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The Production of Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon on Civil Society and Democracy

Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Samuel Moyn, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 294 pp.

Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Demands of Liberty: Civil Society in France Since the Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 354 pp.

Pierre Rosanvallon is one of France's major scholars of civil society. His interest in that concept is rooted not in observations about bowling leagues or in frustration with the anomie of liberal societies, but in the experience of the labor movement—in particular, in the debates about self-management (*autogestion*) that re-shaped the French left in the wake of the events of 1968. During those years, Rosanvallon held a position as a “house intellectual” at the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail, France's democratic-left trade union confederation, where he won public notice as a leading theorist of *autogestion* (DPF, p. 6).¹ Rosanvallon's work today flows out of the debates around that concept.

What remains of the ideal of *autogestion*, Rosanvallon declares, is not any prospect for a radically democratic escape from market economics or for immediate or direct democracy.² Rather, the *autogestion* debates left behind “a new and more political way of thinking about the role of associations” (DL, p. 257). Rosanvallon seeks to appreciate the democratic role of

¹ I will cite the works under review in parentheses within the text, using the abbreviations DL for *The Demands of Liberty* and DPF for *Democracy Past and Future*. For introductions to the concept of *autogestion*, see Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 36-42, and Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (New York: The New Press, 1996), pp. 535-540. Samuel Moyn's introduction to DPF, especially pp. 6-7, is also useful in this regard.

² On the distinction between immediate democracy (the rejection of any institutional interface between the people and their collective expression) and direct democracy (the rejection of any separation between the people's legislative role and the functions of executive power), see DL, pp. 5 and 39, and DPF, p. 205-206.

associations outside the state without denigrating representative institutions. He sees what he has called “the production of solidarity” as the central question for the future of democracy,³ and he offers a political theory that takes democracy as a project rather than a model. He is able to develop these ideas in relation to each other because he expects something quite different from civil society than do many other contemporary civil society theorists.

Rosanvallon calls his method “the philosophical history of the political” (DPF, p. 60 and *passim*). His approach shares with much contemporary political theory a concern with fundamental questions about the meaning of and prospects for democracy in modern politics. However, Rosanvallon does not fit easily into the familiar factions of that discipline. He is critical of the normative orientation of democratic theorists such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, and he draws heavily on the legacies of Aristotle and Alexis de Tocqueville without joining the civic republican school. Rosanvallon’s work attends to the intertwined developments of ideas, political institutions, and social life in a way similar to the work of the historical institutionalists, but unlike their works Rosanvallon’s has a distinctly philosophical purpose.

The central themes of Rosanvallon’s recent work have been the propositions that “the political” (a concept he inherited from his teacher Claude Lefort) be understood as “the process whereby a human collectivity...progressively takes on the face of an actual community,” and that democracy be seen as that form of the political “in which the conditions of life in common are not defined *a priori*, engraved in a tradition, or imposed by an authority” (DPF, pp. 34-36). Democracy, in other words, is not for Rosanvallon an established fact of popular sovereignty but the process through which a sovereign people continually institutes itself.⁴ Popular sovereignty

³ Pierre Rosanvallon, *The New Social Question: Rethinking the Welfare State*, trans. Barbara Harshaw (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 34.

⁴ Moyn notes that Rosanvallon uses “institution” to mean “a process—less conscious and instantaneous than foundation or revolution—by which human collectivities come about” (DPF, p. 27-28).

remains the core of democratic politics, but sovereignty must not be understood as Jean-Jacques Rousseau understood it, as the expression of a single general will that incorporates and supersedes all partial or particular wills. Popular sovereignty must instead mean a “complex sovereignty” articulated through multiple institutions and organizations (DPF, pp. 199-204 and *passim*). If Rosanvallon, like Walt Whitman, were to hear the people singing, he would hear polyphony.

The idea of complex sovereignty allows Rosanvallon to appreciate political life outside the state as part of the self-institution of the sovereign people. Civil society activity matters to democracy, Rosanvallon suggests, because it is a means through which social solidarity can be generated. Associational life shows us “the people in the process of organizing themselves” (DL, p. 258, quoting René Lenoir). This organizing process never yields a definitive form: for Rosanvallon, democracy is more a problem to work on than a solution to any problem.

Democracy Past and Future is a collection of ten essays (with an introduction by Samuel Moyn and a postscript by Rosanvallon) introducing Rosanvallon to American readers. The essays are paired under five headings: “The Study of Politics in History,” “The Voluntarist Drive to Unity,” “The Allure of Rationalism,” “Civil Society,” and “The Future of Democracy.” Six were originally published within the past decade; two are from earlier in the 1990s, one from the 1980s and one from the late 1970s. Together, they present Rosanvallon’s methodology and the main lines of his argument about complex sovereignty.

