposes uniformity. It means that in the process of negotiating differences between particular wills, the willing of the general interest eventually finds a way to prevail. There is an inclusive general will in so far as those who initially oppose it correct their mistake and realize that 'if my private opinion had prevailed I would have done something other than what I had willed' – that is, something inconsistent with my ongoing participation in the general will.<sup>39</sup> So long as it lasts, participation in a general will, be it that of a national movement, a political organization, a social or economic association, a trade union, and so on, always involves a resolve to abide by its eventual judgement, not as an immediate arbiter of right and wrong but as the process of collectively deliberating and *willing* what is right. Participation in a general will involves acceptance of the risk of finding yourself being, at any given moment, 'wrong with the people rather than right without them'.<sup>40</sup> By the same token, it's precisely in so far as it remains actively capable of seeking and willing the collective right that we can agree with Rousseau and Sieyès when they insist that, in the long run, a general will can neither err nor betray. The 'sovereign, by the mere fact that it exists, is always what it ought to be'.<sup>41</sup>

The most pressing question, as the Jacobins would discover in 1792–94, is less that of a general will's legitimacy than that of its continued existence. Without 'unity of will', Sieyès understood, a nation cannot exist as an 'acting whole'; 'however a nation may will, it is enough for it to will, [and] for its will to be made known for all positive law to fall silent in its presence, because it is the source and supreme master of all positive law'.<sup>42</sup> After Robespierre, Saint-Just summarizes the whole Jacobin political project when he rejects 'purely speculative' or 'intellectual' conceptions of justice, as if 'laws were the expression of taste rather than of the general will'. The only legitimate definition of the general will is 'the material will of the people, its simultaneous will; its goal is to consecrate the active and not the passive interest of the greatest number of people'.<sup>43</sup>

Mobilization of the general will of the people must not be confused, then, with a merely putschist vanguardism. An abrupt appropriation of the instruments of government by a few 'alchemists of revolution' is no substitute for the deployment of popular power.<sup>44</sup> In spite of obvious strategic differences, Lenin is no more

tempted than Luxemburg to substitute a Blanquist conspiracy for 'the people's struggle for power', via mobilization of the 'vast masses of the proletariat'.<sup>45</sup> It's not a matter of imposing an external will or awareness upon an inert people, but of people working to clarify, concentrate and organize their own will. Fanon makes much the same point, when he equates a national liberation movement with the inclusive and deliberate work of 'the whole of the people'.<sup>46</sup>

Such work serves to distinguish political will from any merely passive opinion or preference, however preponderant. The actively general will distinguishes itself from the mere 'will of all' (which is 'nothing but a sum of particular wills') on account of its mediation through the collective mobilization of the people.<sup>47</sup> The people who sustain the 'will of the people' are not defined by a particular social status or place, but by their active identification of and with the emergent general interest. Sovereignty is an attribute of such action. Conceived in these terms as a general *willing*, the power of the people transcends the powers of privilege or government, and entitles the people to overpower the powers that oppose or neglect them. If such powers resist, the Jacobins argue, the only solution is to 'arm the people', in whatever way is required to overcome this resistance.

3. The will of the people is thus a matter of material power and active empowerment, before it is a matter of representation, authority or legitimacy. What divides society is its response to popular self-empowerment. Jefferson goes so far as to privilege insurgency even when it might seem misguided or deluded: 'the people cannot be all, and always, well-informed', he concedes with reference to Shays' Rebellion, but they are entitled if not obliged to 'preserve the spirit of resistance' in the face of all obstacles.<sup>48</sup> This is as much a Marxist as it is a Jacobin insight. Any social 'transformation can only come about as the product of the – free – action of the proletariat', notes Lukács, and 'only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat possesses this ability to transform things.' Such a praxis-oriented philosophy did not die out after the political setbacks of the 1920s. Sartre took up the same theme in the early 1950s (before Badiou in the 1970s): as far as politics is concerned a 'class is never separable from the concrete will which animates it nor from the ends it pursues. The proletariat forms itself by its day-to-day action. It exists only by action. It *is* action. If it ceases to act, it decomposes'.<sup>49</sup>

Of all the concerns that link Rousseau and Marx, few run as deep as the critique of conventional parli-

amentary representation. Since ‘a will cannot be represented’, so then ‘sovereignty, being nothing more than the exercise of the general will, can never be alienated [and] can only be represented by itself; power can indeed be transferred but not will.’ The people can (and must) delegate ‘agents’ to execute their will, but they cannot delegate their willing as such.<sup>50</sup> Marx follows Rousseau, against Hobbes, when he criticizes modern bourgeois politics as essentially representative – that is, as an expropriation of popular power by the state.<sup>51</sup> The bourgeois ‘state enmeshes, controls, regulates, superintends and tutors civil society from its most comprehensive manifestations of life down to its most insignificant stirrings’. Popular emancipation will require the interruption of such a state, and its replacement, through ‘the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class’, of a political form capable of overseeing ‘the economic emancipation of labour’.<sup>52</sup> In the wake of Marx’s critique of the Commune, Lenin’s *State and Revolution* takes this argument to its logical conclusion.

