The Ideology of Democratism

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Is democracy antidemocratic? If you apply the standards of a hugely influential modern understanding of what democracy ought to be, this question is not as paradoxical as it may seem. According to this understanding of popular government, which forms part of a larger view of human nature and society, the practices of actual democracies fall far short of, or egregiously violate, what is considered to be “real” democracy. This view is not confined to a small minority of theorists, and it is not of recent origin. It has been a powerful and growing influence in America and leading Western European nations and their colonial satellites for a couple of centuries. It has long been prominent in universities and intellectual circles, and it is today more widespread than ever—so ubiquitous, in fact, that its views are a prominent ingredient in public debate whenever issues of democracy or related issues are raised. This view of democracy informs a wide range of demands for reform that often extend far beyond politics. This understanding of democracy has become something like a new view of life, a replacement for old Western beliefs and practices, and in some instances appears to have taken on a religious dimension. The research behind this book provides overwhelming evidence for the view that a certain imaginative belief in democracy has emerged that has all the earmarks of an entire ideology and that is, moreover, perhaps the dominant political belief system in modern Western society. So compelling is the evidence for this view that it is surprising so few have been aware of this hugely influential ideology and that nobody has undertaken a comprehensive study of its features. It is as if the ideology in question has been assumed by its advocates and many sympathizers to be self-evidently true and that it has, as it were, been able to hide in plain sight.

This book investigates the underpinnings and major thrust of what appears to be yet another political “ism.” Considering the enormous influence of this belief system, it needs to be examined with care. The name I give this post-Enlightenment understanding of democracy is “democratism.” While I am not
the first to use this term for the phenomenon in question, this book is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to offer a systematic description, analysis, and assessment of the ideology of democratism.

At its core, democratism is a hypothetical or ideal conception of democracy that is only tenuously connected to the actual, historical desires of real popular majorities. Rousseau was a pioneering figure in elaborating a new conception of democracy that theoretically calls for rule by the people but eschews popular sovereignty in practice. Rousseau labels the ideal expression of the popular will the “General Will.” While Rousseau coined the term and gave it powerful expression in *The Social Contract*, many others have consciously or unconsciously incorporated this same fundamental concept into their understandings of democracy. Democratism can perhaps best be summed up as the belief that democracy is real or genuine only to the degree that it reflects an idealized conception of the popular will. The president of Freedom House was oriented by this democratist conception of democracy when he declared popular majorities a “threat” to democracy. How could a popular majority threaten democracy, one might wonder? When democracy morphs conceptually in the imagination from a *type of government* into an abstract and ahistorical ideal, its historical manifestations may be considered false, not “real democracy,” or not democratic enough. One of the abiding features of democratism is the belief that true democracy can be accomplished once certain institutional mechanisms are put in place. It is always just over the horizon.

Because the general will is an ideal, a leader or group of leaders must bring it to life practically. Rousseau’s *Social Contract* is, again, paradigmatic. An all-knowing legislator is Rousseau’s solution to the seemingly intractable problem of escaping business-as-usual politics. Leading without coercing, omniscient and all-capable, the legislator is the deus ex machina of *The Social Contract*, setting the new political system in motion. Those who conceive of democracy according to the democratist perspective rely on a legislator in one form or another to midwife a new, truer Democracy into existence. Because of its prima facie commitment to democracy, democratism is often reluctant to acknowledge its dependence on a legislator or vanguard to encourage the “right” democratic norms. One of the paradoxes of democratism and one of the indicators of its ideological nature is the need for an elite to coax the general will—whatever name it might go by—from the populace.

Calling for greater power to the people and fewer mediating institutions between the people and government, democratism has every appearance of being highly democratic. Heavy use of abstract concepts from the democratic lexicon has helped democratism largely escape notice as an ideology and as fundamentally antidemocratic. It will likely come as a surprise to many to see notable champions of democracy such as Thomas Jefferson and the school of
thought known as deliberative democracy included in this book as examples of an ideology that, to a greater or lesser degree, rejects popular sovereignty. Subtle assumptions about the need to alter inherited norms and cultural practices guide the ostensibly democratic thought of democratists. Careful examination reveals that what may at first seem like reasonable reforms are in fact proposals for dramatic, even revolutionary changes to a people’s social norms and ways of life. Democratism glosses over the ways in which it expects to transform a people’s practices and even psychology, focusing instead on the technical aspects and new procedures. Yet the adoption of the new “democratic” system is dependent on the people accepting it and practicing it, much more so than on the correct political architectonics, as the history of political revolution and lesser political change reveals.

