

## DEMOCRACY FOR SALE

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### *Cuchulain vs. Kouchner*

Am I a democrat? “Democrat,” at least for Auguste Blanqui writing in 1852, was a word, as he put it, “without definition”: “What is a democrat, I ask you. This is a vague and banal word, without any precise meaning, a rubbery word.”<sup>1</sup>

Is “democrat” an any less rubbery name to embrace in our own time?

In June 2008 Ireland, the only country to hold a popular referendum on the European constitution, voted to reject it. One of the principal authors of the treaty, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, was the first to admit that the text of the treaty (which ran over 312 pages in the English language version) was little revised from the version the French and the Dutch had rejected three years earlier, when they too held a referendum by popular vote. “The tools were exactly the same.

They just had been rearranged in the tool box.”<sup>2</sup> The same treaty, in other words, was being revoted, after having been rejected by the French and the Dutch. This time around it was a “quirk,” as the mainstream media regularly called it, in the Irish constitution, which gave the Irish the right to approve or disapprove the treaty by popular vote when all the other countries, including now France and Holland, were to be represented by deputies. A mounting mood of suspicion toward the Irish vote was palpable in the European press, which viewed “the quirk” as a potential occasion for irrational and destructive behavior on the part of the public. The Irish, after all, like the third world, might lack the political sophistication to make the right choice; they might not be ready for democracy. The suspicion boiled over in the days immediately preceding the election when French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner took it upon himself to make clear to the Irish that they were, in effect, *obliged* to vote yes out of gratitude to a Europe that had dragged them out of the bogs. It would be, he stated, “very, very annoying for the right-thinking people [“la pensée honnête”] if we couldn’t count on the Irish, who themselves have counted heavily on Europe’s money.”<sup>3</sup> The division he established between the Irish, cast now as brigands who had absconded with Brussels’s cash, and *la pensée honnête*, presumably all other Europeans who have learned to regard politics as a giant intercountry game of treaties, summits, and committees, had been suggested a few days earlier by Daniel Cohn-Bendit: “The Irish have gotten everything from Europe, and they aren’t conscious of it.”<sup>4</sup>

The language of a “new” and technocratic Europe barely masked the repetition of colonialist tropes of older empires: the Irish figured as the latest rendition of the uneducated and unteachable people, whose appropriate response could only be gratitude to its leaders. But there was a new twist. Irish support for the constitution was viewed as an obligation of *repayment*; an investment, it seems, had been made, and the EU wanted a return on the investment. As President Sarkozy reportedly told his aides, “They [the Irish] are bloody

fools. They have been stuffing their faces at European expense for years and now they dump us in the shit.”<sup>5</sup>

The referendum was supposed to be nothing more than an exercise in rubber-stamping the experts’ text. But the Irish decided to treat the vote as a real vote. In their decision to reject the treaty and their refusal to align themselves with the powerful nations, some heard an echo of Bandung: the Irish were constituting themselves not only as a minority, but as a different kind of minority: those whose recent history had been a colonial one. Others, after the election, expressed what they took to be a general explanation for the treaty’s defeat: the reluctance of voters to approve something they had been told in advance they were incapable of understanding and should leave to their betters to administer. As one “No” voter put it, “the reason that the treaty went down to defeat is that we Irish voters found it to be an impenetrable read and an impossible thing to get our collective heads around. The Treaty was *purposefully drafted* to defy our understanding.”<sup>6</sup> It was purposefully drafted, in other words, to communicate to voters through its very form that it was best to leave such complex matters of governance up to the experts, the technocracy.

EU officials were quick to blame “populism” for the defeat. The Irish, they insisted, must be made to *revote*, presumably until the correct result could be reached. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and Nicolas Sarkozy immediately called for a new vote. Giscard went on the airways:

GISCARD. “The Irish must be allowed to express themselves again.”

NICOLAS DEMORAND (the radio interviewer): “Don’t you find it deeply shocking to make people who have already expressed themselves take the vote over?”

