

ESSAYS

COMMUNITARIAN THEORY

No Community, No Democracy, Part I*

Charles Taylor

The revolutions which ushered in regimes of popular sovereignty transferred the ruling power from a king onto a “nation,” or a “people.” In the process, they invented a new kind of collective agency. These terms existed before, but the thing they now indicate, this new kind of agency, is something unprecedented, at least in the immediate context of early modern Europe. Thus the notion ‘people’ could certainly be applied to the ensemble of subjects of the kingdom, or to the nonelite strata of society, but prior to the turnover it hadn’t indicated an entity which could decide and act together, to whom one could attribute a **will**.

Why does this new kind of entity need a strong form of cohesion? Isn’t the notion of popular sovereignty simply that of majority will, more or less restrained by the respect of liberty and rights? But this kind of decision rule can be adopted by all sorts of bodies, even those which are the loosest aggregations. Supposing during a public

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lecture, some people feel the heat oppressive and ask that the windows be opened; others demur. One might easily decide this by a show of hands, and those present would accept this as legitimate. And yet the audience of the lecture might be the most disparate congeries of individuals, unknown to one another, without mutual concern, just brought together by that event.

This example shows by contrast what democratic societies need. It seems at once intuitively clear that they have to be bonded more powerfully than this chance grouping. But how can we understand this necessity?

One way to see it is to push a bit farther the logic of popular sovereignty. It not only recommends a certain class of decision procedures—those which are grounded ultimately on the majority (with restrictions)—but it also offers a particular justification. Under a regime of popular sovereignty, we are free in a way we are not under an absolute monarch, or an entrenched aristocracy, for instance.

Now supposing we see this from the standpoint of some individual. Let's say I am outvoted on some important issue. I am forced to abide by a rule I am opposed to. My will is not being done. Why should I consider myself free? Does it matter that I am overridden by the majority of my fellow citizens, as against the decisions of a monarch? Why should that be decisive? We can even imagine that a potential monarch, waiting to return to power in a coup, agrees with me on this question, against the majority. Wouldn't I then be freer after the counterrevolution? After all, my will on this matter would then be put into effect.

We can recognize that this kind of question is not merely a theoretical one. It is rarely put on behalf of individuals, but it regularly arises on behalf of subgroups, e.g., national minorities, who see themselves as oppressed. Perhaps no answer can satisfy them. Whatever one says, they cannot see themselves as part of this larger sovereign people. And therefore they see its rule over them as illegitimate, and this according to the logic of popular sovereignty itself.

We see here the inner link between popular sovereignty and the idea of the people as a collective agency, in some stronger sense than

our lecture audience above. This agency is something you can be included in without really belonging to, which makes no sense for a member of the audience. We can see the nature of this belonging if we ask what is the answer we can give to those who are outvoted and are tempted by the argument above.

Of course, some extreme philosophical individualists believe that there is no valid answer, that appeals to some greater collective is just so much humbug to get contrary voters to accept voluntary servitude. But without deciding this ultimate philosophical issue, we can ask: What is the feature of our “imagined communities” by which people very often do readily accept that they are free under a democratic regime, even where their will is overridden on important issues?

The answer they accept runs something like this: You, like the rest of us, are free just in virtue of the fact that we are ruling ourselves in common, and not being ruled by some agency which need take no account of us. Your freedom consists in your having a guaranteed voice in the sovereign, that you can be heard, and have some part in making the decision. You enjoy this freedom in virtue of a law which enfranchises all of us, and so we enjoy this together. Your freedom is realized and defended by this law, and this whether or not you win or lose in any particular decision. This law defines a community, of those whose freedom it realizes/defends together. It defines a collective agency, a people, whose acting together by the law preserves their freedom.

Such is the answer, valid or not, that people have come to accept in democratic societies. We can see right away that it involves their accepting a kind of belonging much stronger than the people in the lecture hall. It is an ongoing collective agency, one the membership in which realizes something very important, a kind of freedom. Insofar as this good is crucial to their identity, they thus identify strongly with this agency, and hence also feel a bond with their co-participants in this agency. It is only an appeal to this kind of membership which can answer the challenge of our imagined individual above, who is pondering whether to support the monarch’s (or general’s) coup in the name of his freedom.