To what extent is democratism’s ideal of democracy connected to actual democracy as a form of government? If it is found to have little in common with our traditional notion of democracy as “rule by the people,” then it is worth investigating this new conception of rule and asking if it is desirable or legitimate. Part of this will entail asking if democratic idealism is a fruitful way of conceiving democracy, or if such idealism inherently encourages undemocratic, even dangerous political practices. If democratism is not a system that depends on the people’s actual, historical will, then on what does it base its legitimacy? These are questions that this book investigates through a careful examination of this ideology’s leading representatives, the democratists.

The original idea for this book was sparked by an observation that the vast majority of democratic scholarship in recent decades is oriented by a shared normative assumption about democracy, namely the belief that real democracies are more or less legitimate as they conform to an ideal of democracy. This assumption is rarely spelled out, but it underlies almost all normative questions about democracy in political science and public discussion. Furthermore, because a democratic ideal is held to be normative, it is assumed that all countries of the globe must be striving toward it, even if it is not apparent that they are doing so. The assumption is that in undemocratic countries most of the people, if they were able to think rationally and clearly about their interests, would choose something like Western-style democracy, and specifically “democracy” as the elite representatives of this ideology conceive of it. It seemed to me that this democratic idealism represented a type of enchantment that Max Weber thought had disappeared from the Western imagination. Weber was, of course, correct in the sense that scientific rationality had replaced an earlier Christian and spiritual interpretation of life, but in another sense the world remains very much enchanted. This book argues that the modern Western world is enchanted with an imaginative vision of democracy that at times is almost indistinguishable from religious belief. And like religious belief, it has its apostles, who define
the democratic orthodoxy, and also its heretics, who must be managed and censored.

I began this book in the summer of 2016, before it was clear that a new form of populism was beginning to take shape in the United States and many European nations. Since then, it has been interesting to see new manifestations and expressions of what I have taken to be the ideology of democratism. If anything, it has become more pronounced and overt. It is routine to hear about this or that policy or action being urgently needed in order to “save democracy,” for example. Yet increasingly, it seems, democracy must be rescued from itself. It must be saved even from popular majorities. The term “populist,” paradoxically, is now often used to indicate those who allegedly wish to destroy democracy. “Populists” are often derided as “authoritarians” or “fascists.” The democratist ideology has created the framework for this otherwise perplexing phenomenon, equating populism with what would seem to be its opposite: authoritarianism. Those who interpret democracy as an ideal believe that its correlation with the will of actual majorities need not be perfect or even approximate. Censorship, military action, or other seemingly undemocratic activities may be needed to coerce an unwilling or ignorant population into accepting what the democrats consider to be a more genuine expression of democracy. Even elections may be considered outmoded institutions if they do not produce results that would further the democratist ideal. Perhaps democracy proper—the actual rule by the people through some form of representation—is an outdated form of government, inappropriate for extended territories or particular peoples, and another type of rule is warranted, say, some form of aristocracy (from the Greek, “rule by the best”) or oligarchy (“rule by the few”). But democratism does not openly declare the desire for another form of government; it presents itself as supremely democratic and its contributors as the mantle-bearers of true democracy. The evidence must be weighed as to whether democratism represents a variant of democratic thinking or the opposite and to what extent this modern, visionary conception of popular rule overshadows the older concept of democracy as actual, rather than hypothetical, rule by the people.
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Rousseau Sets the Tone