GISCARD: “We spend out time revoting. If we didn’t, the president of the Republic would be elected for all eternity”<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes there is all the time in the world to vote again. After all, the Lisbon Treaty was itself a revote, after the French and Dutch had defeated it. Other times, as in the contested Bush/Gore U.S. election in 2000, there is no time to revote or even to recount existing votes. In the impoverished rural area in the Hudson Valley where I live, we indeed pass our time revoting. Our county ranks near the bottom—which is to say with counties in Mississippi and Alabama—in the mediocrity of its school system, a mediocrity measured in terms of the ratio of money spent per student and uniform test results. Our county spends the highest amount of money for the worst results. But on the rare occasions when voters manage to vote “No” on yet another inflated school budget proposal in an attempt to hold bureaucrats and administrators accountable, the same exact proposal, accompanied by a renewed chorus of warnings against “abandoning our kids,” is put up for a vote month after month until it succeeds.

“Revoting,” then, in today’s actually existing representative democracies, is nothing unusual. “No,” apparently, doesn’t really mean no. What was striking about the aftermath of the Irish vote was not only that a treaty pronounced dead by popular vote was still very much alive, but that through exercising their democratic right to vote, by taking the election seriously, the Irish, in the view of the EU oligarchy, had struck a blow not against the powers of the Parliament, but *against democracy itself*. Here is Hans-Gert Pöttering, president of the European Parliament: “It is of course a great disappointment, for all those who wanted to achieve greater democracy, greater political effectiveness and greater clarity and transparency in decision-making in the EU, that the majority of the Irish could not be convinced of the need for these reforms of the EU.”<sup>8</sup>

The proof, it seems, was in the numbers. 500 million Europeans had been taken hostage by 862,415 Irish—less than 0.2 percent of the European population. The leaders of the large nations, France and Germany, reacted:

AXEL SCHÄEFER (SPD leader in the German Bundestag):

“We cannot allow the huge majority of Europe to be duped by a minority of a minority of a minority.”<sup>9</sup>

WOLFGANG SCHAEUBLE (German interior minister): “A few million Irish cannot decide on behalf of 495 million Europeans.”<sup>10</sup>

JEAN DANIEL: “A country of four or five million inhabitants can’t hold countries made up of 490 million citizens hostage.”<sup>11</sup>

Now, presumably among the 500 million Europeans held hostage by Irish banditry could be counted the French and Dutch who had themselves voted no on the constitution earlier. But we won’t quibble over numbers. What is more interesting is to see the reappearance of a discursive figure, a familiar character, that made its debut during the most recent historic moment of high panic among the elites, the 1960s, and has been strategically conjured up at subsequent crisis moments: the “silent majority.” When “the silent majority” appears, the world has been divided into two according to a quantitative logic whereby forces are presented in both numerical and moral terms: the “law” that a silent, reproachful, and now purportedly “oppressed” majority must defend against a stigmatized and vocal minority, a civic and majoritarian Europe hijacked by a subversive and destructive minority. The “silent majority” appears when the largest number is *spoken for* rather than speaks and when the voice of the minority is increasingly voided of authority and rendered illegitimate.<sup>12</sup>

Frédéric Bas has traced the invention of the term *the silent majority* back to the moment it originated in the mouths of Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew as they attempted to counteract the noisy opposition to the Vietnam War out in the streets. In France the first use of the term, in the context of the passage of the *loi anticasseurs* in 1970, was, as Bas points out, inscribed in the framework of a general reflec-

tion on democracy: “In our democracy, it is the duty of each citizen to prevent minorities from imposing their law on the silent majority of the country. If that majority acts like sheep, it will awaken to the reign of the colonels or that of majority agitators who, without taking account of existing laws, will impose their own.”

But it was none other than Valéry Giscard d’Estaing who Bas credits with introducing (in latent form) the figure in the midst of the May-June insurrections, on May 19, 1968, back when he was a deputy from Puy-de-Dome:

In the grave national circumstances our country is undergoing, I want merely to express the point of view that I know to be that of the greatest number of students, workers, but also of French men and women everywhere. This majority wishes that order be restored and liberties be protected. . . . Up until now, the greatest number of French people, who love order, liberty, and progress, and who accept neither arbitrariness nor anarchy, have remained silent. If necessary, they must be ready to express themselves.

