

Radical Politics and Political Will¹

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What is radical politics? I will argue that a radical political project depends upon the mobilisation of a popular political *will*, i.e. the determination of a collective or general will to transform an oppressive social order. Recent examples of the sort of popular will that I have in mind include the determination, assembled by South Africa's United Democratic Front, to overthrow an apartheid based on culture and race, or the mobilisation of Haiti's Lavalas to confront an apartheid based on privilege and class. Conditioned by the specific strategic constraints that structure a particular situation, such mobilisations test the truth expressed in the old cliché, 'where there's a will there's a way.' Or to adapt Antonio Machado's less prosaic phrase, taken up as a motto by Paulo Freire: they assume that 'there is no way, we make the way by walking it.'²

¹ A considerably longer (and more thoroughly referenced) version of this essay first appeared under the title 'The Will of the People: Notes Towards a Dialectical Voluntarism', *Radical Philosophy* 155 (May 2009).

² Antonio Machado, 'Proverbios y Cantares – XXIX', 1912, in *Selected Poems of Antonio Machado*, trans. Betty Jean Craige, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1978.

To say that we make the way by walking it is to resist the power of the historical, cultural or socio-economic terrain to determine our way. It is to insist that in an emancipatory political sequence what is 'determinant in the first instance' is the will of the people to prescribe, through the terrain that confronts them, the course of their own history. It is to privilege, over the complexity of the terrain and the forms of knowledge and authority that govern behaviour 'adapted' to it, the purposeful will of the people to take and retain their place as the 'authors and actors of their own drama.'³

To say that we make our way by walking it is not to pretend, however, that we invent the ground we traverse. It is not to suppose that a will creates itself and the conditions of its exercise abruptly or ex nihilo. It is not to assume that the 'real movement which abolishes the existing state of things' proceeds through empty or indeterminate space. It is not to disregard the obstacles or opportunities that characterise a particular terrain, or to deny their ability to influence the forging of a way. Instead it is to remember, after Sartre, that obstacles appear as such in the light of a project to climb past them. It is to remember, after Marx, that we make our own history, without choosing the conditions of its making. It is to conceive of terrain and way through a dialectic which, connecting both objective and subjective forms of determination, is oriented by the primacy of the latter.

³ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* [1847], Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1966, p. 109.

I

Not so long ago, the concept of a collective or general political will was widely recognised as the animating principle of progressive democratic politics. The arrival of the 'will of the people' as an actor on the political stage was itself a revolutionary development, and it was experienced as such by the people themselves. In the run-up to the great revolutions of the late eighteenth-century, to assert the deliberate, rational and collective will of the people as the source of political legitimacy and the mainspring of political action was to reject alternative conceptions of politics premised on either the mutual exclusion of society and will (a politics determined by natural, historical or economic necessity), or on the primacy of another sort of will (the will of God, of God's representative on earth, or of his semi-secular equivalent: the will of an elite entitled to govern on account of their accumulated privileges and qualifications).

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

vested interests of the day.⁴ The taking of the Bastille, the march upon Versailles, the invasion of the Tuileries, the September Massacres, the expulsion of the Girondins, the innumerable confrontations with 'enemies of the people' up and down the country: these are the deliberate interventions that defined both the course of the French revolution, and the immense, unending counter-revolution that it provoked. The Haitian revolutionaries went one step further and forced, for the first time, immediate and unconditional application of the principle that inspired the whole of the radical enlightenment: affirmation of the natural, inalienable rights of all human beings.

The campaign to re-pacify the people has been running, in different ways in different places, ever since. Today, preservation of popular deference and passivity remains the first priority of our single-party democracies at home and their various 'stabilisation' missions abroad. People in those places still too stubborn to accommodate themselves to such priorities – most obviously in Gaza and Haiti – are quarantined or crushed.

⁴ See in particular Sophie Wahnich, *La Liberté ou la mort: Essai sur la terreur et le terrorisme*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2003; Wahnich, *La Longue Patience du peuple: 1792, la naissance de la République*, Payot, Paris, 2008; Florence Gauthier, 'The French Revolution: Revolution and the Rights of Man and the Citizen', in *History and Revolution: Refuting Revisionism*, ed. Michael Haynes and Jim Wolfreys, Verso, London, 2007; Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2008.

