Fugitive Democracy Narratives: A Gift in Time

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Prologue: Democracy's Gift

My concern in this paper is to consider the temporal dimension of democracy, in particular its relation to the idea of tradition. But I will not be addressing the familiar liberal conception of tradition, which seeks to frame justification of a basic social structure amidst a plurality of possible conceptions of the good, including ones that identify themselves explicitly as traditions.[1] I am interested, instead, in asking whether democracy itself should be understood as a tradition. The motive question is not: What is democracy? It is, rather: What is the relationship of democracy to time?

In what follows I propose to analyze the notion of *fugitive democracy* as the true meaning of the democratic ideal, once appropriately temporalized.[2] This attempt at temporalization of the democratic entails a critical engagement with the concepts of *tradition* and *progress*. And so, to that end, I will suggest that the substance of democratic relations must go beyond politics, punctuating normal sequences of events with kairotic ruptures. These ruptures in turn work to realize an imperative of ongoing trusteeship—a kind of gift economy—at the heart of democracy. What I mean by gift economy will emerge more clearly in the succeeding sections but let me say something about it as part of these prefatory remarks.

A gift is something freely given: that is, proffered without expectation of profit or return. It is the opposite, even the negation, of a transaction.[3] The *gift of democracy* should rather be considered in terms of the phrase's double genitive 'of'. I mean the phrase's use of that same grammatically unstable 'of' that creates ambiguity in phrases such as the *death of honour*. In such cases, the path of adjectival modification can flow in both directions: the phrase 'death of honour' can mean both an honourable death OR the demise of honour itself. When we utter the phrase the gift of democracy, then, let us preserve the ambiguity rather than attempt to resolve it. Thus, the meaning of democracy's gift is BOTH the benefits that democracy bestows upon us AND our own acts of democratic bestowal.

To begin the journey towards those conclusions—itself a kind of narrative of received benefits and forwarded trust—I turn now to some enabling thoughts about time and authority (section one), tradition (section two), and fugitive democracy (section three).

[1] See, for example, Kymlicka 1989.
[2] A seminal work here is Wolin 1994; see also Wolin 2008.
[3] Here I follow the analysis of Hyde 1979.

1. Two Concepts of Time, Two Concepts of Authority

In his brisk history of secular political consciousness and the public sphere, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Charles Taylor remarks in passing how different concepts of time, or time-consciousness, are necessary for the emergent modern political order. "The eighteenth-century public sphere thus represents an instance of a new kind: a metatopical common space and common agency without an action-transcendent constitution, an agency grounded purely in its own common actions."[4] This 'metatopical common space' was, crucially, continuous and evenly distributed across its participants; that is why it could become the basis for what we now recognize as democratic civil society. Despite this continuity and equality, however, it was not considered to have originated *ex nihilo*: there are founding myths and moments which are considered to create the possibilities of public space. But these moments of origin, Taylor argues, "are displaced onto a higher plane, into a heroic time, an *illud tempus* which is not seen as qualitatively on a level with what we do today." And so, "[t]he founding action is not like our action, not just an earlier similar act whose precipitate structures ours. It is not just earlier, but in another kind of time, an exemplary time."[5]

The distinction Taylor suggests here has many forebears. One clear way of capturing its impact hinges on the fact that Greek has two words that both translate as 'time': *chronos* and *kairos*. Chronological time is the time of measurement and portioning, the time that passes. In its modern manifestation, the history of chronological time is nicely traced by both Taylor and other, more radical thinkers such as Guy Debord, in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). This conception of time is crucial to the emergence of a shared public sphere—but also to the emergence of a work-world in which time can be subject to transaction. This is especially true in the special set of social relations that Debord calls 'the spectacle', in which everything and everyone is a commodity. This is secular time, in the sense that it is 'of the age': the space of everydayness, work, and exchange.

The visible sign of this time, as Lewis Mumford among others has noted, is of course the clock. The mechanism of keeping good time, once the holy grail of sailors looking to measure longitude, is here revealed as the enabling condition of capitalist labour relations. "The popularization of time-keeping," Mumford notes, "which followed the production of the cheap standardized watch, first in Geneva, was essential to a well-articulated system of transportation and production."[6] The clock keeps time by making its units identical and measured; it appears first as a shared community property in (as it might be) the town hall or church tower, matching the more ancient tolling of bells to a visual representation of time passing. Later, as technology advances, the mechanism of *chronos* time is bionically conjoined to the human frame in the form of the pocket watch and, eventually, the wristwatch. When I fasten on a wristwatch, in other words, I am signalling to myself and others my contract with the telling of time, expressing an agreement in some sense with the proposition that time is money. The same integration of technology and biology is essential to the logic of time-and-motion studies in factory production, as exemplified by the 'scientific oversight' model of Frederick Winslow Taylor. "The enormous saving of time," Taylor writes in *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), "and therefore increase in the output which it is possible to effect through eliminating unnecessary motions and substituting fast for slow and inefficient motions for the men working in any of our trades can be fully realized only … from a thorough motion and time study, made by a competent man."[7]