In the 1960s, the indeterminate silence of “the greatest number” could be confidently translated or ventriloquized by government officials as expressing a bastion of good sense against anarchy or arbitrariness. The minority had “seized speech” in the streets, but the *highly valorized* silence of the majority could function as a vast reserve army, a force held back until the moment when it would be called upon to express itself, in the legitimate way, that is: by voting. In 2008 the silent majority, the “greatest number” of Europeans, finds its silence just as confidently translated by the ruling elite, but its silence is now constrained to be eternal—democracy as voiceless assent. The situation is one in which those who are deprived of their political say function comfortably in the belief that “governability”—a concept massively promoted in the 1990s—benefits everyone, de-

spite the fact that “governability” actually consists of the most unlimited wielding of power by the most powerful and wealthy classes. Indeed, another way of looking at the Irish referendum is that the Irish, invested with the specter of democracy as lawless or violent, were being asked to vote away their right, as well as everyone else’s, to ever vote again, by helping force through a ruling bureaucracy insulated to a virtually impermeable degree against democratic accountability. The EU had made an investment in Ireland and the interest they required as a return on their investment was either the abrogation of the right to vote or what amounted to the same thing: the obligation to keep voting until the correct vote—assent—was obtained. Governability—the creation of faraway, supranational, European bureaucratic bodies against which no worker’s organization can fight directly—is designed to prevent radical minorities in wealthy or overdeveloped societies from upsetting the system in any way.

In 1968, many of the minority engaged in direct democracy out on the streets viewed elections, the tired, ritualized exercise of representative democracy, as, in the famous words of Sartre, “a trap for fools.” What the gap between our own time and the 1960s indicates is first of all a progressive dismantling of universal suffrage—the attempt to deprive even “representative” democracy of its validity in the effort to offset the unpleasant effects of universal suffrage and in favor of “rationalizing” people’s will and the expression of that will. The term *consensus* is no longer adequate to describe what is in fact a kind of socializing of people into silence—silence as consent. But it also says something about the creative, bricolagelike capacity of the demos, when even a ballot box can become a weapon. It suggests that democracy can reassert itself via the most diverse of political forms. By taking an outmoded ritual seriously when, as Giscard’s cynicism makes patently clear, no one else does, even voting, in this instance, can become an instantiation of “fugitive democracy”: the political potentialities of ordinary citizens.<sup>13</sup> The vote could be treated as a

weapon to be used in the antidemocratic assault on popular sovereignty by a “Europe” that presents itself as the reign of democracy on earth, a brand-name sold by evoking peace, justice, and above all, democracy.

## Democracy for Sale

The modern, received understanding of democracy is rule by voting, the authority to decide matters by majority rule, the rule of “the greatest number.” But another understanding of the term, familiar to readers of Jacques Rancière’s *Le Maître ignorant*, conveys a sense of power that is neither quantitative nor concerned with control. It is rather one of potentiality or enablement: the capacity of ordinary people to discover modes of action for realizing common concerns. Rancière’s encounter with Joseph Jacotot, and his continuing reworking of that encounter, have helped make available what was in fact the original, more expansive and suggestive, meaning of the word *democracy*: namely, the capacity to do things. Democracy is not a form of government. And it is not concerned with number—neither with a tyrannical majority nor a minority of agitators. In ancient Greece, as Josiah Ober points out, of the three major terms designating political power—*monarchia*, *oligarchia*, and *demokratia*—only *demokratia* is unconcerned with number. The *monos* of *monarchia* indicates solitary rule; the *hoi oligoi* of oligarchy indicates the power of a few. Only *demokratia* does not provide an answer to the question “how many?”<sup>14</sup> The power of the *demos* is neither the power of the population nor its majority but rather the power of anybody. Anybody is as entitled to govern as he or she is to be governed.

Yet if democracy as “the capacity to do things” is free from the law of number, it does presuppose an existing division of the world into two, a division between those who are defined as having the capacity to participate in collective decision making (the “best people”) and



those said to be without that capacity. Democracy *refuses* this division as the basis of organizing political life; it is a call for equality on the part of the people defined as not being among the best people. “The best” have been defined in different ways throughout history: as those who possess noble birth, the right race, those who exhibit military power, as the wealthy, or those who possess complex knowledge or managerial skills. And as Immanuel Wallerstein reminds us, the modes of defining who count among “the best” have always been accompanied by assumptions about the ethos or lifestyle of “the best people”—assumptions, for example, that a “civilized” nature is their particular endowment.<sup>15</sup>