Will commands the initiation of action, not representation. An exercise in political will involves taking power, not receiving it, on the assumption that (as a matter of ‘reason’ or ‘natural right’) the people are always already entitled to take it. ‘The oppressed cannot enter the struggle as objects’, Freire notes, ‘in order *later* to become human beings.’<sup>53</sup> It makes no sense, as John Brown argued during his trial in 1859, to treat the imperatives of justice merely as recommendations that must bide their time: ‘I am yet too young’, Brown said on the eve of his execution, ‘to understand that God is any respecter of persons.’<sup>54</sup> A similar impatience informs the strategic voluntarism of Che Guevara, who knew that it is pointless to wait ‘with folded arms’ for objective conditions to mature. Whoever waits for ‘power to fall into the people’s hands like a ripe fruit’ will never stop waiting.<sup>55</sup>

As one of today’s more eloquent proponents of a ‘living communism’ suggests, an inclusive popular politics must start with an unconditional assertion of the ‘humanity of every human being’. Our politics, says S’bu Zikode, chairperson of the Durban shack dwellers’ movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, is rooted in the ‘places that we have taken’ and kept:

We will no longer quietly wait for our humanity to be finally recognized one day. We have already taken our place on the land in the cities and we have held that ground. We have also decided to take our place in all [political] discussions and to take it right now. We take our place humbly, but firmly. We do not allow the state to keep us quiet in the name of a future revolution that does not come. We do

not allow the NGOs to keep us quiet in the name of a future socialism that they can’t build. We take our place as people who count the same as everyone else.<sup>56</sup>

Those who lack confidence in the people, by contrast, recommend the virtues of patience. Such lack of confidence takes the general form of an insistence on socially mediated time, the time of ongoing ‘development’. The people are in too much of a rush; it is too soon for them to prescribe demands of their own.<sup>57</sup> It is always too early, from this perspective, for equality and participation. Only when they ‘grow up’ or ‘progress’ might today’s people become worthy of the rights that a prudent society withholds. Between confidence in the people and confidence in historical progress, as Rousseau anticipated, there is a stark choice.

4. Like any form of free or voluntary action, the will of the people is grounded in the practical sufficiency of its exercise. Will is no more a ‘substance’ or object of knowledge than the *cogito* variously reworked and affirmed by Kant, Fichte and Sartre. A ‘fundamental freedom’ or ‘practical exercise of reason’ proves itself through what it does and makes, rather than through what it is, has or knows. Freedom demonstrates and justifies itself through willing and acting, or else not at all.<sup>58</sup> We *are* free, writes Beauvoir, but freedom *is* only by making itself be’. We are free in so far as ‘we will ourselves free’,<sup>59</sup> and we will ourselves free by crossing the threshold that separates passivity and ‘minority’ from volition and activity. We will ourselves free across the distance that our freedom puts between itself and a previous unfreedom. We are free as self-freeing.

In order to rouse themselves from the nightmare of history, the people thus need to anticipate the power of their will. The people are condemned, Robespierre accepts, to ‘raise the temple of liberty with hands still scarred by the chains of despotism’. A will, individual or collective, cannot begin in full possession of its purpose or power; it precisely wills rather than receives its clarification.<sup>60</sup> A voluntarist prescription must anticipate effects which enable their cause. Rousseau recognizes this necessity: ‘In order for a nascent people to appreciate sound political maxims and follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause ...; before the creation of the laws, people would have to be what they should become by means of those same laws.’<sup>61</sup> The pressure of events would push Robespierre and Saint-Just to similar conclusions. Marx gave much the same problem its most productive formulation when he



framed it in terms of the process that might educate the educators.<sup>62</sup>

The process of transition from submission to participation, notes Michael Hardt with reference to both Lenin and Jefferson, always involves a 'self-training in the capacities of self-rule.... People only learn democracy by doing it.' Much of Jacques Rancière's work is organized around a parallel question: given the social differentiation of rulers and ruled, or teachers and taught, how can initially passive, subordinate or 'brutalized' people come to emancipate themselves in an anticipation of equality, an assertion whose verification will retrospectively invalidate any basis for the initial differentiation of functions or intelligences?<sup>63</sup> By contrast the already-educated tend to worry that, if left unchecked, popular self-education will lead only to the forever-imminent tyranny of the majority. 'Since



the beginning of society', notes Draper, 'there has been no end of theories "proving" that tyranny is inevitable and that freedom-in-democracy is impossible; there is no more convenient ideology for a ruling class and its intellectual flunkies', and 'the only way of proving them false is in the struggle itself'.<sup>64</sup>

