

## *The Constraints on Transformative Action*

*A Third Point of Departure*

### FACING FALSE NECESSITY

#### *The Disappointments of Transformative Practice*

SUPPOSE, reader, that, moved by the idea of the transformative vocation and by a nonnaturalistic version of the social ideal, you threw yourself into some form of political action in the world of the late twentieth century. Imagine that your more concrete interpretation of the ideal included the attempt to relativize the contrast between the long periods of petty, routinized conflict and the interludes of expanded transformative struggle and to keep privileged factions of society from controlling the means to create the social future. All your particular programmatic aims referred back to the more general aim of cracking society open to politics: so that to every aspect of its established structure there might correspond some activity that made it vulnerable to collective conflict and deliberate revision.

The current ways of organizing the workplace, the economy, and the state appeared to you an imperfect realization of these objectives. You did not accept the notion that these available options were the only arrangements capable of satisfying insurmountable technical or psychological constraints. You did not believe that people had to choose between the kind of democracy that existed in the North Atlantic democracies of the day or the vanguardist dictatorships of the communist regimes; the kind of market that had arisen in the modern West or no market at all except as the tolerated appendage of central economic command; the kind of work organization associated with stereotypes of bureaucracy and assembly lines or no large-scale, efficient production.

In each instance, the available options appeared to combine an abstract, indeterminate idea – of democratic rule, market decentralization, or technical coordination – with a concrete set of institutions that developed the idea in some directions rather than in others. You could not accurately understand the emergence of these dominant institutional solutions as the inevitable result of practical constraints rooted in the facts of scarcity and efficiency, in the un-

yielding requirements of large-scale organization, and in the abiding truths of human nature. Much in these established institutional arrangements seemed capable of being explained only as the outcome of a highly particularistic and accidental history. Once you recognized this fact, you were much less likely to treat the available alternative forms of social and governmental organization as an exhaustive catalog from which humanity – at least contemporary humanity – had to select its future.

If, anywhere in the world, you entered politics with such ideals and understandings, you would soon be disappointed. Your disappointment would be all the harsher for resisting easy analysis. The constraints on action undertaken in this spirit could not be adequately understood with the help of the available social theories. On the contrary, these theories, representing as they did but a partial break from the naturalistic premise, were more part of the problem than part of the solution. They helped solidify the very constraints they pretended, but failed, to explain.

#### *A Limiting Case of Social Closure*

Consider first the circumstance of a society with the greatest conceivable degree of closure to politics – a society that remained as invulnerable as any society can to the struggle over the basic terms of its collective existence. One way to describe such a situation is to say that it is one in which the terms of people's material and moral access to one another find no counterweight in ordinary practical or conceptual activities that bring these terms into question or open them up to conflict and revision. Such is the characterization of closure developed at length later in *Politics*. For the moment, however, I adopt another more superficial, but essentially equivalent, description. The situation in which the terms of collective existence are most taken for granted can be described as the one in which society lives under the influence of three main constraints: the oligarchy, the identity, and the survival effects. Each of these entangles the pursuit of ordinary human aims in the perpetual regeneration of a social world with definite limits.

#### *The Instruments of Closure: The Oligarchy Effect*

Some groups have a privileged access to power and material surplus. The premise of this conception of privilege is the existence of a difference between relatively small leading groups and a vast majority: a mass of ordinary workers whose income is kept close to a socially defined subsistence level, whether or not they are legally free

“property owners.” These workers are denied a voice in running the government or the other central institutions of the society.

The powerful hesitate between two options. They may draw upon mass support in their internecine strife, as by raising a peasant army through agrarian protection rather than outright coercion. Alternatively they may resist the temptation to play to the common man even when they do not actively gang up against the people.

The first of these two paths is widely understood to be dangerous. If any faction of the powerful were to go too far in the recruitment of a mass following, it would risk being destroyed by the other factions or overwhelmed by its own supporters. The privileged – including the privileged turned demagogues – would face an ever starker choice between the need to impose a remorseless despotism in order to hold the agitated populace down and the radical opening up of access to advantage.

Each time the groups and rulers that clash at the summit of power step back from the gamble of drumming up active popular support, they renew the life of the established order. Thus, both the satisfaction of economic or military needs and the quarrels of the powerful are shaped by an ordinarily tacit but deeply felt constraint upon the alliances that can be struck between the higher-ups and the masses. This constraint is the oligarchy effect.

#### *The Instruments of Closure: The Identity Effect*

The practices of social life are inseparable from the conditions on which people are morally available to one another: the groups with an authoritative claim upon the individual’s loyalties, the contexts in which heightened vulnerability becomes tolerable to him, and the terrain on which he can hope to be accepted by other people and to understand himself as a being with place. He cannot easily distinguish who he is and what his interests are from the groups to which he belongs. The multiple links between individual existence and group boundaries give rise to common identities.

Collective identities are entangled with distinctive, concrete forms of life. When countries fight, they struggle for the right to retain their identities, as defined by a settled order of practice and belief, as well as for wealth, power, and honor. Any overt and self-confessed assault upon the constitutive elements of the most inclusive identities is usually out of the question in normal politics, whether politics at the apex of government or politics in the recesses of a village community. This principle of exclusion is the identity effect. It operates with relative precision so long as the shared identity remains bound up with a richly defined tangle of customs. Even then, it may often

be unclear just how much a group can change its way of life and still remain itself.

The confusion of shared identity with tangible custom emphasizes the distinctiveness of the collectivity by giving the distinction the semblance of a manifest difference rather than just a willed apartness. This prop seems to become the more important, the less the group identity can rely upon kinship or contiguity, though both contiguity and kinship are likely to be effects as well as causes of collective identities that have additional foundations. The same confusion offers sentiments and interests something they can readily grasp. It binds together the terms under which material needs are satisfied and group solidarities upheld: for both are implied by the detailed arrangements of power and exchange. It provides criteria that help evade the uncertainties of individual conscience or religious revelation and change habit into right. It lifts the burden of excluded and uncertain possibility that would otherwise weigh upon people's imagination of society and of themselves.

#### *The Instruments of Closure: The Survival Effect*

Each society's practical arrangements, including its dispositions of power and exchange, suspend the uncertainty and violence that prevail beyond the frontiers of a conditional world, and they determine the terms on which elementary material needs can be met. To attack these arrangements is to disorganize the means by which security is established and minimal needs are satisfied. Even when an alternative ordering is clearly in sight and ultimately successful, there will be a transitional period, of uncertain length, during which insecurity grows, many simple wants are denied, and the country is weakened in the contest with its rivals. When it is all over, everyone may still end up worse off than he was before. Such are the unavoidable risks of changing basic social arrangements, in the large or in the small. Though the fear of these risks is constantly exaggerated by oligarchic self-interest and by the collective commitment to a way of life, it has a basis that cannot be reduced to this self-interest or this commitment. The irreducible element is the survival effect.

The relationship of material needs to their established modes of satisfaction is like that of the passions to their conventional forms of expression. Though the conventions help shape the passions it is always possible for people to feel an ironic distance between an inchoate emotion and the language available to them for expressing it. They can even try to enter more fully into the denied possibility of emotion by changing the language. This enterprise is hazardous, and the measure of success uncertain: the nature of the passion changes as the means for its fulfillment are reformed. While the change takes

place the difficulty of expression may increase rather than diminish. So, too, material needs get redefined as the means for their satisfaction are changing. In the interim, before these needs can be either re-oriented or reaffirmed, they are threatened with frustration.

When the oligarchy, the survival, and the identity effects operate with full force, the limits of the possible in social life seem clearly and severely defined. For the facts to which these effects refer draw a relatively sharp distinction between what each social world incorporates and what it excludes. They circumscribe the range of normal conflict and the readiness with which a society can be willfully and deliberately altered, from above or below.