The decisive events of 1792-93, and the popular mobilisation that enabled them, have defined the basic political spectrum ever since: the most fundamental modern political choice is between empowerment or disempowerment of the will of the people.

Different versions of this choice have come to the fore every time there is an opportunity to go to the roots of the system of domination that structures a specific situation. Haiti, Palestine, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, and Bolivia are some of the places where in recent years the people have managed, in the face of extraordinary levels of opposition and intimidation, to formulate and to some extent impose their will to transform the situation that oppresses them. Responses to such imposition have tended to follow the Thermidorian model. The mix of old and new counter-revolutionary strategies for dividing, disarming and then dissolving the will of the people – for restoring the people to their 'normal' condition as a dispersed and passive 'flock' – are likely to define the terrain of emancipatory struggle for the foreseeable future.

II

In a European context, philosophical expression of a confidence in the will of the people dates back to Rousseau, and develops in different directions via Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Marx. The optimism that characterises such an approach is still emphatic in Gramsci (who seeks 'to put the "will", which in the last analysis

equals practical or political activity, at the base of philosophy'⁵) and in the early writings of Lukács (for whom 'decision', 'subjective will' and 'free action' have strategic precedence over the apparent 'facts' of a situation⁶). Comparable priorities also orient the political writings of a few more recent philosophers, like Sartre, Beauvoir and Badiou. Obvious differences aside, what these thinkers have in common is an emphasis on the practical primacy of self-determination and self-emancipation. However constrained your situation you are always free, as Sartre liked to say, 'to make something of what is made of you.'⁷

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

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, 'Study of Philosophy', *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1971, p. 345; cf. Gramsci, 'The Modern Prince', in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, pp. 125-133, 171-172.

⁶ Georg Lukács, 'What is Orthodox Marxism?', *Political Writings 1919-1929*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. Michael McColgan, NLB, London, 1972, pp. 26-27; cf. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Merlin Press, London, 1971, pp. 23, 145, 181.

⁷ Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 91; Sartre, 'Itinerary of a Thought', *New Left Review* 58, November 1969, p. 45.

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

Even the most cursory overview of recent European philosophy is enough to evoke its general tendency to distrust, suspend or overcome the will – a tendency anticipated, in an extreme form, by Schopenhauer. Consider a few names from a list that could be easily expanded. Nietzsche's whole project presumes that 'there is no such thing as will' in the usual (voluntary, deliberate, purposeful...) sense of the word.⁸ Heidegger, over the course of his own lectures

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, New York, 1968, §488.

on Nietzsche, comes to condemn the will as a force of subjective domination and nihilist closure, before urging his readers 'willingly to renounce willing.'⁹ Arendt finds, in the affirmation of a popular political will ('the most dangerous of modern concepts and misconceptions') the temptation that turns modern revolutionaries into tyrants.¹⁰ For Adorno, rational will is an aspect of that enlightenment pursuit of mastery and control which has left the earth 'radiant with triumphant calamity.' Althusser devalues the will as an aspect of ideology, in favour of the scientific analysis of historical processes that proceed without a subject. Negri and Virno associate a will of the people with authoritarian state power. After Nietzsche, Deleuze privileges transformative sequences that require the suspension, shattering or paralysis of voluntary action. After Heidegger, Derrida associates the will with self-presence and self-coincidence, a forever futile effort to appropriate the inappropriable (the unrepresentable, the equivocal, the undecidable, the differential, the deferred, the discordant, the transcendent, the other...). After these and several other philosophers, Agamben summarises much recent European thinking on political will when he effectively equates it with fascism pure and simple.

Even those thinkers who, against the grain of the times, have insisted on the primacy of self-determination and self-emancipation have tended to do so in ways that devalue political will. Take Foucault, Sartre and Badiou. Much of

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, Harper & Row, New York, 1969, p. 59.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin, London, 1990, p. 225.