Introduction

It seems appropriate to begin by analyzing a person who was of central inspiration to the entire ideology that is about to be examined. He may indeed be a paradigmatic figure for democratism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau “set the world in flame,” Lord Byron said. Referring to him as the “apostle of affliction,” Byron joins many others who have seen fit to use religious language to describe the philosopher who has become more of a prophet. The sociologist Robert Nisbet calls Rousseau “the man of the hour” and “the saint of saints” and says, “He offers absolute power in the form of divine grace, of the community of the elect.” Along these same lines, Jacob Talmon criticizes Rousseau’s “Discourse on Inequality,” calling it “that Gospel of Revolution.” Robespierre, however, was sincere in calling Rousseau “divine.” Ernst Cassirer, also an admirer, summarizes Rousseau’s political project along these lines: “The hour of salvation will strike when the present coercive form of society is destroyed and is replaced by the free form of political and ethical community—a community in which everyone obeys only the general will, which he recognizes and acknowledges as his own will. . . . But it is futile to hope that this salvation will be accomplished through outside help. No God can grant it to us; man must become his own savior.”

Rousseau’s ostensibly secular philosophy of democracy has led many to conceive of his project in religious terms and has inspired a corresponding quasi-religious faith in the type of democracy he envisions. At the heart of Rousseau’s political philosophy and no doubt informing the ersatz religion of democracy that he arguably founded is the concept of the general will. This was surely on the mind of Nisbet when he referred to the “absolute power” Rousseau offers. Cassirer specifically mentions the general will as the vehicle for our political salvation. Rousseau suggests as much. This chapter examines the ways in which Rousseau’s understanding of the general will, perhaps the concept orienting his
philosophy of democracy, guides the democratist interpretation of democracy in general and the popular will in particular.

In this chapter, I highlight those aspects of Rousseau’s political thought that are reflected in the modern, conflicted understanding of democracy that I identify with democratism. This book takes seriously Rousseau’s assertion that a singular “great principle” guides all of his works.6 “All that is challenging in the Social Contract had previously appeared in the Essay on Inequality; all that is challenging in Émile was previously in Julie,” Rousseau insists. I draw on these and other works and find that in them is indeed a guiding principle, the same that guides democratism. To demonstrate that Rousseau’s political philosophy is paradigmatic of what I here identify as a comprehensive political ideology, I must paint with somewhat broad brush strokes. To go into great detail and to analyze the many nuances of any one aspect of Rousseau’s thought will ultimately detract from the major purpose of this book. Like other chapters, this chapter has the limited aim of establishing a particular thinker’s connection to democratism. I touch on the concepts of the legislator and Rousseau’s understanding of education as they fit within his political philosophy, but the concept on which this chapter focuses most attention is the general will.

My interpretation of Rousseau’s general will is certainly not the only one. Many would agree, though, that for Rousseau the general will is the voice of the people and is the source of political legitimacy. Precisely how it is to be elevated and discerned is a matter of debate—and one of the subjects of this book. Rousseau offers hints about how to tease the general will from the merely aggregated, historical desires of the people, but he does not offer many details.7 According to Judith Shklar, the general will is “ineluctably the property of one man, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He did not invent it, but he made its history.”8 Rousseau seems to have given expression to an idea already in currency and one that would outlast many of the particulars of The Social Contract. “By turns celebrated and condemned, the general will in its history after Rousseau stirred passions as few ideas, concepts, words, or metaphors have,” write James Farr and David Lay Williams.9 Farr and Williams mention Rousseau’s influence on some of the French revolutionaries, such as Abbé Sieyès, who invoked the general will “to elevate the Third Estate from ‘nothing’ to sovereign,” as well as the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which proclaims the law to be “an expression of the general will.”10 They note his influence on many thinkers, including Kant, Fichte, and Rawls. This book seeks, among other things, to illustrate that his influence extends well beyond the narrow realm of political philosophy and can be detected in myriad and unexpected ways in modern interpretations of democracy and politics in the broad sense.
Rousseau and the Social Contract Tradition