5. If it is to persist, a political association must be disciplined and 'indivisible' as a matter of course.<sup>65</sup> Internal difference and debate within an organized association is one thing, factional divisions or schisms are another. Popular freedom persists as long as the people assert it. 'In order that the social pact may not be an empty formula,' as Rousseau's notorious argument runs, 'it tacitly includes the commitment, which alone can give force to the others, that anyone who refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the entire body; this means nothing else than that he will be forced to be free.' Preservation of public freedom, in Robespierre's arresting phrase,

requires acknowledgement of the 'despotism of truth'. Collective freedom will endure, in short, only so long as the people can defend themselves against division and deception. 'The general will is always in the right and always tends toward the public utility, but it does not follow that the decisions of the people are always equally correct.... The people is never corrupted but it is often deceived, and it is only then that it appears to will what is bad.'<sup>66</sup>

'Virtue' is the name that Rousseau and the Jacobins gave to the practices required to defend a general will against deception and division. To practise virtue is to privilege collective over particular interests, and to ensure that society is governed 'solely on the basis of the common interest.... Each person is virtuous when his private will conforms totally to the general will.' If then 'we wish the general will to be accomplished' we need simply to 'make all the private wills agree with it, or in other words ...: make virtue reign.'<sup>67</sup>

The French revolutionaries took Rousseau's advice to heart. If Robespierre prevailed over the course of 1793 it's because he understood most clearly why (as he put it in a private notebook) 'we need a single will, ONE will [*une volonté UNE*]'. If this will is to be republican rather than royalist then 'we need republican Ministers, republican newspapers, republican deputies, a republican constitution.' And since domestic resistance to such republicanization of the public space 'comes from the bourgeois' so then 'TO DEFEAT THE BOURGEOIS we must RALLY THE PEOPLE.'<sup>68</sup>

Across the distance that links and separates Marx from Robespierre we move from popular insurgency to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. But what does recourse to such dictatorship imply, other than 'the truism that a cohesive popular will would be overwhelming in a truly democratic state'?<sup>69</sup> The basic strategic principle was once again anticipated at the limits of Jacobin practice. The 'first and crucial step' towards a more equal distribution of resources and opportunities, Babeuf knew, was 'the achievement of a truly effective democracy through which the people's will could be expressed.' Having witnessed the fate of Robespierre and Saint-Just, however, in the autumn of 1794 Babeuf takes the initial steps down a path that Communist militants would explore for the next century and a half. Since 'the undifferentiated mass of the people' could not be relied upon on its own to sustain the revolution in the face of their enemies, so then the partisans who seek to continue the revolution must first consolidate, through the mediation of



popular societies and associations, more disciplined and coherent forms of political organization.<sup>70</sup>

6. The practical exercise of will only proceeds, as a matter of course, in the face of resistance. To will is always to continue to will, in the face of difficulty or constraint. To continue or not to continue – this is the essential choice at stake in any militant ethics.<sup>71</sup> Either you will and do something, or you do not. Even as it discovers the variety of ways of doing or not-doing, these are the alternatives a political will must confront: yes or no, for or against, continue or stop, where ‘to stop before the end is to perish’.<sup>72</sup> A (temporary) survivor of Thermidor, Babeuf knew all too well that ‘the organization of real equality will not at first please everyone.’ In so far as ‘the aim of the Revolution is to destroy inequality and re-establish the common welfare’, so then ‘the Revolution is not finished’ so long as the rich dominate the poor.<sup>73</sup> Then as now, the revolution divides those who seek to terminate it from those who resolve to continue it.

As usual, Sieyès anticipates the essential logic of the antagonism that would inform the Jacobin political sequence: ‘a privileged class is harmful ... simply because it exists.’<sup>74</sup> And, as usual, Robespierre ups the ante: since the rich and the tyrants who protect them are by nature ‘the lash of the people’, so then the people who dare to overthrow tyranny ‘have only one way to escape the vengeance of kings: victory. Vanquish them or perish; these are your only choices.’ In the speeches that decided the fate of his own king, Saint-Just relied on the same logic. The king qua king is an ‘enemy stranger in our midst’, who ‘must reign or die’; if the ‘king is innocent the people are guilty’.<sup>75</sup>

If for the Jacobins of 1793 ‘terror’ comes to figure as the complement to ‘virtue’, it is above all as a consequence of their determination to overcome the resistance of kings and the rich. ‘One leads the people by reason’, as Robespierre explained in February 1794, and

the enemies of the people by terror.... If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the mainspring of popular government during a revolution is both virtue and terror; virtue, without which terror is baneful; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe, and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a principle in itself than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the *patrie*.<sup>76</sup>