The crucial point here is that, whoever is ultimately right philosophically, it is only insofar as people accept some such answer that the legitimacy principle of popular sovereignty can work to secure their consent. The principle only is effective via this appeal to a strong collective agency. If the identification with this is rejected, the rule of this government seems illegitimate in the eyes of the rejecters, as we see in countless cases with disaffected national minorities. Rule by the people, all right; but we can't accept rule by this lot, because we aren't part of their people. This is the inner link between democracy and strong common agency. It follows the logic of the legitimacy principle which underlies democratic regimes. They fail to generate this identity at their peril.

This last example points to an important modulation of the appeal to popular sovereignty. In the version I just gave above, the appeal was to what we might call "republican freedom." It is the one inspired by ancient republics, and which was invoked in the American and French Revolutions. But very soon after, the same appeal began to take on a nationalist form. The attempts to spread the principles of the French Revolution through the force of French arms created a reaction in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere, the sense of not being part of, represented by that sovereign people in the name of which the Revolution was being made and defended. It came to be accepted in many circles that a sovereign people, in order to have the unity needed for collective agency, had already to have an antecedent unity, of culture, history, or (more often in Europe) language. And so behind the political nation, there had to stand a preexisting cultural (sometimes ethnic) nation.

This means that the modern democratic state has generally accepted common purposes, or reference points, the features whereby it can lay claim to being the bulwark of freedom and locus of expression of its citizens. Whether or not these claims are actually founded, the state must be so imagined by its citizens if it is to be legitimate.

So a question can arise for the modern state for which there is no analogue in most premodern forms: What/whom is this state for? Whose freedom? Whose expression?

This is the sense in which a modern state has what I want to call a political identity, defined as the generally accepted answer to the “what/whom for?” question. This is distinct from the identities of its members, that is, the reference points, many and varied, which for each of these defines what is important in their lives. There had better be some overlap, of course, if these members are to feel strongly identified with the state; but the identities of individuals and constituent groups will generally be richer and more complex, as well as being often quite different from each other.

The close connection between popular sovereignty, strong cohesion, and political identity can also be shown in another way: the people are supposed to rule; this means that the members of this “people” make up a decision-making unit, a body which takes joint decisions. Moreover, it is supposed to take its decisions through a consensus, or at least a majority, of agents who are deemed equal and autonomous. It is not “democratic” for some citizens to be under the control of others. It might facilitate decision making, but it is not democratically legitimate.

In addition, to form a decision-making unit of the type demanded here, it is not enough for a vote to record the fully formed opinions of all the members. These units must not only decide together, but deliberate together. A democratic state is constantly facing new questions, and in addition aspires to form a consensus on the questions that it has to decide, and not merely to reflect the outcome of diffuse opinions. However, a joint decision emerging from joint deliberation does not merely require everybody to vote according to his or her opinion. It is also necessary that each person’s opinion should have been able to take shape or be reformed in the light of discussion, that is to say by exchange with others.

This necessarily implies a degree of cohesion. To some extent, the members must know one another, listen to one another and understand one another. If they are not acquainted, or if they cannot really understand one another, how can they engage in joint deliberation? This is a matter which concerns the very conditions of legitimacy of democratic states.

If, for example, a subgroup of the “nation” considers that it is not being listened to by the rest, or that they are unable to understand its

point of view, it will immediately consider itself excluded from joint deliberation. Popular sovereignty demands that we should live under laws which derive from such deliberation. Anyone who is excluded can have no part in the decisions which emerge and these consequently lose their legitimacy for him. A subgroup which is not listened to, is in some respects excluded from the "nation," but by this same token, it is no longer bound by the will of that nation.

For it to function legitimately, a people must thus be so constituted that its members are capable of listening to one another, and effectively do so, or at least that it should come close enough to that condition to ward off possible challenges to its democratic legitimacy from subgroups. In practice, more than that is normally required. It is not enough nowadays for us to be able now to listen to one another. Our states aim to last, so we want an assurance that we shall continue to be able to listen to one another in the future. This demands a certain reciprocal commitment. In practice, a nation can only ensure the stability of its legitimacy if its members are strongly committed to one another by means of their common allegiance to the political community. Moreover, it is the shared consciousness of this commitment which creates confidence in the various subgroups that they will indeed be heard, despite the possible causes for suspicion that are implicit in the differences between these subgroups.