#### EMANCIPATION FROM FALSE NECESSITY

The larger historical setting of the ideas developed in this book was the experience of the partial breaking open of these different forms of closure. It was as if the denaturalization of society through conflict and insight had been unaccountably but unmistakably interrupted. In several different ways people all over the world had discovered that social orders could be remade and reimagined. The naturalistic premise had been shaken both as a basis for theoretical understanding and as a guide to practical action. But the different forms of closure had been broken in a way that maintained them in a loosened and less visible, but nevertheless intractable, fashion.

This partial freedom from false necessity was the common characteristic of the circumstances of mass politics, world history, and enlarged economic rationality. Each of these circumstances bore most directly on an aspect of social closure – mass politics on the oligarchy effect, world history on the identity effect, enlarged economic rationality on the survival effect. Nevertheless, each of them belonged to a single historical experience. Each shook all the devices by which the basic terms of social order became immune to the practical and spiritual conflicts of ordinary life.

#### *The Sources of Emancipation: Mass Politics*

Mass politics rattles oligarchy without tearing it apart. Its defining feature is a special pattern of opportunity and constraint in the capacity of ordinary people to remake, collectively, the conditions of their own existence. The result of this ambivalence is that the conditions under which people can win governmental power and use it to transform society become incorrigibly unclear.

In the age of mass politics all power in the state is ultimately justified by the will of the people, whether by the measured consent of an electoral system or by the virtual consent invoked by a party

that claims to speak for a popular program. Moreover, this nod to the masses in the realm of words and apologies is confirmed, at a minimum, by a hard fact about the scramble for power: the individuals and cliques that can either enlist active mass support or count on tacit mass benevolence gain a decisive head start in the competition with their rivals. The weight of this advantage comes from a shared sense that there is no other ultimate basis of authority (save sheer technical necessity in the allegedly unpolitical areas of life). It results as well from the way in which popular loyalties give their beneficiaries a leg up on the successful management of the country's major business and military institutions. Faith in doctrines that justify the confiscation of power by elites is corroded by the discovery that this confiscation is at least unnecessary. You can run a country in a way that makes the working people something more than a favored mob, a desperate and unruly crowd, or an underling ally whose precarious rights are the reverse side of its duty to pay and to fight.

One way to describe the distinctive quality of mass politics is to consider its meaning for the relations between the leaders and the led, between those who stand within or near the circle of governmental power and the working people who neither participate directly in that power nor have the prerogative, the honor, or the wealth that might protect them from it. The spontaneous solidarity of the oligarchs that came from the fear of losing their condominium over the masses has been repeatedly thrown off balance; only laborious party discipline and propaganda can bring back, in tottering form, the oligarchic serenity that disbelief and discovery have taken away.

In all historical societies that never knew mass politics the hierarchical and communal-corporate divisions of the society set the terms on which the leaders could communicate with the laboring people and on which these people could make themselves heard in the state. The ruled understood that the rulers did not, in the end, belong to them. Even the most centralizing autocrat had reason to be frightened by the danger of playing too often for the favor of the rabble in the course of his run-ins with the oligarchs.

From this standpoint mass politics represents a special kind of confusion about the extent to which those who hold the chief offices of the state can appeal effectively to the simple populace over the head of the grandees and the intermediate powers – the capitalists, managers, bureaucrats, military officers, labor and party leaders, and other bigwigs with a lien on the economic surplus or on the guidance of the large-scale organizations of state and society. Though this confusion takes different forms in a representative democracy and in the one-party “people’s democracy” it retains a recognizable identity.

Under mass politics the grandees and intermediate powers may

be attacked at any moment from the very center of the state; the strengthened influence of the masses destroys the natural foundation of self-restraint in the internecine quarrels of the oligarchic power blocks. The point is not that these quarrels become any more violent or more crucial to the fate of the individual oligarch – they may in fact be deceptively gentle in style – but rather that the whole design and necessity of oligarchic power itself are brought more openly and thoroughly into question.

The paradox is that, no matter how important the leader's ability to win mass support may seem, he repeatedly finds himself captive to the grandees and the intermediate powers. Moment by moment, it is never quite clear, under mass politics, how seriously the transformative and antielitist uses of popular mobilization should be taken. The people in charge of central government may be able to go further in bypassing the powerful and the privileged, and the entrenched institutions at whose head they stand, than the rulers of past societies could ever have dreamt of. How far they can go at any one time or in any one country without destroying the basis of their own power is anyone's guess.

The intermediate powers can count on several resources in their efforts to limit the destabilizing effects of popular mobilization under the democratic or nondemocratic forms of mass politics. The first resource is their capacity to disrupt the workings of society and economy so seriously as to jeopardize the hold that the party, the coterie, or the leader in power exercises over popular sympathy. The second element is the special role of double agent that many of these organizational bosses and activists, entrepreneurs and bureaucrats, play in dealings between the successful politicians and the apprehensive masses. Consider, for example, the labor leaders in the parliamentary democracies or the party cadres and local managers in the communist states. At times they are the borrowed voice of central power cajoling and threatening the ordinary salaried worker and trying to rein in his supposedly unrealistic and shortsighted demands. At other times they are his confessed or covert representative. Often enough, they work both ways at the same time, and the key to their ordinary careerism is to learn when and how to play out the equivocation. The basis of this two-faced strategy lies in the ambiguity of the organizations themselves: in their tendency to superimpose the inchoate interests and ideals of a constituency and the prudence of an organizational elite in a manner that mixes the two up. The repeated opportunity for this mix-up is the constituency's need to have its claims translated into a language of pressure and persuasion that is intelligible and effective in the councils of the state. The third source of the influence exercised by the intermediate powers – and by far the most important and obscure – is the combination of forces that

shapes the large-scale business or bureaucratic institutions that provide these grantees with a power base, that ceaselessly re-create a particular type of hierarchy within these organizations, and that make it necessary for each organization to get governmental help in its struggle against its enemies or the enemies of its leaders.

The same decisive paradox can be rephrased as a more impersonal comment on pervasive hierarchies. The hierarchies that make mass politics possible and that mass politics reproduces share the drive toward abstraction marking collective identities in the age of world history – the disengagement of collective identities from the maintenance of distinctive, elaborately defined ways of life. The abstraction results from the relative pluralism of multiple hierarchies of advantage and of access to advantage, from the lack of a clear-cut one-to-one relation between hierarchical position and the individual's life outside the workplace, and from the bleeding together of criteria of advancement based on inherited opportunity, formal certification, and the putatively technical demands of the job. The more such a hierarchy is set against the background of a shared culture of material enjoyment or ambition and presented as the by-product of impersonal certification and practical need, the less it seems to exist in its own right as a distinct and controversial aspect of society; the less, also, are people able to grasp and alter these hierarchies in the routine conflicts of official politics or everyday life.

The precise way by which mass politics nourishes this style of hierarchy remains to be shown. But the suggestion can already be made that the idea of society as a comprehensive hierarchical ordering of ranks is both canceled and reaffirmed by mass politics, just as the idea of mankind as a battleground of largely incommensurable and incommunicable forms of life is both denied and reasserted by world history. The social world is indeed cracked open for the will and the imagination but, strangely, the crack seems to give a new resilience and opacity to the order that remains.