The reasons why the Jacobin terror continues to terrify our political establishment, in a way that the

far more bloody repression of the 1871 Commune does not, has nothing to do with the actual amount of violence involved. From the perspective of what is already established, notes Saint-Just, ‘that which produces the general good is always terrible’. Terror in the Jacobin (as opposed to Thermidorian) sense is the deployment of whatever force is required to overcome those particular interests that seek to undermine or disempower the collective interest. The Jacobin terror was more defensive than aggressive, more a matter of restraining than of unleashing popular violence. ‘Let us be terrible’, Danton said, ‘so that the people need not be.’<sup>77</sup> The need for more limited but no less resilient forms of self-defence has been experienced more recently, in different ways but with similar outcomes, by political militants in the shanty towns of Port-au-Prince and Johannesburg, in the villages of the Altiplano, and in the refugee camps of Gaza and Lebanon.

7. By the same token, the practical exercise of will distinguishes itself from mere wish or fantasy through its capacity to initiate a process of genuine ‘realization’.<sup>78</sup> ‘The will always wills to *do* something’, notes Arendt, and ‘thus holds in contempt sheer thinking, whose whole activity depends on “doing nothing.”’<sup>79</sup> As the polysemy of its English usage suggests, a will orients itself in line with the future it pursues. Even Kant could see that in so far as we will its achievement, the ‘mere yet practical idea’ of a moral world ‘really can and should have its influence on the sensible world, in order to make it agree as far as possible with this idea’.<sup>80</sup> Kant’s Jacobin contemporaries anticipated, in their own practice, the implication that post-Kantian philosophy would soon develop in theory. Only suitable republican institutions and educational practices, wrote Saint-Just, can serve to ‘guarantee public liberty’ and enhance public virtue. ‘We have turned into imposing realities’, Robespierre proudly declared, ‘the laws of eternal justice that were contemptuously called the dreams of humanitarians. Morality was once confined to the books of philosophers; we have put it into the government of nations.’<sup>81</sup>

Political will persists, then, to the degree that it perseveres in its material realization or actualization. After Fichte, Hegel complements the voluntarist trajectory initiated by Rousseau and Kant, and opens the door to Marx, when he identifies a free collective will – a will that wills and realizes its own emancipation – as the animating principle of a concrete political association. Thus conceived, the will is nothing other than ‘thinking translating itself into existence.... The activity of the will consists in cancelling and over-

coming [*aufzuheben*] the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity and in translating its ends from their subjective determination into an objective one.<sup>82</sup> After Hegel, Marx will expand the material dimension of such concrete determination, without ever abandoning the idea that what is ultimately determinant is not given economic or historical constraints but free human action – the ability of ‘each single individual’ to prescribe their own ends and make their own history.<sup>83</sup> Along the same lines, after Lenin and Gramsci, the partisans of ‘dual power’ seek to build, step by step, the grassroots institutions of ‘a social framework responsive to the actual will of the people’.<sup>84</sup>

8. Realization of the will of (the) people is oriented towards the universalization of its consequences. As Beauvoir understood better than Sartre, I can only will my own freedom by willing the freedom of all; the only subject that can sustain the work of unending self-emancipation is *the* people as such, humanity as a whole. Kant, Hegel and Marx take some of the steps required to move from Rousseau’s parochial conception of a people to its universal affirmation, but the outcome was again anticipated by Jacobin practice: ‘the country of a free people is open to all the people on earth’, and the only ‘legitimate sovereign of the earth is the human race.... The interest, the will of the people, is that of humanity.’<sup>85</sup>

9. The will of the people, however, is not an absolute. The process of ‘thinking translating itself into existence’ cannot be understood in a literally Fichtean or Hegelian sense. To absolutize the will is also to ‘de-voluntarize’ it. Self-determination operates within the constraints of its situation, and the freeing that is a free will is a relative and relational process.<sup>86</sup> To move in this context from thought to existence is simply to determine, step by step, the consequences of a popular will. Participation in the process which empowers a collective capacity is a practical and political rather than an ontological process. It prescribes what people may choose to do, not what they are.