When Blanqui in 1852 complained about the rubbery nature of the name *democrat*, he was already registering the profound modification the term was beginning to undergo—a modification that would last throughout the Second Empire and beyond. Up until then the word had largely retained its revolutionary 1789 heritage; *democrat* was the label, for example, of many far-left organizations in the 1830s and 1840s. But during the Second Empire the Imperial Regime had effectively appropriated the term for itself, for the most part successfully, by opposing what it called real “democracy” to the bourgeois “party of order.”<sup>16</sup> The emperor, in other words, claimed to have given sovereignty back to the people by the “plebiscite” or the *appel au peuple*. Monarchists in the 1850s and 1860s embraced the word, equating it favorably with Empire; the minister of the interior, an impassioned Bonapartist, was able to call himself “the defender of democracy.” By 1869, a partial enumeration of the kinds of “democrats” flourishing in French political life included *démocrates socialistes*, *démocrates révolutionnaires*, *démocrates bourgeois*, *démocrates impérialistes*, *démocrates progressistes*, and *démocrates autoritaires*. The list reflects both the point Blanqui was making—that the term was entirely up for grabs—as well as the effort made by some socialists to affirm the revolutionary heritage of the word by lending precision to their position with an appropriate qualifier. But the word on its own—then as today—

conveyed virtually no information. Blanqui was not the only Republican or socialist to hesitate to use a word his adversaries used to describe themselves. As he writes to Maillard:

You say to me: "I am neither bourgeois, nor proletarian. I am a democrat. Beware of words without definition, they are the preferred instrument of schemers. . . . It is they who invented the beautiful aphorism: neither proletarian nor bourgeois, but democrat! . . . What opinion couldn't manage to find a home under that roof? Everyone claims to be a democrat, even aristocrats.

*Democrat* no longer named the division to be overcome between those judged capable of governing and those judged incapable: it was too rubbery, it did no labor, it created consensus rather than division. Even the Communards of 1871, engaged in their short-lived experiment in taking control of the administrative and institutional functions normally reserved for traditional elites, did not call themselves democrats. The declaration of the communal form of government in Paris in the wake of the French capitulation to the Prussians signified nothing if not the most renewed commitment to democratic politics in modern times. In their brief existence the Communards replaced long-entrenched hierarchic and bureaucratic structures with democratic forms and processes at every level. Yet these agents of democracy preferred other words—*républicains*, *peuple*—to describe themselves. But I think it is significant that they did not entirely abandon the word *démocratie*. Even though it had been derailed from its true meaning and had fallen into the hands of the enemy, it still retained the heritage of 1789.

When Arthur Rimbaud entitled one of his last prose poems "Démocratie," a poem written soon after the demise of the Commune, the title is nothing more than a banner under which a mobile and imperialistic bourgeois class expands out from the metropolis to

the “languid, scented lands,” feeding, as the poem says, “the most cynical whoring,” “destroying all logical revolt.”

### *Democracy*

“Toward that intolerable country  
The flag floats along  
And the beating drums are stifled  
By our rough backcountry shouting . . . ”  
“In the metropolis we will feed the most cynical whoring.  
We will destroy all logical revolt.”  
“On to the languid scented lands! In the service of the most  
monstrous industrial or military exploitations.”  
“Goodbye to all this, and never mind where.”  
Conscripts of good intention,  
We will have savage philosophy;  
Knowing nothing of science, depraved in our pleasures,  
To hell with the world around us . . .  
“This is the real advance! Forward. . . March!”

What if it were Rimbaud, and not Baudelaire, whom we read as the poet that best compiled the central tropes and figures of the nineteenth century? With images courtesy of Edgar Allan Poe and Jules Verne, with prophecies drawn from political pamphlets, with figures taken from children’s novels and popular science texts, Rimbaud assembles the emblems and possible futures of his moment. And the colonial soldier is very much one of those figures, producing as many, if not more, of the principal postures, orientations, stereotypes, and directions, as does the ragpicker or *flâneur* for the future of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. “*Démocratie*” the poem, and the *Illuminations* taken as a group, stand on the brink, so to speak, of a mutating world system: their moment is the inauguration of a world drawn together by colonialism, the moment when a genuinely

bourgeois regime begins to install itself definitively.<sup>17</sup> Just as significant, though, is what occurs immediately before the writing of these poems: the class massacre that occurred in the heart of “civilized Europe”: the mass shootings of tens of thousands of Communards in May 1871. This attempt on the part of the bourgeois-republican government to physically exterminate one by one and *en bloc* its class enemy, to kill all those who had engaged in the brief attempt to change the political and social order, is quite extraordinary:

The executions were not just happening in the Luxembourg. They were shooting people down on the street corners, in the passageways between houses, against doors. Wherever they could find a wall to push victims up against.