The dictatorships that arise in an age of mass politics draw on a small number of variations on the theme of oligarchy denied and reestablished. Such dictatorial regimes may be efforts to enlist central government in the defense of powers and hierarchies that cannot stand on their own feet and that are jeopardized by the popular agitation that mass politics facilitates and democracy protects. Or they may be attempts to wage war on these hierarchies and powers from a position at the center of society. In this event, however, they will set up new screens between power and the masses unless they can somehow change the deeper facts from which privilege continuously reemerges and gains immunity from politics. The success of the dictator may also depend on his ability to persuade his petty bourgeois or working-class constituency that he is engaged in a life-

and-death struggle with the privileged while, in fact, he is striking mutually beneficial deals with them. Or the dictatorship may commit itself to a vision of national power and unity against the background of an enforced social peace designed to close off possibilities that mass politics might otherwise make available.

Democracy, in turn, comes to both fulfillment and frustration in the conditions of mass politics. The defining elements of democratic practice are the organized competition for the control of governmental power, the appeal to a mass electorate as the final arbiter of this contest, and the sanctity of guarantees that allow the opponents of the people in office to associate and to propagandize. These traits pose a permanent threat to the domination of state power by a well-defined oligarchy, either as a hereditary class of rulers or as a loose cartel of privileged interests. They also establish an institutional device for undermining the identity effect from within: power is sought by the parties; the parties stand for programs; and the programs, however inconsequential and incoherent, make a portion of social life vulnerable to regular, overt conflict. Yet, as long as the oligarchy and the identity effects are disturbed rather than destroyed, democracy as an ideal has only a precarious hold on reality. Democratic party politics becomes a quarrel about forms of power and advantage whose real roots lie in aspects of society that party politics cannot ordinarily reach.

#### *The Sources of Emancipation: World History*

World history exists when all countries vie with one another for the same prizes and when their leaders are forced to recognize that no aspect of domestic practice and belief is safe from the demands imposed by the military, economic, and ideological rivalries of nation-states. A country's independence and the authority of its rulers depend on a proven capacity to deal with other states from a position of military, economic, or administrative strength. The brutal encounter with the demands of international conflict is accompanied by a discovery of the potential universality of practical thought and practical reform across the supposedly inviolable frontiers of distinct and hostile cultures. Everything that is tried out in one part of the world might in principle be tried out in another. If something really seems necessary to the cause of national power and prosperity, the rulers and bosses will understand that it must be used even if it jeopardizes aspects of life that had entered deeply into a people's sense of identity and even if it combines institutions in ways that had been regarded as impossible, bizarre, or wicked.

Again and again, governments, no matter how restorationist or revolutionary their intentions, find that the practical problems of

production, administration, and warfare present themselves across national boundaries in recognizably similar ways; that in solving them it is dangerous to disregard any resource of analysis and technique available in the world, although the solutions must be suited to local conditions and described in a locally acceptable vocabulary; and that a sacrilege against the idols of collective identity will be forgiven more quickly than a practical failure as long as the profanation is delicate and its benefits unmistakable. The demands of common sense and ingenuity constantly liquefy the forms of social life and confuse them with one another. Ordinary prudence thus achieves, through a series of mundane questions and answers, desires and satisfactions, what the social iconoclasm of the world religions failed to accomplish with a frontal assault.

The need to produce the means of national prosperity and power overshadows the cult of martial valor, the ethos of pacificistic abnegation, and the effort to ennoble passion through ritual form. These elite ideals of civilization give way to the requirement of thinking matter-of-factly about a matter-of-fact world. Successful regimes must prove that they know how to fill stomachs, to win wars, and even to encourage the surprises of science and art.

The dominant moral alternatives that faced the ruling elites of so many past societies now appear archaic, and some of the atmosphere in which collective identities were championed or denounced lifts and blows away. No concrete set of traditions and beliefs is thought to define the necessary and sufficient conditions for holding on to a particular collective identity. Every custom and dogma may be changed through deliberate policy, under the shadow of foreign threat, or by mass conversion, at the touch of foreign example.

There was another reason for the inability to limit in advance the parts of social life susceptible to change under the influence of foreign teaching and example. The cracking open of society to politics was preceded, accompanied, and reinforced by the secular doctrines of emancipation, chiefly liberalism, socialism, and communism, that rejected the necessity and authority of the established hierarchical and communal divisions of society, the rigid contrasts among national traditions (though not among types or stages of social organization), and the accustomed ways of separating the practical from the utopian. These new doctrines denied that existing systems of social roles and hierarchies cut through to the marrow of humanity. These revolutionary ideas therefore implied the potential relevance of every social experience to every other one. They forced open the gates of universal spiritual seduction. They were aided in this effort by every feature of the situation that proved or suggested the transformability of society through politics.

For all these reasons collective identities – at least at the national

level – tend to become abstract: to consist more in a pure sense of apartness than in allegiance to a particular way of life. In this abstract condition they are excited as well as weakened. Though politics is allowed to roam over a broader area of existence and to transform the concrete practices that were revered as part of the shared identity, the will to maintain the life apart may become all the more intense. Besides, the fall into abstraction is softened: the awareness of the universality and toughness of practical problems does not wholly discredit the conviction that a people's distinctive existence is bound up with its commitment to a unique style of sociability.

National identities become concrete to the extent that they remain attached to tangible customary relations of production and exchange, division and hierarchy, and to intangible but distinctive preconceptions about the possible and desirable forms of human association. Several restraints on the evisceration of their concreteness are at work. The social forms and assumptions that embody a national identity become a "second nature" that resists manipulation. Or they survive to influence programs of thought and action that are meant to be universal but that bear the marks of their origin in the history of particular classes, communities, and nations. Or they get mixed up with the factional interests and self-images of an elite that knows how to turn a deaf ear to the requirements and opportunities of practical reform when they threaten its own position. Thus, despite the homogenizing effect of practice and of its organizational and technological instruments, the confrontation among peoples continues to take place in two dimensions: in one, where distrustful governments compete for similar advantages of wealth and power; in another, where the inability of nations and communities to accept one another's existence reflects an awareness, descending from the leaders to the led, that the things they stand for are irreconcilable.

Even as the national identity and the narrower group identities that have been formed as its corollaries or rivals lose their concrete content, they do not, in their abstraction, fall to pieces. For practical need or opportunity, which may be strong enough to rob a picture of collective life of all its substance, is not clear or inspiring enough to fill the vacuum it has created. The imperatives of running things fall short of establishing the basis of a true human unity, on a worldwide or even a more limited scale: the same objectives of power and prosperity can be achieved in too many different ways and with too much variation in the ideals, the interests, and the institutional arrangements capable of sustaining those aims.

By shaking the identity effect, the experience of world history makes the entire face of society more open to transformation through contests over power and moral truth. But, in its new remote and equivocal position, the collective identity also becomes harder to get

at and to bring under the discipline of conscious will. Now that it is a worshiped idol without being a visible presence, people find it harder to discover its flaws and to resist its claims. Politics gains greater freedom to serve a more demanding and pretentious master.

What is true of the collective identities that are entangled with a state is also true of those that exist within the state or alongside the nation. For the characteristic mark of these identities (the oppressed nationality, the religion, the race) in an age of world history and mass politics is to represent experiences of community without a secure basis in a particular form of life or in an articulate organization. This willed and abstract solidarity remains at once seductive and obscure. There is no easy way to reach and redefine it through normal politics. In fact, the only group identity likely to depart much from this picture is one that is rooted in the immediate, shared material concerns of a relatively well-defined group, like an organized segment of the work force, that knows what it wants and is out to get it.

#### *The Sources of Emancipation: Enlarged Economic Rationality*

Enlarged economic rationality and quickened economic innovation complement the force of mass politics and world history. The key to economic rationality is the freedom to recombine and to renew. The advance of economic rationality always amounts to a greater facility to rearrange relationships, techniques, and organizations according to productive opportunity or economic reward. (A crucial, second-order sense of economic rationality is the avoidance of any non-self-correcting disparity between what must be done to maximize secure opportunity and to secure a profit that benefits and therefore motivates an economic action.) Positions in the production system must not be allowed to freeze into vested rights that narrow the range of further innovation.