To illuminate the connection between Rousseau’s political philosophy and democratism, it will be helpful to place Rousseau in the context of the social contract tradition that preceded him. Rousseau emerged in the wake of a new brand of humanism—very different from humanism of a more classical type— which set the tone for Enlightenment and later thinking about life and politics. This new humanism revolutionized the West’s philosophical anthropology and transformed its understanding of self, family, and community. Modern humanism proposed that the person be understood first as an individual, apart from the traditional social and spiritual nexus that for so long had been at the foundation of Western political philosophy. In the first book of Aristotle’s *Politics*, he says that every polis is a species of association, composed not of individuals but of smaller associations, the smallest being the household.11 It was not until a new humanism followed by the Enlightenment that political philosophers began to imagine political society composed of individuals as the primary building blocks. This new understanding of personhood and its relationship to politics harbored the seeds of political revolution and found concrete expression in strains of thought derivative of the Reformation, which had stressed a direct relationship between God and the individual. Church authority, especially that of Roman Catholicism, represented the antithesis of individual autonomy as humanism now understood it. As might be expected, the doctrine of the divine right of kings was challenged. The ultimate culmination of this new political role of the individual was the French Revolution in 1789.

One of Rousseau’s predecessors in the social contract tradition, Thomas Hobbes, was among the first major political philosophers to reimagine political order as an expression of the desires and consent of the individual.12 Hobbes witnessed the political instability that unfolded in the wake of crumbling Church authority and corresponding royal authority and responded with a philosophy of the Leviathan state. Meaningful association and political order are possible only under the rule of an absolute sovereign, Hobbes insisted, a conclusion he drew from his belief that human existence is *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Driven by fear of violent death and a corresponding desire for power over others—a *libido dominandi*—the sole hope for a stable political order must lie in an all-powerful state. Yet Hobbes lays the groundwork for Rousseau’s understanding of a general will. The people, Hobbes says,

> reduce all their wills by plurality of voices unto one will; which is as much as to say, to appoint one man or assembly of men to bear their person; and every one to own and acknowledge himself to be author
of whatsoever he that so beareth their person shall act or cause to be acted in those things which concern the common peace and safety; and therein to submit their wills, every one to his will, and their judgements to his judgement. This is more than consent or concord; it is a real unity of them all in one and the same person.  

While Hobbes states that an all-powerful sovereign is the only way to ensure stability and security in the polis, his understanding of a commonwealth as an “artificial man” or organic body united in spirit and will suggests that he imagines each individual’s will to be commensurate, in the end, with the will of the sovereign. Like Rousseau’s general will, as we will see, unity in the Hobbesian commonwealth derives from a shared identification of the people with the sovereign, which is their multitude of wills united not just in practice but also in a metaphysical sense. Hobbes calls the Leviathan a “mortal god,” whose great and terrible power is able “to conform the wills of [the people of the commonwealth] all to peace at home and mutual aid against their enemies abroad.” In this sovereign “consisteth the essence of the commonwealth,” and each individual must consider himself also the author of the sovereign’s actions. In many ways this anticipates Rousseau’s understanding of the general will as the complete and perfect expression of the people’s highest will, such that each citizen can identify completely with the general will if he or she reflects on the true general interest of the society.

John Locke further oriented Western political philosophy away from the associational basis that had earlier informed its thought and toward the individual as the basic unit of social organization. The Lockean understanding of liberty, central to modern political thought in the West and especially in the Anglophone world, is based on his belief that the individual is primary. For Locke, concepts of property and ownership guide much of his thinking about politics. Liberty, according to Locke, is the ability to dispose of one’s person and property as he or she sees fit, so long as this exercise of freedom does not infringe on the same right of others. The individual’s primary source of rights is his or her right to self-ownership. Liberty in this sense, for Locke, is the natural state, interrupted by perverse social institutions and hierarchies such as the Church and monarchy. The beneficiaries of these traditional institutions rely not on their own productive labor, the source of social and economic value, according to Locke, but on socially constructed power dynamics founded on inherited wealth, birth, and superstition. For Locke, productive labor is an expression of human freedom and also conducive to it. The universal impulse to mix one’s labor and generate property confers a certain spiritual equality among persons and implies individual sovereignty. The desire to protect the fruits of one’s labor is, according to Locke, a major impetus behind the social contract. “The chief end [of civil
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"...society],” Locke says, “is the preservation of property.” The commonwealth has the power to punish transgressions, make laws, and make war and peace, “and all this for the preservation of the property of all the members of that society.”