10. A final consequence follows from this insistence on the primacy of political will: voluntary servitude, from this perspective, is more damaging than external domination. If the will is ‘determinant in the first instance’ then the most far-reaching forms of oppression involve the collusion of the oppressed. This is the point anticipated by Etienne La Boétie, and then radicalized in different ways by DuBois, Fanon and Aristide (and also Foucault, Deleuze and Žižek): in

the end it is the people who empower their oppressors, who can harm them ‘only to the extent to which they are willing to put up with them’.<sup>87</sup>

It wouldn’t be hard to write a history of the twentieth century, of course, in such a way as to illustrate the apparent futility of political will. The failure of German communism in the 1920s, the failure of ‘Soviet man’ in the 1930s, the failure of anti-colonial liberation movements in the 1950s and 1960s, the failure of Maoism, the failure of 1968, the failure of anti-war and anti-globalization protests – all these seeming failures might seem to demonstrate one and the same basic point: the diffuse, systemic and hence insurmountable nature of contemporary capitalism, and of the forms of state and disciplinary power which accompany it.

Such a distorted history, in my opinion, would amount to little more than a rationalization of the defeats suffered in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In the late 1940s Beauvoir already bemoaned our tendency to ‘think that we are not the master of our destiny; we no longer hope to help make history, we are resigned to submitting to it.’<sup>88</sup> By the late 1970s such complaint, revalorized as celebration, had become the stuff of a growing consensus. This consensus has now been dominant, in both politics and philosophy, for more than thirty disastrous years. It’s time to leave it behind.

## Notes

This article is a preliminary overview of an ongoing project. Fragments of the material presented here were first discussed in lectures at the universities of York (October 2006), Nottingham (February 2007), Cornell (April 2007), California at Irvine (November 2007), Kent (March 2008) and London (March 2009). I am grateful, for detailed comments on a rough draft, to Bruno Bosteels, Alberto Toscano, Adrian Johnston, Peter Kapos, Christian Kerslake, Nathan Brown, Tracy McNulty, Frank Ruda, Alex Williams and Richard Pithouse.

1. Antonio Machado, ‘Proverbios y Cantares – XXIX’, 1912, in *Selected Poems of Antonio Machado*, trans. Betty Jean Craige, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1978.
2. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1966, p. 109; cf. Peter Hallward, ‘What’s the Point: First Notes Towards a Philosophy of Determination’, in Rachel Moffat and Eugene de Klerk, eds, *Material Worlds*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 148–58.
3. See in particular Sophie Wahnich, *La Liberté ou la mort: Essai sur la terreur et le terrorisme*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2003; Wahnich, *La Longue Patience du peuple: 1792, la naissance de la République*, Payot, Paris, 2008; Florence Gauthier, ‘The French Revolution: Revolution and the Rights of Man and the Citizen’, in