Foucault's work might be read as an extended analysis, after Canguilhem, of the ways in which people are 'de-voluntarised' by the 'permanent coercions' at work in disciplinary power, coercions designed to establish 'not the general will but automatic docility.'¹¹ Foucault never compromised on his affirmation of 'voluntary insubordination' in the face of newly stifling forms of government and power, and in crucial lectures from the early 1970s he demonstrated how the development of modern psychiatric and carceral power, in the immediate wake of the French revolution, was designed first and foremost to 'over-power' and break the will of people who had the folly literally to 'take themselves for a king';¹² nevertheless, in his published work Foucault tends to see the will as complicit in forms of self-supervision, self-regulation and self-subjection. Sartre probably did more than any other philosopher of his generation to emphasise the ways in which an emancipatory project or group depends upon the determination of a 'concrete will', but his philosophy offers a problematic basis for any sort of voluntarism. He accepts as 'irreducible' the 'intention' and goals which orient an individual's fundamental project, but makes a sharp distinction between such intention and merely 'voluntary deliberation' or motivation: since for Sartre the latter is always secondary and 'deceptive', the result is to render

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Pantheon Books, New York, 1977, p. 169.

¹² Foucault, 'What is Critique?', in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, Semiotext(e), New York, 1997, p. 32; Foucault, Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, trans. Graham Burchell, Palgrave, New York, 2006, pp. 11, 27-28, 339.

the primary intention opaque and beyond 'interpretation'.¹³ Sartre's later work subsequently fails to conceive of a collective will in other than exceptionalist and ephemeral terms. Badiou's powerful revival of a militant theory of the subject is more easily reconciled with a voluntarist agenda (or at least with what Badiou calls a *volonté impure*¹⁴), but suffers from some similar limitations. It's no accident that, like Agamben and Žižek, when Badiou looks to the Christian tradition for a point of anticipation he turns not to Matthew (with his prescriptions of how to act in the world: spurn the rich, affirm the poor, 'sell all thou hast'...) but to Paul (with his contempt for the weakness of human will and his valorisation of the abrupt and infinite transcendence of grace).

Pending a more robust philosophical defence, contemporary critical theorists tend to dismiss the notion of will as a matter of delusion or deviation. But since it amounts to little more than a perverse appropriation of more fundamental forms of revolutionary determination, there is no reason to accept fascist exaltation of an 'awakening' or 'triumph of the will' as the last word on the subject. The true innovators in the modern development of a voluntarist philosophy are Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel, and the general principles of such a philosophy are most easily recognised in the praxis of people like Robespierre,

¹³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* [1943], trans. Hazel Barnes, Routledge Classics, London, 2003, pp. 585-586; pp. 472, 479.

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, 'La Volonté: Cours d'agrégation', notes taken by François Nicolas, <http://www.entretemps.asso.fr/Badiou/02-03.2.htm>, 13 March 2003.

John Brown, Fanon, Che Guevara... It is to such people that we need to turn in order to remember or re-conceive the true meaning of popular political will.

III

On this basis we might briefly enumerate, along broadly neo-Jacobin lines, some of the characteristic features of radical or emancipatory political will:

1. Political *will* commands, by definition, voluntary and autonomous action. Unlike involuntary or reflex-like responses, if it exists then will initiates action through free, rational deliberation. As Rousseau puts it, the fundamental 'principle of any action lies in the will of a free being; there is no higher or deeper source [...]. Without will there is no freedom, no self-determination, no "moral causality."¹⁵ Robespierre soon drew the most basic political implication when he realised that when people will or 'want to be free they will be.' Sieyès anticipated the point, on the eve of 1789: 'every man has an inherent right to deliberate and will for himself', and 'either one wills freely or one is forced to will, there cannot be any middle position'. Outside voluntary self-legislation

¹⁵ Rousseau, *Emile, ou de l'éducation*, Institute for Learning Technologies online edition, <http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/pedagogies/rousseau/contents2.html>, §1008; Rousseau, *Première version du Contrat social*, in *Political Writings*, ed. Charles Vaughan, Wiley, New York, 1962, I, p. 499.