Locke develops this image of human nature through a hypothetical “state of nature,” in which the primary characteristics of human nature are freedom, equality, and rationality.

Rousseau follows the Hobbesian and Lockean social contract traditions, imagining the individual as the metaphysical cornerstone of a new political order. Hobbes’s Leviathan state is not entirely compatible with the later Enlightenment’s quest for radical personal autonomy, while Locke’s social contract supposes material conditions that would facilitate social hierarchy, seeming to perpetuate many of the old ways that had been institutionalized with the help of a system of inherited wealth. Rousseau’s novel contribution was to propose a political philosophy that would provide the protection and order promised by the Leviathan state while preserving individual freedom and also equality.

The problem of political theory, according to Rousseau, is to “[f]ind a form of association that defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and, by means of which, each one, while uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.” Rousseau hopes to satisfy the Enlightenment demand for emancipation from the bonds of tradition and political hierarchy and also the establishment of perpetually peaceful life in community. As the Romantic movement unfolded, the Enlightenment epistemology and language of reason gave way to a new vocabulary of authenticity and freedom and stressed the importance of an undifferentiated political system. Political order was to be neither an organic, historically evolved kind of order nor a deliberate rational construct, but had to be, if it was to be legitimate, a product of wholly free choice.

While Rousseau challenges many of the Enlightenment’s assumptions, he ultimately shares its fundamental epistemology. His emphasis on radical autonomy supported by a socially atomistic anthropology is largely consistent with Enlightenment voluntarism and rationalism. Cassirer is correct in saying that “Rousseau belongs, in spirit, with the rationalist individualists whom he is supposed to have overcome and denied.” Rousseau adopts an ahistorical approach to political philosophy, employing a theoretical “state of nature” framework to imagine what is politically normative while also preferring the individual as the primary political unit. At the same time, he inspires and taps into a growing desire for communal existence based in an idea of equality and freedom rather than traditional social distinctions. The Social Contract, according to Rousseau, outlines a political theory that resolves the tension between radical individual autonomy and meaningful community:
Since the alienation is made without reservation, the union is as perfect as possible, and no associate has anything further to demand. For if some rights remained with private individuals, in the absence of any common superior who could decide between them and the public, each person would eventually claim to be his own judge in all things, since he is on some particular point his own judge. The state of nature would subsist and the association would necessarily become tyrannical or hollow.

Finally, in giving himself to all, each person gives himself to no one. And since there is no associate over whom he does not acquire the same right that he would grant others over himself, he gains the equivalent of everything he loses, along with a greater amount of force to preserve what he has.22

While the ghost of Hobbes’s Leviathan lingers, Rousseau also points toward a new understanding of sovereignty that emphasizes its popular source. Individual autonomy is preserved at the same time as absolute community is established because all individuals willingly unite in the social compact; none gains over anyone else, and liberty and equality are preserved. All are supposed to benefit by joining. The entire community forms a new “common superior” that is commensurate with the will of each individual: “each person gives himself to no one.”