We can summarize the qualities of secular, *chronos* time this way: it is (i) everyday, (ii) profane, (iii) homogeneous, (iv) linear, (v) horizontal, and (vi) egalitarian. We constantly encounter this time, measuring it and meeting its demands by being on time, matching our movements and achievements to its punctums, saving time and spending time, each of us equally available to time, and having it available to us. Debord closely associates this time with the emergence of labour mechanisms and the bourgeois conception of society, taking time away from the more natural cyclical rhythms of seasonal agriculture and, before it, hunting-gathering to create a time-world in which production is potentially constant. Workers may now punch in to the line *twenty-four-seven*, as we would now say, making the relation to the time-clock explicit. Consistent with orthodox Marxist critique, Debord argues that this process is inseparable from the emergence of class, and so class conflict.

In a crucial middle section of *Society of the Spectacle*, "Time and History," Debord notes how time itself becomes a form of social distinction and conflict in the course of this triumph of *chronos* time:

> The social appropriation of time, the production of man by human labour, develops within a society divided into classes. The power which constituted itself above the penury of the society of cyclical time, the class which organizes the social

[4] Taylor 2004: 96.
[5] Taylor 2004: 97.
[6] Mumford 2010: 17.
[7] Taylor 2005: 129. Compare Koolhaas 1974, which relates Taylor's time-motion ideas to the spectacular rise of first-generation skyscrapers in Manhattan, especially the Empire State Building; I expand on this latter point in Kingwell 2006.

> labour and appropriates the limited surplus value, simultaneously appropriates the *temporal surplus value* of its organization of social time: it possesses for itself alone the irreversible time of the living. The wealth that can be concentrated in the realm of power and materially used up in sumptuous feasts is also used up as a squandering of *historical time at the surface of society*.[8]

Once measured and parceled out, subjected to transaction in the form of paid labour, time immediately becomes a commodity with the potential, like any commodity, to support an upper-tier, luxury version of itself. Free time, leisure time, ample time, time off—these all immediately beckon as goods at the margins of a world ruled by time-as-labour and labour-as-time.

It is not necessary to detail here how the commodification of time creates the familiar pathologies of demented leisure characteristic of late capitalism: the living-for-the-weekend enthrallment that, with every reference to 'hump day' or 'TGIF' party emphasizes the unshakable dominance of the work week.[9] Too often concealed is the persistence and bravery of those workers who demanded the regulated ten-hour, and eventually eight-hour, workday, and still later the two-day weekend.[10] Of more immediate interest, though, is the fact that those battles about time already accepted the premise of what time was. Both Taylor and Debord note that this secular, *chronos* time of labour and production-consumption achieves—one might even say *must* achieve—global reach. It is part of what Heidegger calls "the age of the world picture," the picture in which everything, including ourselves and our temporality, are in principle available for disposal: the comprehensive *standing reserve* or *enframing* (*Ge-stell*) of technology whereby everything, including human desire and possibility, is made fungible in the name of use.[11]

Debord joins other Marxist critics such as E. P. Thompson in noting the effects of this time: "With the development of capitalism, irreversible time is *unified on a world scale*. Universal history becomes a reality because the entire world is gathered under the development of this time. … What appears the world over as *the same day* is the time of economic production cut up into equal abstract fragments. Unified irreversible time is the time of the *world market* and, as a corollary, of the world spectacle."[12]

Thompson: "Indeed, a general diffusion of clocks and watches is occurring (as one would expect) at the exact moment when the industrial revolution demanded a great synchronization of labour." Thus a new ethos of punctuality and efficiency is born: "In all these ways—by the division of labour; the supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preaching and schooling; the suppression of fairs and sports—new labour habits were formed and a new time discipline was imposed."[13]

And compare Charles Taylor: "A purely secular time-understanding allows us to imagine society horizontally, untouched by any 'high points', where the ordinary sequence of events touches higher time, and therefore without recognizing any privileged persons or agencies, such as priests and kings, who stand and mediate at such alleged points. This radical horizontality is precisely what is implied in the direct-access society, where each member is 'immediate to the whole'."[14]

Now, Taylor may be thought too sanguine about this larger temporal development in modernity, even though he does allow that there are persistent local verticalities even in the comprehensively horizontal world of the secular: uneven access to goods, disjointed proximity to glamour or celebrity, corruptions of power. But Debord's sense of the dominance of spectacle in a society in which cyclical time has been lost, while accurate enough, may seem to invite a kind of nostalgia or romanticism about the time-out-of-time. One may accept the value of Debordian Situationism's tactics of *dérive* and *détournement*—drifting and repurposing through the byways of the spectacle-dominated city, rather than resisting in some pre-doomed alternative organization— but still detect an odour of charming failure in the analysis. One of the aims of the present paper is to restore vitality to the Situationist project without inviting any new moments of romance; more on this in the final section.