- Michael Haynes and Jim Wolfreys, eds, *History and Revolution: Refuting Revisionism*, Verso, London, 2007. As for the American revolution, Robespierre was quick to see that it was 'founded on the aristocracy of riches' (Maximilien Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Eugène Déprez et al., Société des Études Robespierriennes, Paris, 1910–1967, V, p. 17).
4. Cf. Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2008; Peter Hallward, 'Haitian Inspiration: Notes on the Bicentenary of Independence', *Radical Philosophy* 123, January 2004, pp. 2–7.
  5. Robespierre, *Œuvres*, IX, pp. 487–8; Thomas Jefferson, letter to Henry Lee 1824, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew Lipscomb and Albert Bergh, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, Washington DC, 1903–04, XVI, p. 73; Jefferson, letter to John Taylor 1816, *ibid.*, XV, p. 23.
  6. 'There can be no pacified conception of the voluntary act' (Badiou, 'La Volonté: Cours d'agrégation', 17 October 2002, notes taken by François Nicolas, [www.entretemps.asso.fr/Badiou/02-03.2.htm](http://www.entretemps.asso.fr/Badiou/02-03.2.htm); I'm grateful to Adrian Johnston for drawing my attention to these lecture notes).
  7. More substantial studies which cover some of this ground include Patrick Riley, *Will and Political Legitimacy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1982; Patrick Riley, *The General Will before Rousseau*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1986; Andrew Levine, *The General Will*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993; John H. Smith, *Dialectics of the Will*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2000.
  8. Marx, 'Rules and Administrative Regulations of the International Workingmen's Association' (1867), in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1975–2005, XX, p. 441; cf. Hal Draper, 'The Two Souls of Socialism', 1966, §1, [www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm); Draper, 'The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels', 1971, [www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1971/xx/eman-cipation.html](http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1971/xx/eman-cipation.html).
  9. Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho, *Marx's Capital*, Pluto, London, pp. 11–12; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes, Vintage, New York, 1968, p. 89.
  10. Adrian Johnston, Tracy McNulty, Alenka Zupančič, Ken Reinhard, letters to the author, 2007–09; Slavoj Žižek, 'To Begin from the Beginning Over and Over Again', paper delivered at 'The Idea of Communism' conference, Birkbeck, University of London, 15 March 2009; cf. Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 2008, p. 102.
  11. Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume I, trans. David Fernbach, Penguin, London, 1976, p. 929; cf. Karl Marx, *Civil War in France*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1977, pp. 75–6.
  12. Marx, *Capital* Volume III, ch. 48, [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch48.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch48.htm); cf. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, London, 1973, pp. 611, 705–6.
  13. Antonio Gramsci, 'Study of Philosophy', *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971, p. 345; cf. Gramsci, 'The Modern Prince', in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, pp. 125–33, 171–2.
  14. Georg Lukács, 'What is Orthodox Marxism?', *Political Writings 1919–1929*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. Michael McColgan, NLB, London, 1972, pp. 26–7; cf. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, London, 1971, pp. 23, 145, 181.
  15. Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 91; Sartre, 'Itinerary of a Thought', *New Left Review* 58, November 1969, p. 45.
  16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, New York, 1968, §488, cf. §666; cf. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* I §13, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, Modern Library, New York, 2000, p. 481; *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, Penguin, London, 1968, p. 53.
  17. Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, Harper & Row, New York, 1969, p. 59; cf. John Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1986, p. 177; Bret Davis, *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, 2007.
  18. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin, London, 1990, p. 225; cf. pp. 156–157, 291 n24.
  19. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Pantheon Books, New York, 1977, p. 169.
  20. Michel Foucault, 'What is Critique?', in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, Semiotext(e), New York, 1997, p. 32; Foucault, Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, trans. Graham Burchell, Palgrave, New York, 2006, pp. 11, 27–8, 339; cf. Foucault, *Abnormal*, trans. Graham Burchell, New York, Picador, 2003, pp. 120, 157–8; Foucault, 'Truth and Juridical Forms', *Essential Works III: Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, New York, New Press, 2000, p. 25.
  21. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), trans. Hazel Barnes, Routledge Classics, London, 2003, pp. 585–6; pp. 472, 479.
  22. Alain Badiou, 'La Volonté', 13 March 2003.
  23. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou De l'éducation*, Institute for Learning Technologies online edition, <http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/pedagogies/rousseau/contents2.html>, §1008; Rousseau, *Première version du Contrat social*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Charles Vaughan, Wiley, New York, 1962, I, p. 499.
  24. Robespierre, *Œuvres*, IX, p. 310; Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Views of the Executive Means Available to the Representatives of France in 1789* [1789], in Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Sonenscher, Hackett, Indianapolis, 2003, p. 10.
  25. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Willing*, in *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt, New York, 1978, II, pp. 6–7.
  26. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, Penguin, London, 1983, 2:24, 3:5; cf. 1:16, 1:32; Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull, Penguin, London, 2004, ch. 9.
  27. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 501.
  28. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1993, pp. 76–7; cf. Duns Scotus, 'The Existence of God', in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Allan Wolter, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1987, 54–6.
  29. René Descartes, Letter to Père Mesland, 9 February 1645, in John Cottingham et al., eds, *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, III, 246; Descartes, *Meditations* IV, *ibid.*, II, 39–40; *Sixth Set of Replies*, *ibid.*, II, 291; *Principles of Philosophy*, *ibid.*, I, §35, §37.

30. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in his *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary McGregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996 (references to Kant use the standard German pagination), pp. 4:461, 4:446; cf. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, p. 5:15; Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, p. 6:392. In his 1930 lectures on Kant's practical philosophy, Heidegger emphasizes this point – 'to give this priority in everything, to will the ought of pure willing' (Heidegger, *Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Ted Sadler, Continuum, London, 2002, p. 201).
31. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. A318–9/B375.
32. Immanuel Kant, 'The Contest of the Faculties', in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 181; cf. Kant, 'Toward Perpetual Peace', in *Practical Philosophy*, p. 8:351.
33. Alan Badiou, 'La Volonté', *bilan de septembre* 2003.
34. Cf. Patrick Riley, 'Rousseau's General Will', in Riley, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 124, 127; Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 184.
35. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Première Version*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Vaughan, I, p. 472.
36. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 4:2, 1:6. In Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which in many ways might be read as an extended consideration of the process whereby a general will takes shape and dissolves, this moment of association is confirmed by a collective 'pledge' (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, Verso, London, 2004, p. 417).
37. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:4; Rousseau, 'Discourse on Political Economy', in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, p. 66.
38. Rousseau, *Émile*, §24; *Social Contract* 2:7; cf. Riley, *The General Will before Rousseau*, pp. 182–97, 257.
39. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 4:2; cf. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Views of the Executive Means Available to the Representatives of France in 1789*, in Sieyès, *Political Writings*, p. 11; Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Anne Kupiec and Miguel Abensour, Gallimard, Paris, 2004, p. 482.
40. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, cited in J.P. Slavin, 'Haiti: The Elite's Revenge', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. 25, no. 3, December 1991, p. 6.
41. Rousseau, 'Discourse on Political Economy', p. 66; *Social Contract* 2:3; Rousseau, *Social Contract* 1:7, translation modified.
42. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* [1789], in Sieyès, *Political Writings*, pp. 134, 136–8. As Thomas Paine would argue, against Burke, 'the right of a Parliament is only a right in trust, a right by delegation, and that but from a very small part of the Nation, ... but the right of the Nation is an original right ..., and everything must conform to its general will' (Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, in Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. Bruce Kuklick, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 131).
43. Saint-Just, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 547.
44. See Marx and Engels, 'Les Conspirateurs, par A. Chenu' (1850), online at [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/03/chenu.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/03/chenu.htm); Marx, 'Meeting of the Central Authority, September 15, 1850', in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, X, pp. 625–9; Engels, 'Introduction,' in Marx, *Civil War in France*, p. 14.
45. Lenin, 'The Conference Summed Up' (7 May 1906), [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/may/07.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/may/07.htm); cf. Draper, 'The Myth of Lenin's "Concept of The Party"', 1990, [www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1990/myth/myth.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1990/myth/myth.htm).
46. 'Experience proves,' adds Fanon, 'that the important thing is not that three hundred people form a plan and decide upon carrying it out, but that the whole people plan and decide even if takes them twice or three times as long' (Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1968, pp. 155–6; cf. pp. 198, 204–5; cf. Jane Anna Gordon, 'Of Legitimation and the General Will: Creolizing Rousseau through Frantz Fanon', *The C.L.R. James Journal: A Review of Caribbean Ideas*, vol. 14, no. 1, forthcoming).
47. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:3. Here is the crux of the difference, often noted, between Rousseau's *volonté général* and Montesquieu's *esprit général*. Occasions for the self-determination of the former arise when the collapse or exhaustion of existing social relations give the people an opportunity to assert a new and deliberate beginning. The latter, by contrast, emerges through the combination of the 'many things that govern people: climate, religion, the laws, the maxims of the government, examples of past things, mores, and manners' (Charles Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler et al., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, 19:4). Since a general spirit is largely the product of its environment and the 'organically' established order of things, Montesquieu's philosophy recommends, in anticipation of Burke and de Maistre, that 'we should accommodate ourselves to this life and not try to force it into patterns of our own devising' (Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws*, 1:2; Norman Hampson, *Will and Circumstance: Montesquieu, Rousseau, and the French Revolution*, Duckworth, London, 1983, p. 9).
48. Jefferson, letter to William Smith, 13 November 1787, in Michael Hardt, ed., Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence*, Verso, London, 2007, p. 35.
49. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 205; Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Communists and Peace*, trans. Martha Fletcher, Braziller, New York, 1968, p. 89.
50. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2.1; cf. 3:15.
51. 'The State does not presuppose the "people" of which it would be the product or the serving delegate, on the contrary it is the state which institutes the represented as political subject, through the permanent dispossession of its capacity to act politically in the first person' (André Tösel, *Études sur Marx, et Engels*, Kimé, Paris, 1996, p. 71). Hence the limitation of Laclau's recent reconceptualization of populism. Since Laclau conceives of the 'construction of a people' not in terms of power, unity and will but in terms of heterogeneity, difference and language, he conceives of any popular 'articulation of a chain of equivalences' first and foremost in terms of representation. For Laclau, arguing against Rousseau, 'the main difficulty with classical theories of political representation is that most of them conceived the will of the "people" as something that was constituted before representation', rather than through it (Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2005, pp. 163–4).
52. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1978, p. 59;