Rousseau, to a greater degree than Hobbes or Locke, stresses a nonrational or transcendent aspect of the social contract, but his understanding of political order as a deliberate contract belies a similar epistemological commitment to Enlightenment rationalism. Robert Derathé says that “Rousseau is a rationalist aware of the limits of reason.”23 Rousseau relies on both rationality and the primitive voice of nature or the conscience as the forces that will move the people to join the social contract. His own imaginative conception of civic life under the general will illustrates, for example, the importance of the nonrational in his political theory. To believe that the general will is possible and ought to serve as a normative guide to politics is to have a certain faith about what is ultimately possible. Politics, and specifically democracy, according to Rousseau, cannot be reduced to something so banal as the rational calculations of self-interested actors but is a moral and transcendent experience. Exiting the state of nature “produces quite a remarkable change in man,” Rousseau says. “It substitutes justice for instinct in his behavior and gives his actions a moral quality they previously lacked.”24 Rousseau’s understanding of the general will, so central to his thought on democracy, helps further illustrate this tension between rationality and intuition or spirituality in his thinking.
Rousseau differentiates between the will of all, an aggregate of the will of all persons, and the general will, which reflects the people’s highest collective will in an ideal sense. Unfortunately, he never gives a clear definition of the general will, despite the concept’s centrality to his political theory. There are two dominant interpretations of the general will: those who view it as a procedure for generating a political will and those who view it as “an expression of a prior commitment to substantive values.”25 Those who view it as procedure look to Rousseau’s guidelines for eliciting the general will. Those who advance the substantive interpretation of the general will, Williams says, look to Rousseau’s remark that “[w]hat is good and conformable to order is so by the nature of things and independently of human convention,” for example.26 While I agree with Williams that the general will represents an ideal, or is “derived from Rousseau’s commitment to metaphysically prior values,” it seems a false dichotomy.27 As I argue in this book, procedures play no small part in shaping outcomes and already imply substantive commitments. This idea will be important in chapter 4, which analyzes deliberative democracy and the role of “procedural norms.” Rousseau asserts that the deliberation of “a sufficiently informed populace” under the right circumstances (that citizens “have no communication among themselves,” for example) will result in the general will.28 In Rousseau’s mind, these procedures are part of the ideal of the general will and are, in some ways, inseparable from its substance. “[T]he general will is always right,” Rousseau says, “and always tends toward the public utility,” so long as the procedures are followed.29 In the absence of proper procedure, the general will is impossible. 

The notion of an ideal political will—rational or mystical—over and above the people’s apparent will lies at the heart of a dominant Western conception of democracy, here termed “democratism,” and I argue that such a bifurcated understanding of the people’s will can be traced back to Rousseau’s articulation of the general will. One of the underlying, if silent, assumptions of democratism is the idea that the people’s will, properly expressed, is a normative ideal toward which historical democracies must strive. 

The concept of the general will, however, predates Rousseau, and tracing its conceptual origins, which reside in theology, will help shed light on this complex and significant concept. Patrick Riley points out that the seventeenth-century French priest and rationalist Nicolas Malebranche contrasts the “general will” with the “particular will” in a way that anticipates Rousseau’s conception. In Traité de la nature et de la grâce (1680) Malebranche says that it is in the capacity of “him whose wisdom has no limits” to discern the most fruitful general laws. On the other hand, “to act by volontés particulières shows a limited intelligence
which cannot judge the consequences or the effects of less fruitful causes.”\textsuperscript{30} To intuit or interpret the general will is to possess a “broad and penetrating mind.”\textsuperscript{31} Pascal, too, says the particular will “involves disorder and self-love,” and “not to ‘incline’ toward \textit{le général} is ‘unjust’ and ‘depraved.’”\textsuperscript{32} For Malebranche and others, a general will is a godly will for its ability to see the whole and to anticipate the abiding needs of humanity over and above narrow, fleeting passions. For Rousseau and thinkers such as Diderot, the general will retains its original theological connotation of wholeness and perfection, but instead of being attributed to an infinite and omniscient God, it becomes a rational and ahistorical ideal.\textsuperscript{33} Rousseau and others substitute for the will of God an abstract will of humanity universally accessible through reason.