The larger point about both the benefits and the costs of secular time is politically significant. Even as it invited commodification and disposal, the achievement of egalitarian secular time was a necessary condition for the emergence of popular sovereignty in full force. Without a sense of immediate access to a non-hierarchical present, however attenuated or subject to doubt, there can be no conviction that we, the people, are the creators of our social order, nor that, to use Taylor's words, popular elections—not bloodlines, transcendental access, or historical

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[8] Debord 1983: V:126.
[9] But see Kingwell 2013.
[10] Rybczynski 1991 offers a gripping version of this story, set against the Babylonian origin of the seven-day week itself.
[11] Heidegger 1977.
[12] Debord 1967: V:145.
[13] Thompson 1967: 69, 90.
[14] Taylor 2004: 157.

precedent—are "the only source of legitimate power." He goes on: "But what has to take place for this change to come off is a transformed social imaginary, in which the idea of foundation is taken out of the mythical early time and seen as something that people can do today. In other words, it becomes something that can be brought about by collective action in contemporary, purely secular time."[15]

This cannot be done purely through action at the level of secular time, however. Not only will a *narrative of origin* continue to prove necessary to the development of democratic society, it will also be necessary to keep open the ever-present possibility of an *eruption of justificatory argument* concerning legitimacy. This kind of argument is distinct from the day-to-day business of collective action, still more from the policy-making and regulatory business-as-usual of politics.

The narrative of origin is familiarly sketched in the various versions of contractarian thought-experiment that come down to us in the liberal tradition: Hobbes's state of nature, Locke's pre-social order, even Rawls's original position—though the last does not indulge in a dubious appeal to history or human nature that undermines our respect for the early modern examples. Rousseau, notably, who sounded such a strong keynote in *The Social Contract* about man being born free but living everywhere in chains, would chide Hobbes for not stripping away enough of the accretions of social contagion in his conception of natural man. The humans for whom pre-social existence was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," were, Rousseau argued, already highly socialized beings trained to pursue their own competitive self-interest. This criticism, though well aimed, does not, however, thereby lend more credence to Rousseau's alternative, which invites the parallel objection that it is a species of special pleading. Rawls's atemporal version of a justificatory scheme, with the original position framed as a thought experiment that one might undertake at any time, draws fire concerning what, precisely, must be excluded by the veil of ignorance in order to generate a unanimous outcome. The political narrative of origin will always be controversial.

The eruption of justificatory argument, because it is grounded in actual rather than imagined history, seems more promising. Such an eruption might be discerned in historical narratives of democratic process, such as Bruce Ackerman's magisterial account of the American republic, in which the Founding plays the originary role, including sometimes heated appeals to the Founders' intentions, but open to returns to originary discourse at times of crisis: the Reconstruction after the Civil War, the New Deal in the wake of the Depression. Ackerman argues that the truly democratic republic, no matter how atavistic its self-narrative, can never foreclose on the option of returning to the democratic drawing-board.[16] To be sure, Founders' Intent remains itself a disputed property, both in everyday judicial argument and in returns to constitutional first principles. More darkly, the same return to originary framing can be glimpsed in Carl Schmitt's notion of the *exception*, that which is decided upon by the sovereign; and in Walter Benjamin's rejoinder about the *violence* in all acts of political establishment.

The contrastive term for secular time gives us an insight about what this complicated narrative of origin and legitimation might look like: the tradition that is distinctively democratic. That is, we are now in a position to characterize the useful diacritical opposite of *chronos* time, namely *kairos* or transcendental time. It is (i) mysterious, (ii) divine, (iii) eternal, (iv) infinite, (v) vertical, and (vi) hierarchical. In many cases, of course, precisely this kind of time—the time of divine intervention or communion with the eternal realm—is familiar as part of an anti-democratic social order, in which privileged access, or anyway claims thereto, keeps a steeply hierarchical class division firmly in place, ostensibly as part of a Great Chain of Being or Divine Universal Scheme. The forerunner here might be, of course, the Platonic Theory of the Forms, with realms of knowledge and reality arranged in rigid order. The upward ascent of the self-freed slave of Plato's Cave, struggling through blindness and pain toward the sun's light, is an ascent to eternity as well as reality—for they are the same.