The freedom to renew and recombine within the production system requires that social order not be so embracing and determinate in its orchestration of social relations as to deny economic innovators any open space on which to stage their experiments. At first this requirement may be satisfied by increasing the relative independence of the productive economy from the surrounding social order. But the more intense the pressure of economic innovation, the more likely it becomes that every feature of social life, within or outside the productive system, must be subject to the same relentless imperative of plasticity.

This logic of economic innovation can be exercised in two directions. It can be the work of a coercive will that shifts people and institutions around. Alternatively, it can operate by consensual de-

vices that keep claims to positions in the division of labor, or to control over capital, from congealing into vested rights. However, this distinction should not be mistaken for the contrast between command and market economies as this contrast has come to be understood. Thus, for example, current market institutions combine coercive and consensual elements: they regularly generate social positions that enable some people to shape other people's activities, through investment control, and thereby to gain a fix on the conditions of collective prosperity.

In the age of mass politics and world history the dissolving force of innovation has advanced up to a certain point. Capital and labor can be shifted around more freely, more constantly, and to greater innovative effect than in most societies of the past. But many features of the institutional context of productive activity remain excluded from the range of revision. Some of the exclusions rest on formal legal entitlements. Others result from established deals and traditional expectations: the claims made by different segments of the work force on places in the division of labor and on the active governmental protection of their interests.

The limited quality of the progress of economic rationality is neatly reflected in the vulgar notion of economic rationality: the ability freely to combine factors of production. This vulgar notion can be generalized into the idea of a free combination of the arrangements that define the context of economic activity. Once generalized, it draws attention to the differences among institutional systems in the extent to which they facilitate experiment and diversity in the organizational settings of production and exchange.

#### *The Quality of Partial Emancipation*

The concepts of mass politics, world history, and enlarged economic rationality describe an experience of the heightened availability of social life to transformative action. At the same time, however, they tell a story of incomplete freedom from the oligarchy, identity, and survival effects.

As a setting for transformative action, animated by the visionary ideal evoked earlier, the circumstance of mass politics, world history, and enlarged economic rationality seems both mysterious and disappointing. The particular degree and manner of the dissolution of these constraints resist any general analysis. The very same cumulative events that increasingly break society open to politics also undermine the plausibility of the naturalistic premise and of its accompanying set of beliefs about societies and their transformations. For belief in a preordained evolutionary sequence or in a well-defined set of possible social worlds represents a lingering commitment to

the naturalistic premise and, for that very reason, a mystification of society and history.

It may seem that the oligarchy, identity, and survival effects can never be completely abolished. But why not more or less abolished than they have been in the age of mass politics, world politics, and accelerated economic rationality? Why abolished through some new forms of social organization rather than others?

The distinctive experience of society making in an age of mass politics, world history, and enlarged economic rationality has to be described more concretely before we can draw lessons from the frustrations of partial freedom from false necessity.

#### THE PUZZLES OF PARTIAL EMANCIPATION FROM FALSE NECESSITY

Toward the close of the twentieth century the paradoxical and revealing features of mass politics, world history, and enlarged economic rationality manifested themselves in two related experiences of puzzlement about the constraints on transformative political action.

##### *Unexplained Routine*

Throughout much of the world, the struggle over the uses of governmental power remained within narrow limits. Efforts at reform and retrenchment alternated in cycles whose content and scope changed only slowly. You might say that this was all you could expect: politics had always been like this, except for brief interludes of radical instability. You might add that political conflict would tend to become all the more routinized, once war – the horrible standard preface to drastic change – had ceased to be an easy recourse. But the more closely you tried to understand the limits on political conflict, the more quickly this appearance of self-evidence dissolved.

In the communist regimes moves toward governmental centralization that fell short of a terroristic campaign of the state against society were regularly followed by bouts of decentralization that rarely jeopardized the ruling party's mastery of government and the economy. In the rich Western countries halfhearted redistributive reforms and the imposition of selective public controls over accumulation alternated with periods of retrenchment in which disheartened or reactionary governments courted investor confidence and labor quiescence in the hope of rekindling economic growth.

The constriction of the ordinary political disputes in the advanced Western world became manifest in the position of the leftist parties that had committed themselves to a far-reaching reconstruction of

society. To the extent that these parties remained faithful to a radical intention they found themselves pushed into electoral isolation. When they managed to capture a broad base of support they lost the reconstructive impulse. They narrowed their sights to a modest program of gradual redistribution and partial nationalization, with the basic structure of the state and the economy intact. In countries like the United States – where no major leftist parties existed – most of domestic party politics came down to a squabble among particular interests of big business or organized labor, clamoring for favors and backing up their threats by disinvestment or disruption. Disadvantaged groups demanded jobs, welfare, and reverse discrimination. A disheartened tax-paying citizenry, faced with unattractive choices by its politicians, tried, at least, to ward off fiscal pressure and economic decline. Whether or not leftist parties mattered, people easily lost the sense of living in history.

To explain the repetitive narrowness of political conflict in such settings, you have to identify the formative context of routine politics: the set of basic institutional arrangements and shared preconceptions that shaped conflicts over the mastery and uses of governmental power. To be counted as part of such a context, a practice, power, or right must meet two tests. First, it must not itself be frequently revised in the course of normal politics. It changes very slowly when it changes at all. Second, together with the other elements in the context, it helps explain the scope and content of the struggles over the uses of state power – and, more generally, over the basic terms of social existence. A formative context begins by determining the instruments and occasions of collective struggle. It ends by entering into people's most intangible ideas of interest, identity, and possibility.

The same arrangements and preconceptions that shape the scope and structure of routine politics and its reform cycles also create the social setting of production, innovation, and exchange. They determine the extent to which, and the sense in which, people can be shifted around and organizational practices revised.

Consider the rich Western countries. Their formative contexts of routine politics included a certain way of organizing democratic governments. This approach prevented any business oligarchy from exercising absolute control over the state. But it also helped fragment collective conflicts and separate the devices of electoral representation from the occasions for collective militancy. The formative contexts of routine politics in the Western democracies included, as well, an amalgam of legal entitlements, organizational styles, and hardened collective deals. This amalgam enabled small groups of businessmen to exercise a decisive influence over the basic flows of investment decisions. It divided the labor force into distinct segments, entrenched

in different niches of the division of labor and benefiting from unequal degrees of collective organization.

Suppose that the state stopped being democratic at all, or that it became democratic enough to foment collective militancy and to subject centers of private power to public accountability. Imagine that the businessmen could have their way or that the government was sufficiently empowered to override their ability to affect, through disinvestment, the conditions of collective prosperity. Assume that none of the workers could organize or that all of them could and did. In any of these instances routine politics in the Western democracies would have changed. Its formative context would have been revised.

Once you define a formative context with enough detail to make it capable of explaining the actual nature of repetitious politics, you discover that the arrangements or assumptions that make up such a context are loosely connected. These components do not have to stand or fall together. They can be replaced piecemeal. And each such partial substitution changes the face of routine politics. So it was hardly surprising to find that the different elements of the formative context had distinct histories, only indirectly connected, like the elements themselves, with one another.

Here lies the mystery. How can these formative contexts be so tenacious – so impervious to the fierce ambitions of ordinary politics – when they are also so loosely held together? Given their looseness, how can you hope to gain any general understanding of their nature, genesis, and vicissitudes?