The French political tradition, Rosanvallon writes, has been characterized by a pathological conflict between Rousseauian democratic voluntarism and liberal rationalism (DPF, p. 127). Where English (and American) Enlightenment liberalism battled arbitrary rule through representative institutions, he argues, French liberalism sought to establish the rule of reason—

which in practice has always meant rule by an elite and adherence to “the cult of law” (DPF, p. 130). Not content to choose between the alternatives of “utopian democracy” and “meritocratic liberalism” (DPF, p. 142), Rosanvallon wants to move beyond both by placing civil society at the center of democratic theory and practice. This is not simply a normative argument, however: for Rosanvallon, the conflict between voluntarism and rationalism has been superseded as civil society has come into its own.

Rosanvallon’s understanding of civil society is shaped by Lefort’s anti-totalitarian political theory. Like Lefort, Hannah Arendt, and others associated with the critique of totalitarianism, Rosanvallon sees Marx’s notion of the “withering away of the state” as fundamentally anti-political. Moreover, Rosanvallon argues that Marx is the “natural heir” of Adam Smith, whose ideal of market liberalism was the quintessential modern dream of a wholly self-regulating society (DPF, pp. 152-153).⁵

Rosanvallon’s alternative to Smith and Marx is an understanding of the political as that set of activities that institutes the social, rather than as a reflection of or superstructure over the social. This means setting aside both Smith’s vision of a market that regulates itself and Marx’s notion of democracy as “a society immediate to itself” (DPF, p. 163). Democracy, Rosanvallon writes,

need not involve the utopia of a unified people and a general will that it is simply a straightforward matter of recognizing and activating; instead, it has to be imagined as a combat that will never have finished with its difficulties or even with the search for its object (DPF, p. 159).

⁵ Rosanvallon is responding here to Marx’s grand theory, not to those passages in his writings—such as the first two parts of the *Communist Manifesto*—that had the most inspiring influence on the nineteenth century labor movement, and thus could hardly be considered anti-political. Without disagreeing with Rosanvallon, it might still be possible to see such passages as offering something quite political indeed—at least as long as we recognize the extent to which those passages are out of step with Marx’s larger arguments. This is not the place to engage these debates in detail, however.

If democracy's sovereign people are always in the process of instituting themselves, then no single body can speak as if it represents an already-instituted people. Rosanvallon argues that there are many forms of representation through which popular sovereignty can be expressed. Voting is one of them, but social movements and civil society associations—and even judicial activity—can be as well.

The concept of complex sovereignty has a normative purpose as well as a basis in the real experience of modern democracies. Rosanvallon's central concern is the question of solidarity—the question of how a collectivity institutes itself—and he suggests that the multiple forms of democratic participation comprehended by complex sovereignty can weld citizens into a “community of sentiment.” This “solidarity of citizenship” is instituted through all the democratic venues available to modern citizens, because all of these help to institute the sovereign people. But participation alone does not create “a life in common” for these citizens. For that, Rosanvallon argues, it is necessary to build a “community of redistribution,” which means in practice a welfare state (DPF, p. 229).⁶ Any vision of socialism that seeks to express a Rousseauian voluntarism is dead today, Rosanvallon insists, but the project of a democratic quest for “life in common” and the vision of society as a “community of redistribution” lives, and such a quest must look to civil society if it is to produce the solidarities that will constitute its day-to-day political practice. Civil society, for Rosanvallon, is important for the future of democracy not because it eases the loneliness of liberal society (as communitarians might have it) or because it is the site of a rational pursuit of consensus (as deliberative democrats might propose) but

⁶ The role of the welfare state in producing solidarity is a theme that Rosanvallon also pursues in *The New Social Question*. There, he proposes that the “traditional principles of social solidarity” that founded the welfare state have disintegrated, thrusting the welfare state into a “philosophical crisis” (pp. 3-4), and he argues that a restructured welfare state might regenerate social solidarity. The specific policy claims he draws from this argument already seem dated, but the book remains a striking model of Rosanvallon's method of philosophical history.

because by participating in associations citizens help to institute a complex and pluralistic sovereign people.

A key question, then, is how civil society has been organized or stunted, pursued or denied. In *The Demands of Liberty*, Rosanvallon applies his method of philosophical history to the emergence of civil society in France. He argues that the Jacobin model of “generality”—that is, a politics based on a unitary general will—has dominated French politics and political thinking since the Revolution but that this model has always been countered in practice by the fact of plurality and change in the real life of society. Rosanvallon sees the history of associational life in France as a long fight against the generalist model, a model that has made reform movements difficult to legitimate, leaving the French left all too often mired in an inauthentic rhetoric of total revolution.