But these towering religio-philosophical edifices have their less grandiose analogues even in our own world. I mean, for example, the sense of time beyond time that still marks genuine leisure, play, and idleness, the *skholé* of Aristotle even now to be found in our aimless games and blissful moments of 'flow'; or the true holiday, where the usual tyranny of work and use-value is suspended in the name of carnival or sabbath.[17] The common desire for what the Germans call *Freizeit*—time free of obligation—is united with the transcendence of time available to almost any North American urban dweller in a baseball game, say, where time is told only in outs and innings, in a pastime that is played in what is usually called a park. (The cognate game of cricket arguably offers even more in the way of time out of time!) In his paean to baseball, Milton scholar and commissioner of baseball A. Bartlett Giamatti references *Paradise Lost* (IV, 434-5) in an expression of Aristotelian leisure, which he calls "the ideal to which our play aspires." From the poem: *Free leave so large to all things else, and choice / Unlimited of manifold delights.* "But in fact, the

[15] Taylor 2004: 110.
[16] Ackerman 1991 and 2000.
[17] See Kingwell 2008.

serpent is already there," Giamatti notes, "and our sports do not simulate, therefore, a constant state. Rather, between days of work, sports or games only repeat and repeat our efforts to go back, back to a freedom we cannot recall, save as a moment of play in some garden now lost."[18]

I will suggest later that these and other *ludic episodes* to be found within everyday existence are portals to the gift of democracy, for they remind us of the resistance to transactional reduction that grounds the most valuable features of our common life. The question for present purposes must be this: is there a sense of *kairos* or transcendent time that can exist as a proximate option for a democratic tradition? In order to advance the argument that there is, once more lodged squarely in the idea of democracy's gift, I will now sketch another useful distinction, between two kinds of social authority.

We can associate two kinds of claim, both indispensable to democratic thought, with the two notions of time I have here contrasted. As Taylor notes, the linear secular time of the modern world-picture is a necessary condition of a political world in which *everyone* feels capable of meaningful action. We are at once de-centered and enabled. The voice of authority that addresses itself to secular time is that of a wisdom tradition. The claims of such a tradition are typically (1) conservative, (2) continuous, and (3) linked to the past. This is the species of authority we associate with scriptural reference, for example, or embodied rituals passed from generation to generation.

The 'wisdom' in question need not always be of world-shaking profundity. The traditions of games such as cricket or baseball, with their 'laws' and prescribed behaviours, a spirit of continuity that good players and fans come to respect and honour, demonstrate this kind of authority. The claim is not "It shall be done this way because it has always been done this way," but rather "It shall be done this way because we acknowledge the accumulated fitness and rightness of doing it this way." Origins are not lost in time, but they are recognized as essential to our current projects, whatever they might be. The wisdom tradition of democracy is acted out in, for example, the various iterations of the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy, the rule of common law, and even such detailed inheritances as the writ of *habeus corpus* and the chancery court. We may debate these details, as when we seek to reform unbalanced first-past-the-post elections, say, but we will do so in the terms set out by the tradition.

This voice of authority, though it ought to be respected, cannot close off even more radical ruptures in the fabric of social life. The authority of *prophetic intervention* must likewise be recognized, a kind of eruption of new energy that rends the time of everyday life and exposes a harsh light of higher responsibility. This voice, then, is (1) radical, (2) discontinuous, and (3) linked to the future. The prophetic voice need not be utopian, however; it may be hortatory or even scolding of our complacency and laziness. It is the voice that condemns the money-changers in the temple and called out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. It is, as Terry Eagleton notes with some relish, "the sour unreasonableness of a document that admonishes us to yield up our lives for the sake of strangers that is most striking, not its diffusion of sweetness and light. There is nothing moderate or middle-of-the road about the scandalous extremity of its demands, as a theologian like Kierkegaard was aware."[19] In a non-Christian context, we might detect this voice in the lately mocked but actually stirring *soixante-huitard* and Situationist slogan: "Be reasonable: demand the impossible." It is the voice that demands that we Occupy Wall Street.

The common ground of these two voices is language, the shared discursive space of democratic politics. Human history, Hegel said, was carried in language, transmitted from one epoch to the next in history and philosophy. This is the sense of discursive immersion that Heidegger refers to when he says, provocatively, language speaks us—not the other way around. Language is the house of Being. Heidegger was no democrat, as we unfortunately have cause to know; even so, his infamous *Rektoratsrede* on "Die Selbstbehauptung der Deutschen Universität" (1933) is itself, necessarily, a discursive intervention which we can even now examine and criticize. Democracy never sleeps when language is present. And, while we listen to the voice of authority and their claims to both the horizontal vertical temporalities of shared social space, we can never abandon the individual responsibility which is the condition of granting legitimacy—a responsibility, as both tradition and prophecy would agree, can never be bought or sold. *Nihil de nobis, sine nobis*, indeed.