The banks of the Seine were witness to ferocious massacres. Underneath the Pont Neuf they were executing people for eight days straight. In the afternoon, gentlemen and their ladies would come out to watch the prisoners being killed. Elegant couples attended the butchery as they would a play.

In a corner of the Left Bank that surrounds the neighborhood of the Pantheon, a half dozen courts-martial were functioning. The mass killings took place at the Luxembourg. But they were shooting people at the Monnaie, at l’Observatoire, at the law school, at the Ecole polytechnique, at the Pantheon. They were executing people at the Collège de France, based on condemnations pronounced by a provost seated in the room on the left of the main entrance. There were continuous executions in the Maubert market.

Six courts-martial for this one neighborhood. For each of them, more and more deaths. The Luxembourg alone counted more than a thousand. As they advanced, the Versailles installed sinister military magistrates, one by one in each square, whose only task was to organize the killing. Judgment didn’t matter.

Around the large slaughterhouses—the Luxembourg, the Ecole Militaire, the parc Monceau, La Roquette, the Père Lachaise, the Buttes Chaumont, and still others—countless massacres were conducted in a more muffled fashion, with less ostentatious display and less glory.<sup>18</sup>

I have quoted at length from this eyewitness account of the *semaine sanglante* because I think we should linger on the sheer magnitude of the hatred exhibited by the bourgeois-republican government, on what Luciano Canfora calls “the furious hostility of the majority.”<sup>19</sup> For it was this class massacre, he reminds us, that was the defeat of democracy that gave birth to the Third Republic. In November of that year, Rimbaud and his friend Delahaye walked the streets of Paris, examining the traces of bullet holes left in the walls of houses and of the Pantheon; the months and, in fact, years after the massacre left a political atmosphere infused, as Rimbaud remarked to his friend, with “annihilation, chaos . . . all the possible and even probable reactions.”<sup>20</sup> The *Illuminations* open onto the movement of late-nineteenth-century expansionism and the wholesale creation of a consciousness conducive to reproducing a colonialist expeditionary class this entailed. In certain of his more futuristic poems, Rimbaud foresees that movement culminating in a bland and homogeneous universe: “a little world, pale and flat” as he puts it in one poem, or in “the same bourgeois magic wherever your baggage sets you down.” In others—I’m thinking here of “Métropolitain,” “Barbare,” and “Soir historique,”—he shows us some of the ways the bourgeois imagination intoxicates itself with apocalyptic images of its own death. In this second cluster of poems, Rimbaud presents the canceled future of a now vanished imperial destiny: a panoramic vision where crystalline and fantastic cityscapes rejoin ancient prefigurations of the end of the world in geological cataclysms of exploding ice and snow; intertwining bridges and highways lie flanked by bar-

barian tribes, a recurring planetary conflagration, at once polar and fiery, chaotic yet eerily still.

How can the future be imagined after the demise of the Commune? Having lived the eruption, evolution, and liquidation of that unusual experiment in democracy, faced now with the “swamp,” as he called it, of the French middle classes consolidating the colonial impetus that would propel them through the next several decades, Rimbaud chooses to prefigure both the triumph and the death of that class in a series of futuristic and fantastic prose poems—the triumph of that class in a progressive homogenization of the planet, its death in an exploded earth.

Rimbaud’s “Démocratie,” then, marks the precise moment when the term *democracy* is no longer being used to express the demands of the *people* in a national class struggle, but is rather being used to *justify* the colonial policies of the “civilized lands” in a struggle on an international scale between the West and the rest, the civilized and the noncivilized. Rimbaud recounts that saga in the “Mauvais Sang” section of *Une Saison en enfer* and provides an additional class portrait of the civilizing missionaries in a poem called “Movement”:

These are the conquerors of the world,  
Seeking their personal chemical fortune:  
Sport and comfort accompany them;  
They bring education for races, for classes, for animals  
Within this vessel, rest and vertigo  
In diluvian light,  
In terrible evenings of study.