#### *Interrupted Dissociation*

The same experience of a constraint both enormous and elusive reappeared in another setting: the worldwide diffusion of technologies, organizations, institutional arrangements, and social ideals originally championed by the richest and strongest Western countries. These nations had once seemed on the verge of conquering the world militarily, economically, and spiritually. At first the non-Western peoples, or their ruling elites, had hoped to adopt the crucial technological innovations while leaving all else unchanged. Later, with more experience and with the further progress of Western technology itself, they felt themselves forced to choose between total acceptance or repudiation of the Western system: its machines and expertise, its way of organizing work, its governmental and social institutions, and even its ruling beliefs. Their conviction that they had to take or leave Western ways was reinforced by the leading Western social theories of the day. These doctrines also presented the triumphant way of life as an indissoluble whole, based on a

coherent set of generative principles and corresponding to a distinct stage in the material and moral history of mankind.

But further experience told a different story. Governments and elites throughout the world found that levels of productive and destructive capability comparable to those of the advanced Western powers could be achieved within the setting of forms of work organization different from those that had taken hold in the intrusive Western societies. To a much more striking extent, styles of work organization taken from the West could be combined with unprecedented styles of social and governmental organization, different from both the Western example and the original indigenous practice. Politicians, propagandists, and entrepreneurs learned to dissociate formative contexts more boldly and deliberately: to incorporate elements from another society's formative context of power and production or its technology of production and destruction while rejecting other elements with which the incorporated ones were loosely linked in the foreign model.

There were real constraints on the dissociation of the initial version of industrial society. Some separations and combinations simply failed to work. But whatever the limits to dissociation, they could not be inferred from any of the available social theories that appealed to stage sequences in history or that relied on the idea of a strictly defined range of possible types of economic and governmental organization.

#### EXPERIENCES OF BLOCKAGE AND OPPORTUNITY

##### *The Exemplary Instability of the Third World*

In the late twentieth century, there were countries in the world in which the limits to the transformation of society through politics seemed far less tightly and clearly drawn than in the rich nations of the West. This vagueness of limits especially characterized those poorer countries, not under a communist regime, known as the third world. They included many rapidly rising powers. From events and efforts in these countries, you could learn something about the conditions under which society might, once again, be subject to far-reaching political experiment, democratic mass politics might regain its original impulse, and the visionary impulse in social life might find a fuller expression in the conflicts of social life. Whatever you might learn about the distinctive opportunities of contemporary politics would also reveal something of very general scope about the real and the possible in society: here history had supplied a new twist on the relation between freedom and constraint. The entire experience of practice and reflection in this less well-defined setting provided

the most revealing example of the sense in which any episode of observed or lived turmoil can suggest general insights into society.

To understand society deeply is always to see the settled from the angle of the unsettled. The settled is the region or the moment where relationships become fixed and, through their fixity, take on a specious aura of necessity. The unsettled is the experience that discloses the perilous, uncertain, malleable quality of society. By seeing the settled unsettled or by looking toward the disturbances that take place in its vicinity, we begin to understand how the settled really works and what it really is. The moment of escalated conflict, when nothing in society seems safe from politics, sets the outer limits to an understanding of the earlier or later times, when social peace returns and conflict appears to be about marginal though cumulative adjustments of advantage within an institutional and imaginative framework that is taken largely for granted. For those who already lived in an age of world history, the bolder experiments in the organization of power and production or in the imagination of society that went on in some countries revealed the deeper character of institutions and visions in those other places where the remaking of society seemed inconceivable outside catastrophic situations. The reference of the settled to the unsettled underlies my comparison of third world politics to the politics of the communist regimes and the Western democracies. It is a principle to which the main body of *Politics* gives a broader application.

All the third world countries of the time offered formidable obstacles to any effort to transform society through collective action. In these societies you found a clash between pretense and reality so relentless, uninterrupted, and unqualified that, in the end, the language of politics declined into an innocuous litany, and the most bitter cynicism appeared to be a redeeming form of sanity. These were also countries in which all organizations that depended on collective effort unrelated to the immediate attractions of the state, property, and the family were constantly falling apart. The weakness of voluntary associations that could not rely on some preexisting communal setting was the mark of societies in which almost everything that really mattered to people flowed through the same privileged hands, by the same means, and in which every attempt to work outside or against the established structure seemed, at first, like defiance of the way things had to be.

These obstacles to political invention were matched, however, by countervailing opportunities. For one thing, in many of these third world countries, the basic structure of group boundaries and group interests remained fluid. So, too, the operative rules about how governmental power could be conquered and about what could be done with it were ill defined. To each of the ways that people had

of picturing the collective context of their activities or the limits of political possibility, there corresponded a different way of defining the aims of partisan political struggle.

For another thing, the third world countries could not reach even the levels of economic equality and prosperity or democratic participation that characterized the rich Western nations without achieving a much more intense degree of popular militancy than these nations had known in recent history. Militant grassroots organization had to combine with escalating conflict over the fundamentals of power in the state and the economy. Without both the organization and the conflict, there could be no mass involvement in politics capable of escaping the tutelage of caesaristic demagogues and fake revolutionary parties or of standing up effectively to attempts at outright repression. Once this higher level of popular collective action had been attained, it might serve to catapult these countries into ways of organizing government and the economy that would be more deeply egalitarian and democratic, because more exposed to transforming collective activity, than those of the contemporary rich Western societies. If only the unsettled nations could achieve the institutional forms that might transform a temporary struggle into a lasting structure they would become the testing ground on which society would be more thoroughly cracked open to politics.

The same counterpoint of aggravated constraint and heightened opportunity applied to people's imaginative ideas about society. In both the non-Western civilizations and the countries empty or emptied of an original civilization, men and women lacked the words with which to describe their experience of society. They knew that they lacked them. Slogans and ideas drawn from the most varied quarters were incongruously pasted together. People seemed even more confused than they usually are about the conditions under which they would be justified in revising their social beliefs. The brittle and half-baked quality of elite or popular political ideas seemed to be the imaginative counterpart of the strange mixture of churning and blockage in the practical life of the society.

The unformed and yet resistant quality of people's beliefs about social reality and possibility had an ambiguous significance for transformative democratic politics. It tended to bring all articulated schemes of association into dispute, to undermine the meaning of all the words by which individuals could explore their own experience and, whenever the high tide of ideological ardor and reconstructive ambition receded, to leave only a heartless and desperate materialism. But these circumstances also presented an opportunity. People's ideas about possible and desirable human association were not worked out into a set of detailed institutions and practices. The practices and the

institutions did not seem to reveal any coherent though tacit picture of what society should be like in each domain of practical experience.

The disconnection between images of society that lacked an institutional embodiment and practical experiences that lacked a ready-made interpretation released the imagination of the possible and desirable forms of human association from its traditional bounds. People could not match their received images of what their dealings with one another could and should look like in the different areas of social life with the practices and institutions they actually encountered. The combination of these anxieties of the imagination with the more tangible opportunities described earlier in this section made the third world countries at that time a privileged terrain for institutional invention.

These obstacles and opportunities came to life in national politics. All over the world, people who cared, and who could, anxiously followed the revolutionary experiments that took place in faraway countries, wondering what new light these initiatives would shed on the possibilities of mass politics and on the shattering of rigid structures of communal division or social hierarchy. But only when you were actually involved in a sustained political struggle was the full range of enigma and aspiration likely to come home to you. Only then did the inadequacy of the available ideas become bitterly clear.

#### *A Brazilian Example*

Imagine, reader, that you were involved in the politics of one of these countries, say Brazil, around 1985. It was then just haltingly emerging from a long episode of barely veiled military dictatorship. It combined huge dimensions, close prospects of rising to world power, and a breakdown in the ability of the political nation to distinguish clearly and confidently between the possible and the impossible in politics. In every decisive respect the Brazil of that time exemplified the way in which the unsettled social situation merely projects, in exaggerated form, the features of the settled one. The attempt at transformative action in this setting offered a distorted but revealing instance of what such an effort would be like in *any* setting.