2. Tradition

Let us now, with these thoughts in mind, turn to the question of tradition. "A real tradition is not the relic of the past that is irretrievably gone," Igor Stravinsky argued; "it is a living force that animates and informs the present."[20] Stravinsky was thinking specifically of music, of course. What is a tradition in the political sense? Can we speak meaningfully of a *real tradition of democracy*, or is the very idea mired in confusion? The central problem of

[18] Giamatti 1989: 44.
[19] Eagleton 2014: 136.
[20] Stravinsky 1942; 1947, ch. 3.

tradition, namely, how to carry something on in a manner we regard as authentic—even as, perhaps, our ideals of authenticity themselves are ever put in question, and found unreliable. It may be that the very concept of authenticity, not just its various iterations, is found to be incoherent. Or it may be that the once-valid reasons for doing or cherishing something are no longer present, leaving a carapace of ritual obedience reflexively justified as tradition. (A character in Richard Powell's novel *The Philadelphian* (1956), musing on social convention in that most status-conscious of American cities: "We do something for a reason, and then the reason vanishes, but we keep on doing it because by that time it's a tradition."[21])

In such cases of defunct reason or conceptual emptiness, I suggest we have at least three options: (1) an aggressive 'traditionalist' retrenchment; (2) a desperate rootlessness; and (3) what we might call the Nietzschean option, the *sprezzatura* of cool celebration. Here, to use Eagleton's words, "one's beliefs are more like one's manservants, to be hired and fired as the fancy takes you, than like one's bodily organs"; or, varying the metaphor, "as costumes one can don or doff at will … as with kilts and cravats, it is aesthetic considerations which govern the donning and doffing."[22]

Eagleton regards this last option as "cavalier," and seems to deride its 'modernism' in favour of a principled postmodernism—and yet, it is the latter conception that is most often attacked by the stalwarts of option (1). I will prefer to call option (3) *fugitive*, in the sense that its energy comes from the combined freedom and responsibility of self-invention. But our acts of self-invention are never entirely aesthetic (in the pejorative sense detectable in Eagleton's characterization) nor are they without grounding in concrete practical realities of shared social life. That is, our circumstances allow for a range of options in framing our life narratives, but the range is not without limit: it is, as Bernard Williams put it, not a real option for *me* to live *my* life as a samurai warrior, still less (one might add) as a Klingon battle commander—though I may well act out these aspects of my desire-world in fantasy, on-line games, cosplay, and the like. We can say, after Mill, that these are 'experiments in living'. By their very nature they stand opposed to reductive claims of tradition, especially those that are revealed as bogus, such as some parts of Scottish clan identity, and those that are actively harmful, such as the ethnic nationalism and bloodline dominance to be seen in Hutu-Tutsi hatred, religious intolerance of homosexuality, or Nazism.[23] Tradition becomes ideology—typically with violent results.

The gifts of option (3) are not just individual; experiments in living create a milieu in which further, and sometimes more radical, experimentation is possible. This milieu, in its trans-temporal existence, is what I mean by the democratic tradition. It is an imperfect standard, but let us say for the nonce that there is a valid possible distinction between *open* traditions and *closed* ones. The democratic tradition, by virtue of its structural combination of conservation (the present as a gift of the past, the future as a gift of the present) and innovation (we must each invent ourselves as we go on) strikes to correct balance to achieve openness. There is, to be sure, a democratic version of what Harold Bloom called "the anxiety of influence" operative here. How, indeed, could there not be? The freedom to self-invent is, as noted, importantly conjoined with responsibility. Every successful experiment is a bequest to future democratic generations; every failure is a cost that they will be made to bear.

The closest non-political analogy to the open, anxious, free, responsible, conservative, and innovative features of this tradition is, it seems to me, the tradition(s) of scholarship. There may be very closely held standards of responsibility here, as in science, where the by-word is 'creative destruction' of results in the form of testing and reiteration. But even in less strictly policed regions of scholarship we find constraints and standards that compel practitioners to go on in a certain way. And that way is forward-looking—wanting to generate new results, new interventions, new interpretations—even as it is guided and governed by a vast inheritance. This, then, is a trans-temporal discursive community, whose members are in an endless conversation about what is right, good, or simply interesting. Some ideas will reign for a time, only to be rejected, perhaps even reviled, later. Once dismissed results may come into new favour. The only overarching rules of the process is that everyone who possesses the wherewithal to contribute to the conversation acquires, just in virtues of that wherewithal, the authority to do so.

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[21] Powell 1956: 218. Mrs. John Marshall (Carol) Wharton, the wife of an aging, respectable lawyer, says these words to a young colleague of her husband with whom she is contemplating a love affair.

[22] Eagleton 2014: 193. He adds: "The left-wing historian A. J. P. Taylor once informed an Oxford Fellowship election committee that he had extreme political views, but held them moderately."

[23] The standard attack on spurious Highland clan identity is Trevor-Roper 1983. But, as critics have noted, the distinction between 'invented' and 'initiated' traditions, particularly in the case of nation-states (a particular concern of this volume), can be difficult to hold without committing its own kind of special pleading.

In the democratic tradition, there is one clear difference: no credentials are demanded for inspection at the threshold of the discursive arena. You do not need a Ph.D. to be a full member. Indeed, there is no means test except the basic existential one; just being here is enough.

Too many accounts of tradition, positive and negative alike, rely on contrastive force, so that tradition is defended (or condemned) as against modernity, progress, change, or some similar forward-facing value. I hope I have shown in the previous sections that the notion of a democratic tradition, if there is any valid version thereof, cannot be defended in this manner. For one thing, no account of democracy could rely on an unchallenged notion of such anti-traditional values.