- Marx, *The Civil War in France*, p. 74.
53. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos, Penguin, London, 1996, p. 50.
  54. Cited in Arthur Jordan, 'John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry', *International Socialist Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1960, [www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isr/vol21/no01/jordan.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isr/vol21/no01/jordan.htm). 'The general will, to be truly so, must be general in its object as well as in its essence; it must come from all to be applied to all' (Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:4).
  55. Che Guevara, 'The Marxist-Leninist Party', in *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, ed. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdes, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1969, pp. 104–6.
  56. S'bu Zikode, 'The Burning Issue of Land and Housing', 28 August 2008, [www.diakonia.org.za/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=129&Itemid=54](http://www.diakonia.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=129&Itemid=54).
  57. A version of this assumption informs Simon Critchley's recent work. Since we cannot prescribe our own ends, in order to overcome our 'motivational deficit' we must accept a 'heteronomous' motivation imposed from the other or the outside, an other that is infinitely 'higher', i.e. holier, than us. Responsibility to such a transcendent or infinite demand exceeds all merely autonomous freedom (Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, Verso, London, 2007, pp. 56–7). The tactical corollary of such piety is a deflating, 'self-undermining' frivolity: the sacred majesty of the other demands of the self 'not Promethean authenticity but laughable inauthenticity' (pp. 124, 82).
  58. How far we are actually or 'objectively' free, Kant insists, 'is a merely speculative question, which we can leave aside so long as we are considering what ought or ought not to be done' (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A801–4/B829–32; cf. *Groundwork*, 447–50). Rousseau again anticipates the point: 'I will to act, and I act .... The will is known to me by its acts, not by its nature' (*Émile*, §983).
  59. Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Citadel Press, New York, 1976, pp. 24–5, 130–31.
  60. Robespierre, quoted in David Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre*, Free Press, New York, 1985, p. 231. Psychoanalysis allows us to recognize, Badiou notes, that the will 'isn't necessarily transparent to itself' (Badiou, 'La Volonté', 13 March 2003).
  61. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:7.
  62. Robespierre, *Œuvres*, V, pp. 19–20; Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* §3, [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm).
  63. Hardt, 'Introduction', in Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence*, xix–xx; cf. Hallward, 'Rancière and the Subversion of Mastery', *Paragraph*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2005, pp. 26–45.
  64. Draper, 'Two Souls', §10.
  65. 'For the same reason that sovereignty is inalienable, it is indivisible, for the will is general, or it is not' (Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:2; cf. Robespierre, *Œuvres*, VII, p. 268).
  66. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 1:7; Robespierre, *Œuvres*, IX, 83–84; Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2.3.
  67. Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2.1; 'Discourse on Political Economy', pp. 69, 67, translation modified.
  68. Robespierre, notes written in early June 1793, in J.M. Thompson, *Robespierre*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1935, II, pp. 33–4.
  69. Thomas Sowell, 'Karl Marx and the Freedom of the Individual', *Ethics*, vol. 73, no. 2, 1963, p. 119; cf. Draper, *The 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat' from Marx to Lenin*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1987, ch. 1.
  70. R.B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1978, p. 104, pp. 167–9.
  71. Cf. Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 27–8; Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward, Verso, London, 2001, pp. 52, 91.
  72. Robespierre, *Œuvres*, X, p. 572.
  73. Babeuf, *Manifesto of the Equals*, 1796, [www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/conspiracy-equals/1796/manifesto.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/conspiracy-equals/1796/manifesto.htm); 'Analysis of the Doctrine of Babeuf', 1796, article 10, [www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/conspiracy-equals/1797/placard.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/conspiracy-equals/1797/placard.htm); 'Babeuf's Defense', February–May 1797, [www.historyguide.org/intellect/defense.html](http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/defense.html).
  74. Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*, in Sieyès, *Political Writings*, p. 157; cf. Fanon, *Wretched*, p. 200.
  75. Robespierre, *Œuvres*, VI, p. 625; V, p. 61; Saint-Just, *Œuvres*, pp. 479, 512.
  76. Robespierre, *Œuvres*, X, pp. 356–7.
  77. Saint-Just, 'Institutions républicaines' (1794), in *Œuvres*, p. 1141; cf. Saint-Just, *Œuvres*, 659–60; Danton, 10 March 1793, cited in Wahnich, *Liberté ou la mort*, p. 62. In his notorious 'Adam and Eve letter', Jefferson defended the initial phase of the Jacobin terror for the same reason. 'The liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of the contest [ ... , and] rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated' (Jefferson, letter to William Short, 3 January 1793, in Hardt, ed., Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence*, pp. 46–7).
  78. Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 505; Gramsci, 'The Modern Prince', in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, p. 175 n75.
  79. Arendt, *Willing*, p. 37.
  80. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. A808/B836; cf. Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism 1781–1801*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, pp. 279–80.
  81. Saint-Just, 'Institutions républicaines', in *Œuvres*, pp. 1088–89, 1135; Robespierre, *Œuvres*, X, p. 229.
  82. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, §4A, §28, translation modified.
  83. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 1A, [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a3](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a3); cf. Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, p. 739.
  84. Brian A. Dominick, 'An Introduction to Dual Power Strategy', 1998, <http://sandiego.indymedia.org/en/2002/09/2403.shtml>; cf. Alberto Toscano, 'Dual Power Revisited', *Soft Targets*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2007, [www.soft-targetsjournal.com/v21/alberto\\_toscano.php](http://www.soft-targetsjournal.com/v21/alberto_toscano.php).
  85. Saint-Just, *Œuvres*, p. 551; Robespierre, *Œuvres*, IX, p. 469; VII, p. 268.
  86. Badiou, 'La Volonté', 13 March 2003.
  87. Étienne La Boétie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz, Columbia University Press, New York, 1942, [www.constitution.org/la\\_boetie/serv\\_vol.htm](http://www.constitution.org/la_boetie/serv_vol.htm), translation modified.
  88. Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 139.