'there cannot be anything other than the empire of the strong over the weak and its odious consequences.'¹⁶

An intentional freedom is not reducible to the mere faculty of free choice or *liberum arbitrium*.¹⁷ If we are to speak of the 'will of the people' we cannot restrict it (as Machiavelli and his successors do) to the passive expression of approval or consent.¹⁸ It is the process of actively willing or choosing that renders a particular course of action preferable to another. 'Always engaged', argues Sartre, freedom never 'pre-exists its choice: we shall never apprehend ourselves except as a choice in the making.'¹⁹ Augustine and then Duns Scotus already understood that 'our will would not be will unless it were in our power.'²⁰ Descartes likewise recognised that 'voluntary and free are the same thing', and finds in the 'indivisible' and immeasurable freedom of the will our

¹⁶ Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, IX, p. 310; Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Views of the Executive Means Available to the Representatives of France in 1789* [1789], in Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Sonenscher, Hackett, Indianapolis, 2003, p. 10.

¹⁷ Cf. Arendt, *Willing*, in *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt, New York, 1978, II, pp. 6-7.

¹⁸ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, Penguin, London, 1983, 2:24, 3:5; cf. 1:16, 1:32; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull, Penguin, London, 2004, chapter 9.

¹⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 501.

²⁰ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1993, pp. 76-77; cf. Duns Scotus, 'The Existence of God', in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Allan Wolter, Hackett, Indianapolis, 1987, 54-56.

most fundamental resemblance to divinity.²¹ Kant (followed by Fichte) then radicalises this voluntarist approach when he defines the activity of willing as 'causality through reason' or 'causality through freedom.'²² For Kant, will achieves the practical liberation of reason from the constraints of experience and objective knowledge, and it is the active willing which determines what is possible and what is right, and makes it so. As the French revolution will confirm, it is as willing or practical beings that 'people have the quality or power of being the *cause* and [...] *author* of their own improvement.'²³ Those sceptical of political will, by contrast, assume that apparently voluntary commitments mask a more profound ignorance or devaluation of appetite (Hobbes), causality (Spinoza), context (Montesquieu), habit (Hume), tradition (Burke), history (Tocqueville), power (Nietzsche), the unconscious (Freud), convention (Wittgenstein), writing (Derrida), desire (Deleuze), drive (Žižek)...

²¹ Descartes, Letter to Père Mesland, 9 February 1645, in John Cottingham et al., eds., *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, III, 246; Descartes, *Meditations* IV, *ibid.*, II, 39-40; *Principles of Philosophy*, *ibid.* I, §35, §37.

²² Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in his *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary McGregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996 (references to Kant use the standard German pagination), pp. 4:461, 4:446. In his 1930 lectures on Kant's practical philosophy, Heidegger emphasises this point – 'to give this priority in everything, to will the ought of pure willing' (Heidegger, *Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Ted Sadler, Continuum, London, 2002, p. 201).

²³ Kant, 'The Contest of the Faculties', in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 181.

2. *Political* will, of course, involves collective action and direct participation. A democratic political will depends on the power and practice of inclusive assembly, the power to sustain a common commitment. The assertion of what Rousseau calls a general will is a matter of collective volition at every stage of its development. The inaugural 'association is the most voluntary act in the world', and to remain an active participant of the association 'is to will what is in the common or general interest.' Insofar (and only insofar) as they pursue this interest, each person 'puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme control of the general will.'²⁴ Defined in this way, 'the general will is always on the side most favourable to the public interest, that is to say, the most equitable, so that it is necessary merely to be just to be assured of following the general will.'²⁵

A general interest exists only if the will to pursue it is stronger than the distraction of particular interests. To say that a general will is 'strong' doesn't mean that it stifles dissent or imposes uniformity. It means that in the process of negotiating differences between particular wills, the willing of the general interest eventually finds a way to prevail. There is an inclusive general will insofar as those who initially oppose it correct their mistake and realise that 'if

²⁴ Rousseau, *Social Contract* 4:2, 1:6.