The parallel between an ostensibly secularized concept of the general will and its original theological meaning is striking. Many later thinkers who invoke the concept retain its original normative connotation that the general is to be preferred to the particular. It is around the time of Malebranche that the term “transforms from the divine into the civic.”\textsuperscript{34} Riley says that Malebranche’s use of these terms is “not very different from Rousseau’s characterizations of volon\textit{t}é \textit{général part\textit{iculière}} in \textit{Du Contrat Social} (above all when Rousseau argues that volon\textit{t}é \textit{général}, in the form of general laws, never deals with particular cases).”\textsuperscript{35} For Malebranche, God must legislate through His general will “‘and thus establish a constant and regulated order’ by ‘the simplest means.’”\textsuperscript{36} The Italian scholar Alberto Postigliola, in “De Malebranche à Rousseau: Les Apories de la Volon\textit{t}é Générale et la Revanche du ‘Raisonner Violent’” draws an interesting comparison between Rousseau’s notion of the general will and Malebranche’s. In Malebranche is “the universal and sovereign divine reason, which acts through general wills . . . that conform to general laws which it establishes itself”; in Rousseau is “the sovereignty of the \textit{moi commun} which is exercised through general wills . . . which yield a [system of] legislation.”\textsuperscript{37} For Postigliola, Rousseau, “having appropriated Malebranche’s notion of justice (understood as a rationalist and ‘geometrizing’ generality)”[,] committed the ‘unforgivable’ error of forgetting that the ‘general will’ of a people lacks ‘the divine attribute of infinity.’” Rousseau’s error “consisted precisely in using the epistemological categories of Malebranche . . . while continuing to speak of a generality of the will which could not exist in reality as ‘unalterable and pure’ unless it were the will of an infinite being. . . . In the Rousseauean city, generality cannot fail to be finite, since it can be no more than a sort of finite whole, if not a heterogeneous sum.”\textsuperscript{38} Postigliola’s criticism might similarly apply to kings claiming divine right. God’s will as mediated through the king will necessarily become finite, as the king himself is. Rousseau’s concept of the general will, which also requires mediation, would seem not immune to the charge that his system is another variant of divine right, with the concept of Humanity divinizied and the legislator coronated.
Rousseau’s conception of the general will bears a close resemblance to Malebranche’s characterization of God’s will. “It is not difficult to see in Malebranche’s theological formulation a foundation for Rousseau’s secularized discourse, with the question of salvation replaced by the common good,” Williams observes.39 The theological origins of the general will help to explain the trappings of religion that accompany many modern philosophies of democracy, including Rousseau’s. A civil religion is essential to Rousseau’s theory of democracy with the legislator playing the role formerly reserved for a king enjoying divine right. This is perhaps why many of the democratists examined in this book find spiritual meaning in the cause of democracy and why the Catholic thinker Jacques Maritain, for example, unites the things of God and Caesar in a way that would not have occurred to earlier Christian thinkers.

The so-called democratists that I identify in this book often do not acknowledge the metaphysical assumptions behind their conceptions of the popular will. Their theories of democracy rely to a greater degree than is acknowledged on faith—faith that the general will as imagined may be realized, even in the face of seemingly great historical obstacles. These thinkers often assume that the people are capable of transcending personal perspectives, historical circumstances, and human shortcomings such as selfishness and the desire for power in a way not unlike the divine. *Vox populi, vox Dei.* That the general will has its conceptual origins in metaphysics and theology complicates some of the later democratic theories that rely, consciously or otherwise, on this paradigm.

Scholars who have drawn a connection between Rousseau’s general will and earlier theological ideas of the concept do not address the political and practical implications stemming from its secularization. Riley, to be sure, draws attention to Postigliola’s concerns. And while Williams recounts Riley’s analysis of the general will’s theological origins and sees clearly a connection between Rousseau’s general will and the general will that Malebranche attributes to God, Williams does not suggest how this might complicate our understanding of Rousseau as a political thinker. If, despite Rousseau’s secularization of the concept, the general will is mystical and ultimately spiritual rather than political and historical, then we have reason to doubt that the general will can serve as a valuable guide to politics. There is no reason to believe that the collective will of the people can act in the way that we would imagine a divinity ought to act. Democratists, however, are adamant that, as Joshua Cohen states, a “free community of equals . . . is not an unrealistic utopia beyond human reach, but a genuine human possibility, compatible with our human complexities, and with the demands of social cooperation.”40 Cohen puts this idea to work in his philosophy of deliberative democracy. He mentions the general will’s conceptual origins only in a footnote, but there he contends, “The theological background of the notion of a general will in the idea of universal grace underscores the need for a non-utilitarian, aggregative
interpretation of the common good.” For Cohen, as for others, the theological roots of the general will are not a hindrance to its political conceptualization or implementation, and perhaps are even an asset. I argue, however, that the secularization of a spiritual and theological concept may be deeply problematic as a normative guide for politics. It also may help explain why aspirations for democracy that rest on a Rousseauian conception of the general will are so often hypothetical and unattainable in practice.