Progress, for example, has been the cover and clothes of the worst depredations against human spirit and freedom, not least in its aspirations to an ideal state. Walter Benjamin is suitably chastening in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940):

> A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. Its face is turned towards the past. Where we see a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. A storm irresistibly propels him into the future, to which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[24]

Benjamin's image here is reflected in the small Paul Klee work *Angelus Novus* (1920), which Benjamin carried with him in his flight from France to Spain as the Nazi forces entered Paris. The words above were written in January of that year; fearing repatriation to Nazi Germany, Benjamin committed suicide in September in Portbou, Spain.

One needn't be such an obvious world-historical victim to see the force of Benjamin's argument, which indicts the logic of materialism and never-ending social change as a nightmare of instrumental rationality. One might think, here, of another famous artwork, Francisco de Goya's etching *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (1797-99). This image is plate 43 of the 80 etchings that comprise Goya's satirical album *Los Caprichos* ('Caprices'). It shows a sleeping male figure, his head slumped upon a work desk scattered with drawing instruments, beset by a rising flock of bat-like flying creatures, some that resemble owls, as a large cat, reminiscent of a sphinx, looks on. The title is usually translated as "the sleep of reason produces monsters," and the full epigraph reads this way: "Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels." This gloss suggests a benign Apollonian-Dionysian union, in controlled art, of constraining reason and rampant imagination, which would otherwise spin itself off into nightmarish vision.

But another interpretation offers itself, turning on the linguistic ambiguity that has the Spanish word *sueño* meaning both 'sleep' and 'dream'. Suppose that reason, rather than a helpful curb, is itself a generator of monstrous visions when it is allowed to run unfettered in human life. The original meaning captures Goya's *ars poetica*, perhaps, and executes a kind of self-satire in a series of works that mock pretension and excess in contemporary Spanish society. The inverted interpretation sounds, in addition, a subtle warning message for the age about to unfold, in which reason will gather into its hands the reins of everything, including social order—and the results will be monsters that fly into the darkness from our dreaming, world-dominating minds.

Well, perhaps that is itself a flight of fancy. For a more grounded version of the point, compare G. K. Chesterton on the question of anti-traditional manias for change. "It is true that a man (a silly man) might make change itself his object or ideal," he notes. "But as an ideal change itself becomes unchangeable. If the change-worshiper wishes to estimate his own progress, he must be sternly loyal to the ideal of change; he must not begin to flirt gaily with the ideal of monotony. Progress itself cannot progress. … Change is the hardest and narrowest groove that a man can get into."[25] One could add the basic logical point that there can be no such thing as change unless and until there is something that is *not* changing. Change is a contrastive force. Consider: the paradox of Theseus' ship does not make us pause to question the idea of identity over time in the absence of some notion, or at least the *desire* for the notion, of the one and only ship that belongs to Theseus.

Even worse than a mindless devotion to change for its own sake is the peculiar stasis observable in 'presentism', the perverse instantaneity in which everything seems to happen now and seems to demand a response even earlier.[26] The very same social media that allowed for near-instant connection to coordinate resistance in Tahrir Square can effect, in New York or London, a radical disconnection and a generalized feeling of ephemerality. This shrinking of time is a blight on the democratic body, even a sort of *zombie virus* in which we consume our own

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[24] Benjamin 1968.
[25] Chesterton 2006: 31.
[26] For a brisk journalistic account of the issues, see Rushkoff 2013.

consciousness at a pace just beyond our ability to process the world. This never-ending preoccupation with the tyranny of the now, which can be neither completed nor overcome, renders individuals incapable of framing long-term interests of their own, let alone attending to the trusteeship responsibilities we the living bear to those who are still to come. It has been the case, historically, that democracies have defined themselves diacritically against tyrannies, the freedom from oppression of arbitrary rule.[27] We should see that a tyrant of one's own devising, internalized as a dominant part of one's self, is just as harmful to genuine freedom as one whose force is enacted from without.

A self lived under the tyranny of the now is not capable of taking proper stock of its own history. Sheldon Wolin, an avowed 'progressive' thinker, argues that one key factor in the emergence of "managed democracy," and its attendant threat of "inverted," or soft, totalitarianism, is the speed of social change:

> Today, thanks to the highly organized pursuit of technological innovation and the culture it encourages, change is more rapid, more encompassing, more welcomed than ever before—which means that institutions, values, and expectations share with technology a limited shelf life. We are experiencing the triumph of contemporaneity and of its accomplice, forgetting or collective amnesia. Stated somewhat differently, in early modern times change displaced traditions; today change succeeds change.[28]

A casualty of that shift is the very idea that 'progress' might have the power to realize our desires for social justice. Early champions of progress "believed that while change might result in the disappearance or destruction of established beliefs, customs, and interests, the vast majority of these deserved to go because they mostly served the Few while keeping the Many in ignorance, poverty, and sickness."[29] The logic of this dialectic has, however, since vanished, because there is nothing for the forces of 'progress' to push off against. Meanwhile, our sense of time has become compressed and distorted; the outcome of such time is "the tyranny of efficiency" and so the subversion of democracy's demand "that time be defined by the requirements for deliberation, discussion, reconciliation of opposing viewpoints, all of which suddenly seem 'time-consuming'."[30] This, we might say, is the final, but alas self-consuming, victory of *chronos*-time.