In other words, a modern democratic state demands a "people" with a strong collective identity. Democracy obliges us to show much more solidarity and much more commitment to one another in our joint political project than was demanded by the hierarchical and authoritarian societies of yesteryear. In the good old days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Polish peasant in Galicia could be altogether oblivious of the Hungarian country squire, the bourgeois of Prague or the Viennese worker, without this, in the slightest, threatening the stability of the state. On the contrary: this condition of things only becomes untenable when ideas about popular government start to circulate. This is the moment when subgroups which will not, or cannot, be bound together, start to demand their own states. This is the era of nationalism, of the break-up of empires.

From another angle again, because these societies require strong commitment to do the common work, and because a situation in

which some carried the burdens of participation and others just enjoyed the benefits would be intolerable, free societies require a high level of mutual trust. In other words, they are extremely vulnerable to mistrust on the part of some citizens in relation to others, that the latter are not really assuming their commitments, e.g., that others are not paying their taxes, or are cheating on welfare, or as employers are benefitting from a good labor market without assuming any of the social costs. This kind of mistrust creates extreme tension, and threatens to unravel the whole skein of the mores of commitment which democratic societies need to operate. A continuing and constantly renewed mutual commitment is an essential basis for taking the measures needed to renew this trust.

So there is a need for common identity. How does this generate exclusion? In a host of possible ways, which we can see illustrated in different circumstances.

1. The most tragic of these circumstances is also the most obvious, where a group which cannot be assimilated to the reigning cohesion is brutally extruded; what we have come today to call “ethnic cleansing.”

But there are other cases where it doesn't come to such drastic expedients, but where exclusion works all the same against those whose difference threatens the dominant identity. I want to class forced inclusion as a kind of exclusion, which might seem a logical sleight of hand. Thus the Hungarian national movement in the 19th century tried to forcefully assimilate Slovaks and Romanians; the Turks are reluctant to concede that there is a Kurdish minority in their eastern borderlands. This may not seem to constitute exclusion to the minority, but in another clear sense, it amounts to this. It is saying in effect: as you are, or consider yourselves to be, you have no place here; that's why we are going to make you over.

Or exclusion may take the form of chicanery, as in the old apartheid South Africa, where millions of blacks were denied citizenship, on the grounds that they were really citizens of “homelands,” external to the state.

All these modes of exclusion are motivated by the threat that others represent to the dominant political identity. But this threat

depends on the fact that popular sovereignty is the regnant legitimacy idea of our time. It is hard to sustain a frankly hierarchical society, in which groups are ranged in tiers, with some overtly marked as inferior or subject, as with the millet system of the Ottoman Empire.

It is no accident that the 20th century is the age of ethnic cleansing, starting with the Balkan Wars, extending in that area through the aftermath of the First World War, and then reaching epic proportions in the Second World War, and still continuing—to speak only of Europe.

The democratic age poses new obstacles to coexistence, because it opens a new set of issues which may deeply divide people, those concerning the political identity of the state. In many parts of the Indian subcontinent, for instance, Hindus and Muslims coexisted in conditions of civility, even with a certain degree of syncretism, where later they would fight bitterly. What happened? The explanations often given include the British attempt to divide and rule, or even the British mania for census figures, which first made an issue of who was a majority where.

These factors may have their importance, but clearly what makes them vital is the surrounding situation, in which political identity becomes an issue. As the movement grows to throw off the alien, multinational Empire and to set up a democratic state, the question arises of its political identity. Will it simply be that of the majority? Are we heading for Hindu Raj? Muslims ask for reassurance. Gandhi's and Nehru's proposals for a pan-Indian identity don't satisfy Jinnah. Suspicion grows, demands for guarantees, ultimately separation.

Each side is mobilized to see the other as a political identity threat. This fear can then sometimes be transposed, through mechanisms we have yet to understand, into a threat to life, to which the response is savagery and counter-savagery, and we descend the spiral which has become terribly familiar. Census figures can then be charged with ominous significance, but only because in the age of democracy, being in the majority has decisive importance.

2. Then there is the phenomenon we can sometimes see in immigrant societies with a high degree of historic ethnic unity. The sense of common bond and common commitment has been for so

long bound up with the common language, culture, history, ancestry, and so on, that it is difficult to adjust to a situation where the citizen body includes lots of people of other origins. People feel a certain discomfort with this situation, and this can be reflected in a number of ways.