The Brazilian state had gone through an oscillation typical of many third world countries of the period. It had moved between mock liberalism and controlled mobilization as devices by which to reconcile the self-defense of the elites with the partial introduction of the people to mass politics.

At times the elites had tried to run a state that imitated the institutional forms of the North Atlantic democracies. But the imported

arrangements took on different uses when projected into a situation where a huge underemployed mass was only minimally incorporated into economic and political life. If at one moment liberal democratic institutions seemed to be a mere facade for the continuing tutelage of the working classes by an unreconstructed economic and governmental oligarchy, these institutions became, at the next moment, the vehicle of social demands more radical than those habitually pressed on the home ground of liberal democracy.

Controlled mobilization represented the half-deliberate, contradictory attempt to incorporate the masses into the life of the state while preventing much harm from being done to the advantages of the propertied and educated classes. The working people in town and country would have to be organized and flattered: organized from the top down, flattered by selective benefits and unselective promises. But the strategy of controlled mobilization required a shameless leader willing to play fast and loose with republican institutions. This leader would have to recruit to his service large numbers of minions who might end up as militants with ideas of their own. He would be imprudent to enrage the oligarchy or to offend the ideals and prejudices of the military and bureaucratic petty bourgeois. But neither could he afford to do too little for the propertyless. For his power depended on his influence over the people. Otherwise, what need would there have been of him in the first place? As a way to draw a bright line between concession and revolution, controlled mobilization always ran into trouble: it became, too quickly, uncontrolled.

When both mock liberalism and controlled mobilization failed as strategies of elite self-defense, the easiest solution might be an outright dictatorship that claimed to lay the basis on which both reformed democracy and national wealth and power might be established. The military had exercised such a rule since 1964 in a way that, involuntarily, kept access to alternative social futures open. The regime had repressed incipient working-class organizations. It had kept at bay any threat of attack on the fundamentals of power and privilege. But while protecting the wealth and safety of the privileged (which were never seriously endangered anyway), it had begun to undermine the basis of their power. Under military and technocratic rule, government, in precarious partnership with foreign capital, had consolidated a considerable measure of control over basic investment decisions. As a result, national investors and entrepreneurs had lost their ability to threaten the government with recession through disinvestment. They had become the well-kept clients of men they had foolishly expected to be a mere praetorian guard. Though the rulers had repressed the economic demands of almost every sector of the masses except the labor aristocracy employed in

capital-intensive industry, they had also pursued the strategy of controlled mobilization by extending organization of the people through official, government-controlled unions. These unions could be taken over from within by militants committed to make them count.

The military regime had reinforced an economic system that artificially rewarded large-scale agriculture as opposed to family farms, that organized manufacturing chiefly around the consumption demands of the relatively privileged classes, and that used both its export revenues and the foreign loan capital and investment on which it had become increasingly dependent to keep this economic order going. But the government had increasingly to face a choice between two ways to keep the economy growing. Each alternative proved incompatible with the social alliances on which the regime had been founded, with the powers at its disposal, and even with its vision of itself. On the one hand, the government could attempt to break into the markets of the rich Western countries, compensating for tariff barriers and lower productivity by a massive and lasting repression of wage levels. On the other hand, it could try to redirect industry to mass-consumption goods, promote the agrarian reform necessary to reconcile economic growth with the economic and civic rise of the masses, and rigorously subordinate its export drives to the imperative of paying for the industrial inputs required by the program of internal reconstruction.

In the absence of either strategy the people in charge had to make ad hoc deals with the sectors of the entrepreneurial and working classes whose active or passive collaboration seemed most crucial to economic growth. In the face of economic slowdown the authoritarian regime discovered that it had to maneuver on a narrow ground in its attempt to coopt ever larger sectors of the population into acquiescence. During the final years of the military dictatorship, the central rulers retained the loyalty of local supporters and political machines so long as they had favors to distribute. But they had concentrated power within an ever smaller coterie at the cost of isolating themselves increasingly from the country at large, as well as from the main body of the officer corps.

Indefinition was the common denominator of all these features of the life of the state. No clear form of control over governmental power and therefore no definite link between the mastery of the state and the management of economic growth had been allowed to harden. This lack of definition presaged a weakening of the felt limits of political possibility. The impression was confirmed when you turned from affairs of state to the broader experience of the society. All this indefinability could be taken as both the voice of transformative opportunity and the sign of a paralyzing confusion. At one moment it seemed that new experiments in human association might be staged

here; at the next, that nothing could come out of this disheartening and preposterous blend of structure, shiftlessness, and stagnation.

There were two especially striking features of the political ideas of the different social classes, in contrast to the attitudes most characteristic of the corresponding groups in the rich Western countries. The first fact was the spread of radical commitments among the middling classes of the society – smallholders and shopkeepers, the technical intelligentsia, the independent or bureaucratic professionals, the teeming multitudes of minor functionaries and paper pushers. Though many stood by conservative positions, a large number supported one or another stripe of leftism. Leftist party movements had failed to develop a program, a strategy, and a language responsive to the concerns of the petty bourgeoisie and of its technical or professional superiors. The left parties nevertheless found their main base among these classes rather than among the relatively small industrial proletariat (a veritable labor aristocracy) or the vast, underemployed mass of town and country. The other notable characteristic of the political nation was the lack of fixed divisions between the elite labor force employed in the most advanced sectors of industry and the unemployed and underemployed workers or between the rural and the urban masses.

These facts had a similar character and similar effects. In each instance, there seemed to be a departure from a logic of tangible material interests: the petty bourgeois and the industrial operatives, the rural and the urban masses, the labor aristocracy and the ordinary workers, failed to behave as if they had distinct and opposing interests. In each instance, the result was to generate political opportunities that had been all but foreclosed in the rich industrial democracies.

In these democracies the distinctions between the middle classes and the working classes and, within the working classes, between the relatively privileged, organized workers and the underclass, had consistently played a major role in the resistance of society to drastic transformation. The contest between the rural and urban masses had had a similar effect on nineteenth-century European history and continued to exercise a paralyzing influence on the weaker and poorer nations. The mere postponement of the hardening of these social distinctions, in the Brazil of that time as in other third world countries, broadened the range of available social futures.

In every society the hard logic of class or communal interests is only as solid and determinate as the undisturbed institutional and imaginative assumptions on which it rests. Here, as in all else, the Brazilian circumstance simply exaggerated features more or less common to all political experience. By examining the limits to this increased political availability, you might discover something very

general about the nature of transformative opportunity in politics and the flaws in received ideas.

The middle classes of this society had alternated historically between passive service to an agrarian and commercial elite they could not dislodge from the heights of power and futile campaigns to reform the state and establish a regenerate democracy on the North American and Western European model. The military regime had done more for these groups than multiply opportunities of ascension to wealth and power through the officer corps and the civilian bureaucracy. It had provided them with an involuntary political education. It had taught them that politics was indeed fate. The newly manifest power of government to make or break the social order – the partial lifting of the blockage imposed on social life by the oligarchy – shook the sense that things could not be other than what they were. It converted people in the politically conscious but unpropertied classes to a deeper uncertainty about what would become of their social world.

As society came, increasingly, to be recognized as the artifact of politics and as alternative social orders began to seem realistic, class interests lost their self-evident content. The definition of class and communal interests began to depend more visibly on a range of unmistakably contestable views of social possibility and of social ideals rather than on ideas about the ideal and the possible inherent in a straitened, routinized conception of reality.

As a spur to the political availability of the intermediate sectors, this insight was combined with an illusion. But, strangely, the illusion only reinforced the effect of the insight. It was the mistake of people open to radical ideas whose destructive effects on their material habits and career expectations they failed to envisage. This illusion – the bastard child of political impotence and inexperience – weakened the contrasting tendency of class interests under the impact of escalating conflict, the impulse to grab on to the most tangible and immediate advantages.