Nor does the damage end there. This condition of relentless change-upon-change leads, in turn, to a neglect of anything that stands in relation to that self as a public trust or a common good. Social change without direction, instead of leading to desired general goods, merely raises the spectre of empty narcissism. "With postmodernism," Terry Eagleton argues, rather recklessly using a blanket label,

> history is reduced for the most part to commodified cultural heritage, an ever-present repertoire of inherited styles and a 'presentist' approach to the past. … History is too brutely given for a culture which delights in an endless array of options. It is an unwelcome reminder that our freedom in the present is constrained by the irreparable fatality we know as the past.[31]

Under these conditions, postmodern thought is revealed as "depthless, anti-tragic, non-linear, anti-numinous, non-foundational and anti-universalist, suspicious of absolutes and averse to interiority."[32] Quite a catalogue of vices! We should, of course, be careful to distinguish our reactions to this denunciation from a thinker whose hostility toward postmodern thought is sometimes more vivid than reasoned. In concluding the present paper, I suggest *pace* Eagleton that one can—indeed must—retain the suspicion towards universalism and foundationalism, a variform version of Lyotard's "incredulity towards metanarratives," without sacrificing interiority, tragedy, and a sense of history.

And yet, society is changing so fast that sometimes the tug towards both presentism and the bad forms of postmodern restlessness seems irresistible. In previous democratic moments, social change was itself a motor of political aspiration, not stasis. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, "The considerable speeding up of social change" was seen by reformers as a necessary condition for the creation of 'historical consciousness'. And this consciousness was in turn "duly reflected in the … novel sense of history as an endless chain of irreversible changes, with which the

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[27] For example, in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (Paris, 24 June 1793) we find these words offered in defense of the French Revolution: "in order that all citizens … may never permit themselves to be oppressed and degraded by tyranny." The same language is present in Robespierre's (rejected) Declaration of Rights (24 April 1793), though it does not appear in the (accepted) 1789 Declaration.
[28] Wolin 2008: xviii.
[29] Wolin 2008: xix.
[30] Wolin 2008: 233.
[31] Eagleton 2014: 188.
[32] Eagelton 2014: 188; see also Eagleton 1996.

concept of progress—a development which brings change for the better—was not slow to join forces." The resulting notion of constant progressive change, or perfectibility, "paved the way for utopia."[33] We have seen that this utopian impulse has its considerable downside risks, even assuming that such a thing as 'constant progressive change' was possible—as Chesterton, for one, denies.

3. Fugitive Democracy

The answer is not, however, a decline into anti-utopianism, whether of the Fabian sort or, worse, the disengagement and cynicism that characterizes too much of the electorates in Western democracies, especially among young people now experiencing income levels lower than their parents and record levels of under- and unemployment, even when highly educated. Is there, perhaps, a form of anti-anti-utopianism that can keep alive the very idea of democratic aspiration without courting the dangers rightly associated with ideal outcomes? This is the crux of the concept of fugitive democracy. In our initial analysis, the fugitive quality of democracy seems like a disadvantage, an escaped prisoner on the run. This, Sheldon Wolin suggests, is itself the legacy of a long-held but erroneous identification of democracy, and the political more generally, with a form of electoral politics and centralized government. "Institutionalization marks the attenuation of democracy," Wolin notes:

> leaders begin to appear; hierarchies develop; experts of one kind or another cluster around the centers of decision; order, procedure, and precedent displace a more spontaneous politics: in retrospect the latter appears as disorganized, inefficient. Democracy thus seems destined to be a moment rather than a form. Throughout the history of political thought virtually all writers emphasize the unstable and temporary character of democracy.[34]

This initial analysis prompts two urgent questions for democrats: "Why is it that democracy is reduced, even devitalized by form? Why is its presence occasional and fugitive?"

In a way, the answers are obvious. Such institutionalizations of the political are further evidence, if any was needed, of Robert Michels's so-called "iron law of oligarchy," which decrees that the emergence of an oligarchy, or non-circulating elite, is an unavoidable consequence of the "tactical and technical necessities" of democratic politics, especially in systems of electoral representation.[35] Michels: "It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization, says oligarchy." Nor, argued Michels, is this a chance development in some cases rather than others. "Historical evolution mocks all the prophylactic measures that have been adopted for the prevention of oligarchy," he said; and the stated purpose of democratic movements, namely to *eliminate* elites, cannot but generate them through the very attempts at elimination. Like Oedipus, their every move away from social elite formation creates the tragic outcome of creating a political elite—which becomes itself social. This rule by an elite in the name of the *demos* is oligarchy; worse, joining the iron law with Chesterton's oligarchy of the living might be seen to raise the problem to a second power. (Michels was true to his conclusions: in his native Germany he was a vocal socialist; he later emigrated to Italy and joined the socialist wing of Mussolini's fascist party.)