In one kind of case, the homogeneous society is reluctant to concede citizenship to the outsiders. Germany is the best known example of this, with its third generation Turkish “Gastarbeiter,” whose only fluent language may be German, whose only familiar home is in Frankfurt, but who are still resident aliens.

But there are subtler, and more ambivalent ways in which this discomfort can play out. Perhaps the outsiders automatically acquire citizenship after a standard period of waiting. There even may be an official policy of integrating them, widely agreed on by the members of the “old stock” population. But these are still so used to functioning politically among themselves, that they find it difficult to adjust. Perhaps one might better put it that they don’t quite know how to adjust yet; the new reflexes are difficult to find. For instance, they still discuss policy questions among themselves, in their electronic media and newspapers, as though immigrants were not a party to the debate. They discuss, for instance, how to gain the best advantage for their society of the new arrivals, or how to avoid certain possible negative consequences, but the newcomers are spoken of as “them,” as though they weren’t potential partners in the debate.

This illustrates just what is at stake here. I don’t want to claim that democracy unflinchingly leads to exclusion. That would be a counsel of despair, and the situation is far from desperate. I also want to say that there is a drive in modern democracy towards inclusion, in the fact that government should be by **all** the people. But my point is, that alongside this, there is a standing temptation to exclusion, which arises from the fact that democracies work well when people know each other, trust each other, and feel a sense of commitment towards each other.

The coming of new kinds of people, into the country, or into active citizenship, poses a challenge. The exact content of the mutual understanding, the bases of the mutual trust, and the shape of the mutual commitment, all have to be redefined, reinvented. This is not easy, and there is an understandable temptation to fall back on the

old ways, and deny the problem; either by straight exclusion from citizenship (Germany), or by the perpetuation of “us and them” ways of talking, thinking, doing politics.

And the temptation is the stronger, in that for a transition period, the traditional society may have to forgo certain advantages which came from the tighter cohesion of yore.

3. The cases I’ve been looking at are characterized by the arrival from abroad, or the entry into active citizenship of new people, who have not shared the ethnic-linguistic culture, or else the political culture. But exclusion can also operate along another axis. Just because of the importance of cohesion, and of a common understanding of political culture, democracies have sometimes attempted to force their citizens into a single mold. The “Jacobin” tradition of the French Republic provides the best-known example of this.

Here the strategy is, from the very beginning, to make people over in a rigorous and uncompromising way. Common understanding is reached, and supposedly forever maintained, by a clear definition of what politics is about, and what citizenship entails, and these together define the primary allegiance of citizens. This complex is then vigorously defended against all comers, ideological enemies, slackers, and, when the case arises, immigrants.

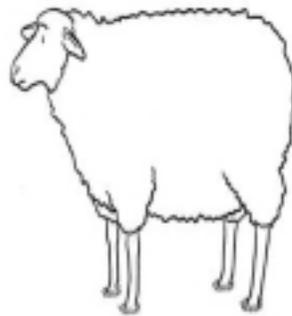
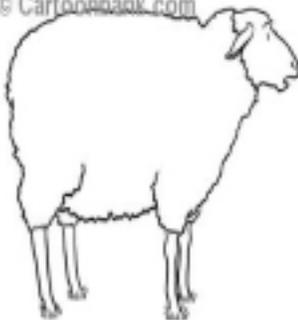
The exclusion operates here, not in the first place against certain people already defined as outsiders, but against other ways of being. This formula forbids other ways of living modern citizenship; it castigates as unpatriotic a way of living which would not subordinate other facets of identity to citizenship. In the particular case of France, for instance, a certain solution to the problem of religion in public life was adopted by radical Republicans, one of extrusion, and they have had immense difficulty even imagining that there might be other ways to safeguard the neutrality and comprehensiveness of the French state. Hence the overreaction to Muslim adolescents wearing the head scarf in school.

But the strength of this formula is that it managed for a long time to avoid or at least minimize the other kind of exclusion, that of new arrivals. It still surprises Frenchmen, and others, when they learn from Gérard Noiriel that one French person in four today has at least one grandparent born outside the country. France in this century has

been an immigrant country without thinking of itself as such. The policy of assimilation has hit a barrier with recent waves of Maghrébains, but it worked totally with the Italians, Poles, Czechs, who came between the Wars. These people were never offered the choice, and became indistinguishable from “les Français de souche.”

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GREGORY

“Sure, I follow the herd—not out of brainless obedience, mind you, but out of a deep and abiding respect for the concept of community.”

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