Consider now the underlying reasons for the lack of clearly felt divisions between the rural and the urban masses, or between the labor aristocracy and the underemployed laborers. The analysis of these reasons elaborates the same picture of institutional and social indefiniteness. First, neither the privileged workers nor the rural smallholders were secure in their jobs or their properties. The skilled worker might suddenly be cast down into the ranks of the underemployed from which he may have recently emerged. The smallholder might find himself thrown into the landless peasantry. Second, in part because of this insecurity, the larger part of the mass was in constant movement from country to small town, from small town

to metropolis, and from one social station to another. This sense of living in a seething and simmering world represented the characteristic experience of the breakdown of well-defined limits to the possible in modern politics. (Compare with, say, the years from the end of the New Economic Policy to the beginning of the civil war in Soviet Russia.) Each privileged worker might find himself supporting family dependents who had come from the countryside or who eked out a harsh existence in the big city. Third, the central government, caught in the uncertainties described earlier, failed to settle on a clear-cut relationship to the propertied or the privileged. The country's rulers hesitated between a policy of devolution to entrepreneurial, bureaucratic, or landowning elites and a counterpolicy of playing for broader popular support. Thus, the hesitations of the state reinforced the anxieties that resulted from the material condition of the people. A fourth reason was the active choice by the emerging leaders of petty bourgeois, working-class, and underclass groups, or by the middle-class militants and priests who worked among them, of a political strategy that deliberately tried to avoid these divisions. This strategy emphasized a common struggle – vague but attractive – against the state, the bosses, and the foreigner.

The relative weakness of the felt divisions within the working-class and petty bourgeois mass – like the unusual availability of radicalized professionals and technical cadres – was no more than a fleeting opportunity. So are all opportunities in politics. The crucial question remained: What strategies, alliances, conceptions, and institutional structures created in this moment of openness could outlast the circumstance of indefiniteness and yet carry into the experience of normalcy something of the heightened availability to revision that society had achieved at this hour of uncertainty? Would the national entrepreneurial classes manage to regain their decisive control over the process of accumulation, or would they find themselves economically dependent on whoever managed to seize the central government? Would the left-leaning parties formulate a vision and a strategy that enabled them to connect a method of rapid economic accumulation with ways to deepen mass organization? Would they, at the same time, win over large parts of the petty bourgeois, professional, and technical groups while openly combating the business oligarchies and the large landowners? Or would they falsely imagine themselves forced to choose between a doomed “proletarian” struggle against everyone else or a paralyzing alliance with the national economic elites against the foreign investor (who was in fact far more willing than his domestic counterpart to bargain with any regime – since, unlike him, he planned for a profit rather than for a dynasty)?

The circumstance of indefiniteness was not limited to the activities

of the state and to the relations among classes. It extended, as well, to people's basic ideas about human association. There, too, though more intangibly, a struggle was going on, rich with opportunity for remaking the society through politics.

The most striking fact about the social imagination of the elites was a particular incongruity between the spiritual ideals they had accepted as properly governing the life of the society and the vision of social life they in fact lived out in their relations to one another and to their subordinates. In their professed beliefs about state and society they had embraced a liberal view of social relations as well as of governmental organization. The correct understanding of social life – in this view – saw community, contract, and power as naturally distinct and even mutually repellent. Outside the family community, people should be bound together by the consensual ties of contract and citizenship. The official political dogmas of this ruling and possessing class enshrined the equality of right, the cult of consent, and the idea that power had to be ennobled by sentiment in the family, controlled by party conflict and legal rule in the state, and justified by voluntary agreement and impersonal technical necessity in the production system. If the Brazilian elites had some other view of human association, they failed to articulate it.

But their actual social life was another story. There they participated in social relations – in business, family, and political life – that combined the elements of community, exchange, and power, the very combination so thoroughly repudiated by their professed beliefs. There they treated each other as patrons and clients and traded in favors and dependencies. There they showed their almost complete disbelief in all institutions not founded on blood, property, or power. There they acted as if a moment of personal presence were worth a thousand promises and as if any exercise of power could be tolerated so long as the veil of sentiment covered it.

For many, the professed ideas may have been little more than a sonorous litany, deafening an experience – the real experience – that these ideas left voiceless. But for some, the professed ideas, combined with some larger vision of human solidarity, *were* the real thing. Those who felt this way were the counterelites – leftist and liberal, civilian, priestly, and military – who had tried to realize in society what the majority of the upper classes merely professed.

The indefiniteness of popular views of the possible and desirable forms of social life had a different character. To the extent that working people were taught any idea of human association it was precisely the idea that dominated elite life but found no place in elite belief. According to this gospel the best escape from an experience of pure subjection to untrammelled coercion was to treat the boss (the landowner, the proprietor, the supervisor, the doctor, and even

the priest) as a patron. The poor man might at least expect to receive protection from the superior to whom he showed allegiance. The whole spiritual life of the working people, however, was an ongoing rebellion against this idea of association. Each segment of the people – the farm laborers and smallholders, the underemployed mass in the cities, the inhabitants of the small towns – discovered in its own way both the reality of coercion behind the pretense of contract or community and the possibility of other forms of association. People discovered such alternatives, in part, through their frequent movement from one social world to another – the worlds of the backward Northeast and the Southeast, of the dismal workplace and the entrancing soap opera; in part, by what they learned from the militants of the churches and the leftist movements.

The contest over the form and nature of association stood out most clearly in religious quarrels. People waged a fierce struggle over the idea of God. To each of these conceptions of God that they quarreled over, there corresponded a different view of salvation, society, and personality. To the believer the religious ideas served as more than metaphors for the secular realities. Each such conception of the relation between man and God implied, and was implied by, a view of the relations among people.

On one side worked those who saw salvation in withdrawal from the larger life of society into a community of the elect – a community that departed as much as it could from the moral characteristics of the surrounding society while continuing to work dutifully within it. The ennobled social island would stand as a denial of the despotic, mendacious, and shameful paternalism that tainted almost everything in Brazilian society. It would be, in effect, a small-scale realization of the liberal dream of autonomy, dignity, and self-respect. This religion worshiped a God whose work could be carried out in the world only through the slow, exemplary influence of purified hearts.

On the other side stood people who saw themselves caught up in a larger messianic and redemptive conflict. The God pictured by their religious vision was both more relentlessly transcendent and more completely engaged in history than the deity of the opposing vision. The contrast between his call and established social life was radical: it could not stop with liberal social relations. The redemptive commitment he required was total: it could not await the edifying influence of the elect. Such a Christian felt that the first and most terrible question he would have to answer when he met his God was: Where are the others? The individual soul and the mass of the people replaced the community of the purified as the key actors in this spiritual drama.

The spiritual vision that emphasized communities of the elect found its main champions in the pentecostal sects that were then making numerous conversions in the country. The other, more col-

lective and messianic spirituality gained support from the Catholicism of the local priests and the radical theologians. The first seemed to have taken root most strongly among the petty bourgeoisie in town and country; the second appealed most readily to the social groups subject to the most violent economic and geographic dislocations. But neither message remained confined to a church or a class. These visions were alternative spiritual responses to a shared experience. They remained largely invisible to the educated elites, who were blinded by their pathetic mimicry of foreign ideas, their vulgar and heartless hedonism, and their prostrate, complacent faithlessness.