²⁵ Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:4; Rousseau, 'Discourse on Political Economy', in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, p. 66.

my private opinion had prevailed I would have done something other than what I had willed', i.e. something inconsistent with my ongoing participation in the general will.²⁶ So long as it lasts, participation in a general will, be it that of a national movement, a political organisation, a social or economic association, a trade union, etc., always involves a resolve to abide by its eventual judgement, not as an immediate arbiter of right and wrong but as the process of collectively deliberating and *willing* what is right. Participation in a general will involves acceptance of the risk of finding yourself being, at any given moment, 'wrong with the people rather than right without them.'²⁷ By the same token, it's precisely insofar as it remains actively capable of seeking and willing the collective right that we can agree with Rousseau and Sieyès when they insist that, in the long run, a general will can neither err nor betray.²⁸

After Robespierre, Saint-Just summarises the whole Jacobin political project when he rejected 'purely speculative' or 'intellectual' conceptions of justice, as if 'laws were the expression of taste rather than of the general will'. The only legitimate definition of the general will is 'the material will of the people, its

²⁶ Rousseau, *Social Contract* 4:2; Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Anne Kupiec and Miguel Abensour, Gallimard 'Folio', Paris, 2004, p. 482.

²⁷ Jean-Bertrand Aristide, cited in J.P. Slavin, 'Haiti: The Elite's Revenge', *NACLA Report on the Americas* 25:3, December 1991, p. 6.

²⁸ Rousseau, 'Discourse on Political Economy', p. 66; *Social Contract* 2:3; Rousseau, *Social Contract* 1:7 translation modified.

simultaneous will; its goal is to consecrate the active and not the passive interest of the greatest number of people.'²⁹

Mobilisation of the general will of the people must not be confused, then, with a merely putchist vanguardism. An abrupt appropriation of the instruments of government by a few 'alchemists of revolution' is no substitute for the deployment of popular power.³⁰ In spite of obvious strategic differences, Lenin is no more tempted than Luxemburg to substitute a Blanquist conspiracy for 'the people's struggle for power', via mobilisation of the 'vast masses of the proletariat.'³¹ It's not a matter of imposing an external will or awareness upon an inert people, but of people working to clarify, concentrate and organise their own will. Fanon makes much the same point, when he equates a national

²⁹ Saint-Just, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 547.

³⁰ See Marx and Engels, '*Les Conspirateurs*, par A. Chenu' (1850), online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/03/chenu.htm>; Marx, 'Meeting of the Central Authority, September 15, 1850', in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, X, pp. 625-629; Engels, 'Introduction,' in Marx, *Civil War in France*, p. 14.

³¹ Lenin, 'The Conference Summed Up' (7 May 1906), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/may/07.htm>; cf. Hal Draper, 'The Myth of Lenin's "Concept of The Party"', 1990, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1990/myth/myth.htm>.

liberation movement with the inclusive and deliberate work of 'the whole of the people'.³²

3. The will of the people is thus a matter of material power and active empowerment, before it is a matter of representation, authority or legitimacy. What divides society is its response to popular self-empowerment. This is as much a Marxist as it is a Jacobin insight. Any social 'transformation can only come about as the product of the – free – action of the proletariat', notes Lukács, and 'only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat possesses this ability to transform things.' Such a praxis-oriented philosophy did not die out after the political setbacks of the 1920s. Sartre took up the same theme in the early 1950s (before Badiou in the 1970s): as far as politics is concerned a 'class is never separable from the concrete will which animates it nor from the ends it pursues. The proletariat forms itself by its day-to-day action. It exists only by action. It *is* action. If it ceases to act, it decomposes.'³³

Will commands the initiation of action, not representation. An exercise in political will involves taking power, not receiving it, on the assumption that (as a matter of 'reason' or 'natural right') the people are always already entitled to

³² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1968, pp. 155-156.

³³ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 205; Sartre, *The Communists and Peace*, trans. Martha Fletcher, Braziller, New York, 1968, p. 89.

take it. 'The oppressed cannot enter the struggle as objects', Freire notes, 'in order *later* to become human beings.'³⁴ It makes no sense, as John Brown argued during his trial in 1859, to treat the imperatives of justice merely as recommendations that must bide their time: 'I am yet too young', Brown said on the eve of his execution, 'to understand that God is any respecter of persons.'³⁵ A similar impatience informs the strategic voluntarism of Che Guevara, who knew that it is pointless to wait 'with folded arms' for objective conditions to mature. Whoever waits for 'power to fall into the people's hands like a ripe fruit' will never stop waiting.³⁶ Between confidence in the people and confidence in historical progress, as Rousseau anticipated, there is a stark choice.