**Rousseau’s General Will**

The formal procedures that are to guide the emergence of the general will help reveal its substance. Rousseau describes few specific measures when he introduces the concept in *The Social Contract*, and so those he mentions must be treated as significant. “If, when a sufficiently informed populace deliberates,” Rousseau says, “the citizens were to have no communication among themselves, the general will would always result from the large number of small differences, and the deliberation would always be good.” The two criteria, that the populace be “sufficiently informed” and that citizens abstain from communication, constitute what might be considered the republican and democratic elements in Rousseau’s philosophy of the general will. Yet they are frustratingly vague. The meaning of an informed populace is debatable, but it would seem that Rousseau has in mind at least some basic knowledge of the subjects of deliberation and also that citizens be “informed” in the moral sense of heeding one’s individual conscience—the reason that citizens must have no communication among themselves. Any influence on the individual other than his or her own intuition or reasoning would result in *la volonté de tous*, “the will of all,” merely the sum of individual interests and private opinions.

Partial associations fostering communication promote inequality and stifle freedom, Rousseau believes: “For the general will to be well articulated, it is . . . important that there should be no partial society in the state and that each citizen make up his own mind.” The general will must apply equally to all citizens and be in the best interest of the whole of society. Rousseau seems to borrow this idea from the earlier, theological conception of the general will. God establishes “laws which are very simple and very general,” Malebranche had said. For Rousseau, all human beings, especially those of “simple morals,” are able to discern the general will. It is a universal. Rousseau is not clear about precisely how citizens access the general will, but it seems to be through something like the conscience, as Williams suggests. It is this law written on the heart that enables citizens to intuit or reason the general will. Williams claims that “an objective or even transcendent conception of justice is part of the core meaning of
the general will." In order to access this universal, Rousseau indicates that it is necessary to shed the accumulations of history and culture and listen to an inner voice. One of the reasons that Rousseau distrusts “learned men and orators” is their tendency to lead us away from this inner voice through refined language and sophistry. “Man’s first language, the most universal, the most energetic, and the only language he needed before it was necessary to persuade men assembled together, is the cry of nature,” Rousseau says in the “Discourse on Inequality.”

Preventing communication is important to the formation of the general will because, according to Rousseau, it encourages citizens to heed the voice of nature or reason rather than social prejudices. To consult one another or to consult social norms for guidance would result in a fracturing of the body politic into so many divided interests and loyalties. It is in this criterion that we gain a better understanding of Rousseau’s definition of freedom. That citizens exercise a free will is essential to the unfolding of the general will. But this freedom is precarious: “Myriad obstacles threaten it [free will] from all imaginable angles.” The corrupting forces of ambition, money, and seeking public approval represent “a constant threat hovering over Rousseau’s republic and the governance of the general will.”

Rousseau’s understanding of freedom is a complicated one. At one point in *The Social Contract* he states, “[T]he philosophical meaning of the word liberty is not part of my subject here.” But in an important way it is part of his subject. Rousseau takes for granted a particular understanding of liberty that is sharply at odds with other, earlier conceptions of the term, and this is important for understanding the revolutionary implications of his political philosophy. For Rousseau, traditional social custom and norms, religion, and even family life represent obstacles to liberty as he interprets it. Such norms are based in illegitimate power relationships. “Since no man has a natural authority over his fellowman,” Rousseau says, “agreements alone therefore remain as the basis of all legitimate authority among men.” Instead, “obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is liberty,” Rousseau says in *The Social Contract*. This amounts to emancipation from the “slavery” of all-consuming appetites. Paradoxically, it is through obedience to one’s own law that one also participates in the general will and there finds a virtuous life. Virtue, Rousseau says, is “merely [the] conformity of the private to the general will.” Yet despite his belief that traditional social mores and taboos are illegitimate sources of moral authority, Rousseau still believes that civil society tempers the instincts and passions that otherwise constitute freedom in his state of nature. Indeed “sublime virtue” is required to distinguish the general will from the private will, Rousseau says. While all persons are capable of discerning the general will—“it is necessary simply to be just to be assured of following the general will”—presumably not all possess the exquisite virtue required to do so. Thus, Rousseau devises an elaborate substitute