Every feature of the circumstance of indefinability whose presence in the life of state, class relations, and social visions I have discussed had its more subtle counterparts elsewhere in the world, even in the countries where the scope of the struggle over the uses of governmental power seemed narrowest. Even in those more tranquil polities the central government hesitated between different ways of dealing with the more privileged classes. Even there, opinion disturbed and transformed the play of tangible material interests. Even there, the occasional escalation of practical and imaginative conflict fragmented apparently shared material interests just as often as it unified them. Even there, people's vision of society served as a battleground between dominant, enacted ideas of association and countervailing experiences or longings.

Now imagine, reader, that you threw yourself into the Brazilian situation just described. Suppose that you were one of those many people who looked on politics as both an insider and an outsider. The contest for power mattered to you, but so did the vision of another society and the justification of your ideas about society. You lived out, among people who hardly cared, one of the only tragedies that the bourgeois world had to offer: the conflict between theoretical and practical activity, whose unity generations of radical thinkers had so unrealistically extolled. You took up partisan propaganda and intrigue, believing that grassroots popular movements were helpless unless they gained the means with which to participate in the struggle over governmental power. But you also tried to study the movements on their own terrain and to discover how they might be turned into a decisive force.

At this time in world history, an attitude once confined to great visionaries had become common among decent men and women. They could no longer participate in political struggle out of a simple mixture of personal ambition and devotion to the power and glory of the state. They also had to feel that they were sharing in an exemplary experiment in the remaking of society. A person who entered Brazilian politics in this spirit wanted his country to do more

than rise to wealth and power as a variant of the societies and polities of the developed West. He wished it to become a testing ground for a way of organizing government and the economy that would enlarge the options available to mankind. He wanted to add alternatives that would advance a little further the radical project – the project of seeking individual and collective empowerment by creating institutions that weaken the hold of preestablished social divisions or hierarchies over our practical or passionate dealings with one another and impart to normal social life something of the heightened mastery over context that characterizes moments of revolutionary conflict or invention.

Such a person took seriously the view of grassroots organization as the indispensable device by which to break the vicious circle of mock liberalism, controlled mobilization, and outright dictatorship. He wished his country to establish a style of democracy that would ensure a higher level of civic militancy. Ultimately, every aspect of the established social structure would meet up with a collective activity of conflict or deliberation that might lay it open to challenge and revision. Economic growth would be achieved by a production system oriented toward popular goods, family farming sustained within state-supported cooperative, commercial or technical networks, and the combination of high-technology industry with decentralized, labor-intensive, and small-scale industrial or assembling centers.

To establish a different organization of the society and the economy, you had, at least, to recognize the situation for what it was. You could not see it as a stage in a preordained sequence or as the relentless working out of a set of objective class interests or as the application of determinate economic and technological constraints. You needed to develop a political practice that prefigured your most distant aims in your methods of mobilization and that allowed for the achievement of a series of transitional objectives. The tendency of means to generate their own ends remained the demon of politics: only the ends at least partly foreshadowed in the means had a chance of being realized in the world.

It was also vital to avoid the path toward isolation that had helped defeat or tame the European leftist parties and to renounce the preconceptions about feasible class alliances underlying that path. You could not, for example, assume that the only alternative to a politics of unremitting hostility to the petty bourgeoisie or the salaried middle classes was an alliance with the national entrepreneurs and landowners against the foreigner.

In all these respects a political practice meant to generate new variants in the forms of social and economic organization could not itself be inspired by ideas that relied upon belief in definite and ir-

resistible historical tendencies. You had to envision political opportunity and constraint in a fashion that refused to treat emergent events as typecast from the start. You had to have a way to deal with the particular organizational form and institutional setting of an industrial system as up for grabs. And you also needed a view with sufficient generality and clarity to guide you and to place the immediate context of your action in a broader setting of worldwide experiments with the possible forms of society. When, committed to these aims, you turned to the people who had practical ideas about society, you were in for a surprise.

The high servants of the state adopted, for the most part, the culture of policy science and microeconomics. The more lucid and effective these officials were, the more clearly they understood that the intellectual techniques supplied by this culture lacked any substantive vision. These techniques might help you manage practical institutions and governmental policies, once the social practical circumstances had been specified from outside. At a stretch, they might even enable you to find a range of alternative feasible strategies of economic growth with different distributive consequences. But there the power of these ideas to elucidate social experience stopped. The top bureaucrats had no reasoned view of transformation from one social circumstance to another. They achieved the semblance of such a view only by smuggling into their analytic apparatus ideas about industrial evolution or about organizational constraints that the apparatus could not itself justify. Like most political managers of the contemporary world, they found themselves repeatedly forced to choose between agnosticism and prestidigitation.

The leftist militants, intellectuals, and oppositional politicians did have beliefs about institutional change. But these beliefs came closer to being parts of the problem than parts of the solution. David Hume had observed that: "Parties from principle, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phenomenon that has yet appeared in human affairs." The broader the experience of social possibility, the more overt the role of abstract ideas becomes. Aims and interests could no longer be defined on the basis of a tacit, uncontroversial picture of social reality and possibility. They depended upon choices among different visions of possible society and of the possible satisfaction and transformation of desire. By that very fact, practical actions became hostage to abstract ideas.

Ideas about personality and society never penetrate completely the experience for which they try to account. If, however, the ideas become too remote from the reality of the experience, they produce another, special disturbance. For people then act as if moved by two different springs: the spring of their residual, unilluminated, and

untransformed experience and the spring of their newfangled ideas. Each interrupts the movements of the other. Such people have lost the spontaneous alacrity of the person whose beliefs remain implicit in his actions without gaining the reflective lucidity of the man whose thoughts self-consciously govern his conduct. The resulting situation becomes all the more dangerous and confusing when people's sporadic efforts to live out their ideas leads them to close down just those opportunities in their own undertheorized experience that might allow them to realize most fully their most serious intentions.

To the extent the best leftist militants and politicians had visionary ideas, these views remained both vague and unrelated to any transformative strategy. To the extent they had a conception of transformation, it relied upon social theories – Marxism preeminent among them – that had broken only incompletely with the naturalistic premise. These theories suggested an arbitrarily limited repertory of ideas about possible class alliances, stages of social evolution, and even the language of political controversy.

People fought for individual and factional advantage as they had always done. They also quarreled over speculative principles. But the sequences of social change to which the influential social theories referred bore so little resemblance to the immediate reality of the country that the theoretical slogans could be upheld only by being treated as metaphors for concerns they did not truly express. At any given moment the contestants could not tell for sure whether the vague ideological disagreements that seemed to divide them were simply the weapons of self-interested factional rivalries or whether, on the contrary, these rivalries were being disturbed and aggravated, rather than guided, by abstract ideas. They were like men wandering around in a daze: their doctrines were dreams. But when they tried to apply them – to take them literally rather than to manipulate them cavalierly as metaphors or pretexts – the results were even worse.

Try to understand, reader, by an act of imaginative empathy, the bitterness a person in such a circumstance might feel when he discovered that doctrines invented to emancipate and enlighten had now become instruments of confusion and surrender. To think correctly about society was not to guarantee successful action. Nobody could reasonably hope to ride to power on the crest of a wave of books or to reverse in the library defeats sustained in practical politics. But something had gone wrong if theories meant to reveal and enlarge opportunities were in fact constraining and masking them. When large numbers of potential militants slid back into an unjustifiably narrow view of possible social futures or sank into an impenetrable confusion between personal antagonisms and ideological claims, you began to feel toward the inherited radical theories a little as Machia-

velli had felt toward Christianity. Ideas had spoiled the contest for power. These ideas disoriented the leaders who rose from the people as well as the middle-class radicals who agitated among workers. The influence of Christianity, however, had been exercised in the name of a higher reality, and it had proved a continuing source of inspiration to those committed to demystifying society. Radical social theory had no such excuse. It was an instance of illusion passing into prejudice. You wanted to write a book to set things straight.