Put in less structural terms, we can say that the devolution to organized, hence corruptible politics, is just the inevitable development of a socialized citizenry, all of whom view themselves as either aspiring to or shadowing the trappings of bourgeois material comfort. Georg Lukács put it in the following terms, which reflect also on the changing nature of time and space under late capitalist conditions: "Bourgeois society carried out the process of socializing society. Capitalism destroyed both the spatio-temporal barriers between different lands and territories and also the legal partitions between the different 'estates'." Lukács concludes: "Man becomes, in the true sense of the word, a social being. Society becomes the reality for man."[36] In toxic versions, this combination of aspiration and shadowing congeals into a comprehensive ideological myth—the American Dream, perhaps. In Wolin's own measured words, "The democratization of 'advanced industrial democracies' comes down to this: the labor, wealth and psyches of the citizenry are simultaneously defended and exploited, protected and extracted, nurtured and fleeced, rewarded and commanded, flattered and threatened."[37]

One could be far more incendiary than this, and denounce the managerial capture of democracy in more rousing language. But such cries tend to dissolve quickly, or else devolve into a cynicism that edges always towards apathy. A better course is to work constantly to free democracy of its institutional shackles and return citizenship to the

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[33] Bauman 1976: 18-19.
[34] Wolin 1994: 19. In support of the last claim Wolin cites Plato, *Republic* VIII: 557e-558a and *Laws* III: 693d.
[35] Michels 1915.
[36] Lukács 1972: 19.
[37] Wolin 1994: 16.

centre of political life—even if only for rupturous moments at a time. Thus does the fugitive transform from prisoner on the run into a guerrilla warrior in the democratic cause. "Democracy is not about where the political is located but how it is experienced," Wolin notes.[38] And later: "Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being which is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily, but is a recurrent possibility as long as the memory of the political survives."[39]

I take particular note of the *temporality* embedded in this revitalized notion of fugitive democracy ('the memory of the political', 'recurrent possibility'); and likewise its invocation of *authority* ('conditioned by bitter experience' and 'doomed', but nevertheless doomed 'to succeed'). This, I suggest, is precisely the living tradition of democracy. Though its orientation to future possibilities marks it as akin to some recent politico-theological conceptions of democracy, such as Derrida's "democracy to come" or Agamben's "coming community," it is rooted in the deep soil of inherited social life and concrete obligation to those both before and after us.[40] Unlike them, it does not ask for a vague 'infinite responsibility' towards those who are yet to come, but it *does* enjoin a real infinite, namely the infinite demand to renew and revitalize democratic legitimacy, here and now (and again).

We might think, in this connection, of Gilles Deleuze's notion of *repetition*: that infinite miracle of singularity, the uniqueness that lies beyond law, equivalency, and transaction, but which can be encountered again and again. "Repetition as a conduct and as a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities," Deleuze says. "If exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition."[41] That is: only that which can be stolen can also be given, and vice versa. "Repetition belongs to humour and irony," Deleuze continues; "it is by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particularities subsumed under laws, a universal opposed to the generalities which give rise to laws."[42] Repetition is festival, excess, rupture. In its democratic possibility, it is where you and I are citizens together, returning to our shared locus of trust, equal not in the sense of being exchangeable but precisely in respect of our infinite difference. Jacques Rancière makes the connection vivid in one of the few optimistic formulations in his *Hatred of Democracy*. "Democracy is neither a form of government that enables oligarchies to rule in the name of the people, nor is it a form of society that governs the power of commodities," he writes there. "It is the action that constantly wrests the monopoly of public life from oligarchic governments, and the omnipotence over lives from the power of wealth."[43]

The possibility of repeating the democratic demand is the gift bequeathed to us by our forebears. The making of it, in the service of our own needs but also in trust to those who will come after us, is the gift we bequeath to them. That is to say, democracy is a gift that we must give to ourselves—so much is obvious—but is also a gift of insight, that we the people are far more than an electorate, a voting bloc, a population. It is, then—to offer another double to match the double genitive of my opening section—a gift in time: that is, one which is both received and given across *and* that must be given without delay if its benefits are not to be squandered in cynicism or complacency, frozen into institutional attenuation, stolen by the monied interest, or otherwise wasted.

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[38] Wolin 1994: 18.

[39] Wolin 1994: 23.

[40] Derrida 2003 and Agamben 1993. For a clear overview and critique, see Laclau 1996: 66-83.

[41] Deleuze 1994: 1.

[42] Deleuze 1994: 5.

[43] Rancière 2006: 96.

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