The resonance of democracy registered by Rimbaud was definitively changed, not merely diluted but filled with an alien content, as the very groups who feared it at the beginning of the century begin to embrace it at the century’s end. As in Rimbaud’s poem, democracy

becomes a banner, a slogan, a proof of being civilized as well as the vital spiritual supplement, the ideal fig leaf, to the civilized and civilizing West. The State, in the name of representative democracy, inaugurates a history of class massacre, within Europe in the form of the Commune and beyond, in the colonial domains, a violence whose echoes can be heard in the language of threat and contempt directed at the Irish at the time of the 2008 vote. The West, as democratic, can become the world's moral leader, since its hegemony is the basis of progress throughout the world. From these "conquerors of the world" to Woodrow Wilson's "making the world safe for democracy" and onto Harry Truman's recoding of *democracy* into the language and project of development economics requires no leap at all.<sup>21</sup>

But before we leave Rimbaud's prefiguration of world history, we must consider, in the context of "Democracy," and "Movement," a poem that may have much to say to our own historical moment, the poem structured as one long advertising spiel entitled "Sale." In an atmosphere made up of equally modern and magical installations, the poem presents the revolutionary cry and the advertising slogan as indistinguishable from each other in a generalized onslaught of consumer goods and services: "For sale—Priceless bodies, beyond race or world or sex or lineage!" Both "Sale" and "Democracy" relate changes in consciousness to the relative penetration of market relationships into everyday life—whether these be in the *outrémer* colonies or in the heart of the European metropolis. (A sonnet written around this time, entitled "Paris," consists entirely of advertising pitches lifted off of Parisian storefronts.) What might be called the prophetic or extraordinarily contemporary feel of these poems—read together, they amount to the title of this chapter, "Democracy for Sale"—has something to do with the way the twentieth century solidified the equation between democracy (in its inverted form) and consumption begun in Rimbaud's time: democracy as the right to buy. Today's Western liberal democracies are all the more assured in their well-being in that they are more perfectly depoliticized,

lived as a kind of falsely timeless ambience, a milieu or style of existence. And this is the atmosphere envisioned by Rimbaud in "Sale": the free exchange of merchandise, bodies, candidates, lifestyles, and possible futures. "For sale—Homesteads and migrations, sports, enchantments and perfect comfort, and the noise, the movement and the future they entail!"

Today, democracy is the slogan of almost all of the leaders on the planet (and the rest, sooner or later, will be brought forcibly into the fold). What separates our own time from the extraordinary moment of Rimbaud is something called the cold war and its ending. In terms of the development of "democracy," it is difficult to overestimate the enormous gain Western governments managed to consolidate when they successfully advanced *democracy* as the opposing counterweight to *communism*. They had actually gained control of the entire word for themselves, leaving nary a trace of its former emancipatory resonance. Indeed, democracy had become a class ideology justifying systems that allowed a very small number of people to govern—and to govern without the people, so to speak; systems that seem to exclude any other possibility than the infinite reproduction of their own functioning. To be able to call an unchecked and deregulated free market economy, a ruthless, no-holds-barred opposition to communism, a right to intervene, militarily and otherwise, in countless sovereign nations and their internal affairs—to succeed in calling all this democracy was an incredible feat. To manage to make the market be considered as an evident condition of democracy and to have democracy viewed as inexorably calling forth the market, is an astounding accomplishment. It was considerably helped along, in France, at least, in the reaction against the '68 years, as the French Revolution, under the profoundly antidemocratic tutelage of François Furet, was submitted to a patient labor of inconsideration, denigrated in comparison to the acceptable revolution of 1776 and ultimately affiliated to Stalinism and the crimes of Pol Pot. And, with the end of "actually existing socialism," we at last, it seemed, finished definitively with



moments of rupture or conflict, and society could be from now on the place for uninterrupted “democratic” deliberation, dialogue, debate, and a perpetual regulation of social relations. Rimbaud’s moment, as we have seen in “Democracy,” initiated the age of “democratic empire”: a natural, inevitable project designed to bring about a predestined future of the peoples or entities being developed. But “democracy” is just as much at work, as we saw in “Sale,” on the homefront: where the main system of rule in a society is the economy, a vast historic force beyond human power, and where a silent consensus informs us that the equilibrium produced by the economy defines the best of all possible worlds.

Is this a permanent contamination of the language of politics? Can I call myself a democrat?