Although French law and political culture after the Revolution were hostile to any association other than *la nation*, “political societies, charitable associations, student groups, and literary societies” as well as a range of other clubs and mutual aid societies nevertheless grew throughout the nineteenth century (DL, p. 186). The great breakthrough for freedom of association came in 1884, when trade unions won legal recognition—largely, it seems, in response to the strike wave of the 1870s and early 1880s. This reform paved the way for a broad recognition of the freedom of association in 1901 (DL, p. 186). Since then, Rosanvallon writes, the French political model has become more pragmatic and flexible, allowing for various forms of associations below the level of the nation, even though French political culture is still oriented largely by the ideal of the general will and most forms of associations in France are faced with limits on their property-owning and public activities far more stringent than those on non-profit organizations in the US.

Rosanvallon's narrative is historical and developmental, but as in his other works his method of philosophical history raises normative themes. When "the political world [claims] to be the sole embodiment of social interest," Rosanvallon writes, there emerges "a certain illiberal tendency" (DL, p. 264). Since associations have a role in the constitution of the sovereign people, Rosanvallon proposes, it is incumbent on the French today to eliminate "all the old prejudices against civil society organizations" (DL, p. 265). Rosanvallon defends the democratic legitimacy of organizations that represent their own members or attend to problems that might not concern everyone—that do not claim to speak for the general will—and he grounds their legitimacy in the idea that they generate social solidarity and help to define the ever-shifting sovereign people.

It is clear here how much Rosanvallon has been influenced by the labor movement, but labor's impact on his thought goes farther than this. During the debates about *autogestion*, Rosanvallon writes, one phrase came to seem "emblematic" of the times: "*syndicalisme du cadre de vie*" (DL, p. 260; emphasis in the original). The expression can be roughly translated as "trade unionism as a framework for life" or perhaps "trade unionism as a habitat." Rosanvallon explains that it denoted "an extension of the trade union model (of functional representation)" to civil society associations (DL, p. 260). The phrase seems to gesture toward a society in which the traditions and practices of trade unionism might feel like a home within which new democratic projects could be lived out.

Rosanvallon's reference to "functional representation" is significant. Unions are representative not because they subject every decision to an internal referendum but because they function as countervailing powers. By carrying out their most fundamental daily activities, they ensure that employers are not the only holders of power in the workplace. Rosanvallon, it seems,

wants associations in civil society to carry out a comparable democratic function. He is most interested in trade unions not because of the content of their demands regarding wages, benefits, working conditions, and the welfare state, but because of their practices: he is concerned with process more than with substance.

This priority of process over substance recurs throughout Rosanvallon's work. It is epitomized, perhaps, by his understanding of democracy as that form of the political that is most open-ended and self-defining. This indeterminacy is what allows Rosanvallon to trace philosophical history so elegantly and to conceive of civil society as an essential element of democratic politics without falling into either a complacent communitarianism or a debilitating *anarchisant* radicalism. But the problem for Rosanvallon is that it is hard to think through the problems of contemporary associations without a richer account of the substance of their concerns.

Rosanvallon notes that since the 1970s unions in France (as in the US and elsewhere, we might add) have been weakened even while some kinds of civil society associations have become stronger (DL, p. 255). This is no incidental detail. The decline of union membership marks a fissure in Rosanvallon's democratic theory. It seems reasonable to posit that unions are under assault today because they institute the sovereign people in a way that wins them powerful enemies, and it seems fair to claim that few civil society associations challenge institutionalized power in such threatening ways. In other words, the trade union model of functional representation, which Rosanvallon identifies as a blueprint for the representative role of associations in general, involves the unsettling of existing power relations. The problems unions face might suggest the limits under which civil society can exercise its democratic capacities without arousing fierce opposition.

Rosanvallon argues convincingly that participation in civil society can represent the popular will and that the welfare state can generate solidarity. But the solidarities that inspire participation in the first place, that fuel the political movements that win social rights, must come from somewhere. Organizers have often reported that to build their associations they must attend to the substance of people's grievances. Rosanvallon writes:

If politics is conceived...as the work of society on itself, then...[s]ubstance and procedure blend, in the end, to make democratic progress connect with the deepening of the exigency for social justice (DPF, p. 251).

Rosanvallon is usually an admirably direct writer, but this passage begs the question of *how* democratic processes are to be connected to demands for social justice. To speak of the democratic role of associations today, especially if we follow Rosanvallon in taking the trade union as our conceptual model of associational life, is necessarily to talk about why we might want to take the risks and make the sacrifices of membership—especially in the face of difficulties as severe as those unions face in a neoliberal era.

Rosanvallon calls on us “to find practical engagement in a democracy conceived as a social activity,” and he recognizes that to do so means to seek a “communion of the ideals of democracy with those of socialism” (DPF, p. 250-251). If we are to seek this engagement and this communion, we may well need something like Rosanvallon's theory of democracy as complex sovereignty, illuminated by a philosophical history of political. We may also, however, need a more robust understanding of power and of the substantive grievances of our fellow citizens than Rosanvallon is able to help us develop.

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