4. Like any form of free or voluntary action, the will of the people is grounded in the practical sufficiency of its exercise. Will is no more a 'substance' or object of knowledge than the cogito variously reworked and affirmed by Kant, Fichte and

³⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos, Penguin, London, 1996, p. 50.

³⁵ Cited in Arthur Jordan, 'John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry', *International Socialist Review* 21:1, 1960,

<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isr/vol21/no01/jordan.htm>. 'The general will, to be truly so, must be general in its object as well as in its essence; it must come from all to be applied to all' (Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:4).

³⁶ Che Guevara, 'The Marxist-Leninist Party', in *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, ed. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdes, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 104-106; cf. S'bu Zikode, 'The Burning Issue of Land and Housing', 28 August 2008,

http://www.diakonia.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=129&Itemid=54.

Sartre. A 'fundamental freedom' or 'practical exercise of reason' proves itself through what it does and makes, rather than through what it is, has or knows. Freedom demonstrates and justifies itself through willing and acting, or else not at all. We *are* free, writes Beauvoir, but freedom '*is* only by making itself be.' We are free insofar as 'we will ourselves free,'³⁷ and we will ourselves free by crossing the threshold that separates passivity and 'minority' from volition and activity. We will ourselves free across the distance that our freedom puts between itself and a previous unfreedom. We are free as self-freeing.

5. If it is to persist, a political association must be disciplined and 'indivisible' as a matter of course.³⁸ Internal difference and debate within an organised association is one thing, factional divisions or schisms are another. Popular freedom persists as long as the people assert it. 'In order that the social pact may not be an empty formula,' as Rousseau's notorious argument runs, 'it tacitly includes the commitment, which alone can give force to the others, that anyone who refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the entire body; this means nothing else than that he will be forced to be free.' Preservation of public freedom, in Robespierre's arresting phrase, requires acknowledgement of the 'despotism of truth'. Collective freedom will endure, in

³⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Citadel Press, New York, 1976, pp. 24-25, 130-131.

³⁸ 'For the same reason that sovereignty is inalienable, it is indivisible, for the will is general, or it is not' (Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2:2; cf. Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, VII, p. 268).

short, only so long as the people can defend themselves against division and deception.

'Virtue' is the name that Rousseau and the Jacobins gave to the practices required to defend a general will against deception and division. To practice virtue is to privilege collective over particular interests, and to ensure that society is governed 'solely on the basis of the common interest. [...] Each person is virtuous when his private will conforms totally to the general will.' If then 'we wish the general will to be accomplished' we need simply to 'make all the private wills agree with it, or in other words [...]: make virtue reign.'³⁹

6. The practical exercise of will only proceeds, as a matter of course, in the face of resistance. To will is always to continue to will, in the face of difficulty or constraint. To continue or not to continue – this is the essential choice at stake in any militant ethics.⁴⁰ Either you will and do something, or you do not. Even as it discovers the variety of ways of doing or not-doing, these are the alternatives a political will must confront: yes or no, for or against, continue or stop, where 'to stop before the end is to perish.'⁴¹

³⁹ Rousseau, *Social Contract* 2.1; 'Discourse on Political Economy', pp. 69, 67, translation modified.

⁴⁰ Cf. Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 27-28; Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward, Verso, London, 2001, pp. 52, 91.

⁴¹ Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, X, p. 572.