It’s certainly not enough to criticize, in an incrementalist way, the “failed” or “insufficient” democracy of this or that law, party, or state. To do so is to remain enclosed in a system that is perfectly happy to critique, say, the blatant seizure of electoral procedures by a Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, but remains powerless before the same process when it is accomplished by economic phenomena that respect democratic rituals—like the exactions of the IMF, for example. In fact, the understanding of democracy as having to do with elections or with the will of the majority is a very recent historical understanding. What is called representational democracy—in our own time said to consist of free elections, free political parties, a free press, and, of course, the free market—is in fact an oligarchic form: representation by a minority granted the title of stewards or trustees of common affairs. All today’s “advanced industrial democracies” are in fact oligarchic democracies: they represent the victory of a dynamic oligarchy, a world government centered on great wealth and the worship of wealth, but capable of building consensus and legitimacy through elections that, by limiting the range of options, effectively protect the ascendancy of the middle and upper classes.<sup>22</sup>

I think we must both recognize this to be the case, that is, recognize the nonexistence of democracy or its inversion in reality, at the same time that we acknowledge how vitally necessary it is to retain the original, expansive sense of the term. If we remain enclosed in an understanding of democracy as a form of government, then we have no choice but to abandon the word to the enemy who has appropriated it. But precisely because it is not a form of government, because it is not a type of constitution or institution, democracy, as the power of anybody to concern himself or herself with common affairs, becomes another name for the specificity of politics itself. It may exist or not exist at all, and it may reassert itself in the most varied of manifestations. It is a moment, at best a project rather than a form. As the name of the struggle against the perpetual privatization of public life, democracy, like love in one of Rimbaud's many slogans, must be reinvented.

9. Sheldon Wolin formulates this matter a little differently, arguing that only what he calls “fugitive democracy” is possible, episodic expressions by the people of their rightful title. See the final chapters of both *Politics and Vision*, expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and *Democracy, Inc.* for Wolin’s development of this notion.
10. For fuller development of this point, see my “Sovereign Hesitations,” in Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac, eds., *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), and “The Return of the Repressed: Sovereignty, Capital, Theology” in David Campbell and Morton Schoolman, eds., *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
11. For a fuller discussion of post-Marxist philosophers pursuing the possibility of resubordinating the economic to a democratic political sphere, see my “The Return of the Repressed.”
12. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (New York: Beacon, 1964).

### 5. Democracies Against Democracy

- 1 Jacques Rancière, *La haine de la démocratie* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2005); English translation: *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Verso, 2006)
- 2 Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente: Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995); English translation: *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

### 6. Democracy for Sale

1. Auguste Blanqui, letter to Maillard, June 6, 1852, in *Maintenant, il faut des armes* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2006), pp. 172–186. Translations from the French, unless otherwise noted, are my own; translations of Rimbaud are taken from Paul Schmidt’s *Arthur Rimbaud: Complete Works* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) and have been in some cases slightly modified.
2. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing blog, October 26, 2007.
3. Interview, *RTL*, June 9, 2008.
4. *Le Monde*, June 7, 2008.

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7. *France Inter*, June 24, 2008.
8. *Institutions*, June 13, 2008.
9. *Irish Times*, June 14, 2008.
10. *Deutsche Welle*, June 15, 2008.
11. Cited in Dominique Guillemin and Laurent Daure, "L'Introuvable souveraineté de l'Union européenne," *L'Action Républicaine*, July 3, 2008, <http://action-republicaine.over-blog.com/archive-07-3-2008.html>.
12. See Frédéric Bas, "La 'majorité silencieuse' ou la bataille de l'opinion en mai-juin 1968," in P. Artières and M. Zancarini-Fournel, eds., 68: *Une histoire collective* (Paris: Découverte, 2008), pp. 359–366.
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14. See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991; see also Josiah Ober, "The Original Meaning of 'Democracy': Capacity to Do Things, Not Majority Rule," *Constellations* 15 (2008). 1–9
15. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Democracy, Capitalism and Transformation," lecture at Documenta 11, Vienna, March 16, 2001.
16. See Jean Dubois, *Le Vocabulaire politique et social en France de 1869 à 1872* (Paris: Larousse, 1962).
17. See Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988; rpt. Verso, 2008); see also Fredric Jameson, "Rimbaud and the Spatial Text," in Tak-Wai Wong and M. A. Abbas, eds., *Rewriting Literary History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1984).
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19. Luciano Canfora, *Democracy in Europe* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), p. 120.

20. Rimbaud, cited by Ernest Delahaye in Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Rolland de Renéville et Jules Mouquet (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 745.
21. Harry Truman, January 20, 1949: "We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas."
22. See Canfora, *Democracy in Europe*, pp. 214–252.