If for the Jacobins of 1793 'terror' comes to figure as the complement to 'virtue', it is above all as a consequence of their determination to overcome the resistance of the privileged and their political protectors. Terror in the Jacobin (as opposed to Thermidorian) sense is the deployment of whatever force is required to overcome those particular interests that seek to undermine or disempower the collective interest. The reasons why the Jacobin terror continues to terrify our political establishment, in a way that the far more bloody repression of the 1871 Commune does not, has nothing to do with the actual amount of violence involved. From the perspective of what is already established, notes Saint-Just, 'that which produces the general good is always terrible.' The Jacobin terror was more defensive than aggressive, more a matter of restraining than of unleashing popular violence. 'Let us be terrible', Danton said, 'so that the people need not be.'⁴²

7. By the same token, the practical exercise of will distinguishes itself from mere wish or fantasy through its capacity to initiate a process of genuine 'realisation'.⁴³ After Fichte, Hegel complements the voluntarist trajectory initiated by Rousseau and Kant, and opens the door to Marx, when he identifies

⁴² Saint-Just, 'Institutions républicaines' [1794], in *Oeuvres*, p. 1141; Danton, 10 March 1793, cited in Wahnich, *Liberté ou la mort*, p. 62.

⁴³ Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 505; Gramsci, 'The Modern Prince', in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, p. 175n.75.

a free collective will – a will that wills and realises its own emancipation – as the animating principle of a concrete political association. Thus conceived, the will is nothing other than 'thinking translating itself into existence [...]. The activity of the will consists in cancelling and overcoming [*aufzuheben*] the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity and in translating its ends from their subjective determination into an objective one.'⁴⁴ After Hegel, Marx will expand the material dimension of such concrete determination, without ever abandoning the idea that what is ultimately determinant are not given economic or historical constraints but free human action – the ability of 'each single individual' to prescribe their own ends and make their own history.⁴⁵

8. Realisation of the will of (the) people is oriented towards the universalisation of its consequences. As Beauvoir understood better than Sartre, I can only will my own freedom by willing the freedom of all; the only subject that can sustain the work of unending self-emancipation is *the* people as such, humanity as a whole. Kant, Hegel and Marx take some of the steps required to move from Rousseau's parochial conception of a people to its universal affirmation, but the outcome was again anticipated by Jacobin practice: 'the country of a free people

⁴⁴ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, §4A, §28, translation modified.

⁴⁵ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 1A, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a3>; cf. Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 739.

is open to all the people on earth', and the only 'legitimate sovereign of the earth is the human race [...]. The interest, the will of the people, is that of humanity.'⁴⁶

9. A final consequence follows from this insistence on the primacy of political will: voluntary servitude, from this perspective, is more damaging than external domination. If the will is 'determinant in the first instance' then the most far-reaching forms of oppression involve the collusion of the oppressed. This is the point anticipated by Etienne La Boétie, and then radicalised in different ways by Du Bois, Fanon, and Aristide (and also Foucault, Deleuze, and Žižek...): in the end it is the people who empower their oppressors, who can harm them 'only to the extent to which they are willing to put up with them.'⁴⁷

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It wouldn't be hard to write a history of the twentieth-century, of course, in such a way as to illustrate the apparent futility of political will. The failure of German communism in the 1920s, the failure of 'Soviet man' in the 1930s, the failure of anti-colonial liberation movements in the 1950s and 60s, the failure of Maoism,

⁴⁶ Saint-Just, *Oeuvres*, p. 551; Robespierre, *Oeuvres*, IX, p. 469; VII, p. 268.

⁴⁷ Etienne La Boétie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz, Columbia University Press, New York, 1942, http://www.constitution.org/la_boetie/serv_vol.htm, translation modified.

the failure of 1968, the failure of anti-war and anti-globalisation protests – all these seeming failures might seem to demonstrate one and the same basic point: the diffuse, systemic and hence insurmountable nature of contemporary capitalism, and of the forms of state and disciplinary power which accompany it.

Such a distorted history, in my opinion, would amount to little more than a rationalisation of the defeats suffered in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In the late 1940s Beauvoir already bemoaned our tendency to 'think that we are not the master of our destiny; we no longer hope to help make history, we are resigned to submitting to it.'⁴⁸ By the late 1970s such complaint, revalorised as celebration, had become the stuff of a growing consensus. This consensus has now been dominant, in both radical politics and philosophy, for more than thirty disastrous years. It's time to leave it behind.

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⁴⁸ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 139.