

12
Michael Walzer

Obligations

**Essays on Disobedience,
War, and Citizenship**



A CLARION BOOK
Published by Simon and Schuster

tension between political responsibility and personal privacy. Something must be said here of the rights of the ardent non-citizen: hence the last of these essays. I do not need to say much, for the noncitizen usually finds his own ways to escape the moralizing of political men.

II A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen

Imagine a day in the life of a socialist citizen. He hunts in the morning, fishes in the afternoon, rears cattle in the evening, and plays the critic after dinner. Yet he is neither hunter, fisherman, shepherd, nor critic; tomorrow he may select another set of activities, just as he pleases. This is the delightful portrait that Marx sketches in *The German Ideology* as part of a polemic against the division of labor.¹ Socialists since have worried that it is not economically feasible; perhaps it is not. But there is another difficulty that I want to consider: that is, the curiously apolitical character of the citizen Marx describes. Certain crucial features of socialist life have been omitted altogether.

In light of the contemporary interest in participatory democracy, Marx's sketch needs to be elaborated. Before hunting in the morning, this unalienated man of the future is likely to attend a meeting of the Council on Animal Life, where he will be required to vote on important matters relating to the stocking of the forests. The meeting will probably not end much before noon, for among the many-sided citizens there will always be a lively interest even in highly technical problems. Immediately after lunch, a special session of the Fish-

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. R. Pascal (New York, 1947), p. 22.

ermen's Council will be called to protest the maximum catch recently voted by the Regional Planning Commission, and the Marxist man will participate eagerly in these debates, even postponing a scheduled discussion of some contradictory theses on cattle-rearing. Indeed, he will probably love argument far better than hunting, fishing, or rearing cattle. The debates will go on so long that the citizens will have to rush through dinner in order to assume their role as critics. Then off they will go to meetings of study groups, clubs, editorial boards, and political parties where criticism will be carried on long into the night.

Oscar Wilde is supposed to have said that socialism would take too many evenings. This is, it seems to me, one of the most significant criticisms of socialist theory that has ever been made. The fanciful sketch above is only intended to suggest its possible truth. Socialism's great appeal is the prospect it holds out for the development of human capacities. An enormous growth of creative talent, a new and unprecedented variety of expression, a wild proliferation of sects, associations, schools, parties: this will be the flowering of the future society. But underlying this new individualism and exciting group life must be a broad, self-governing community of equal men. A powerful figure looms behind Marx's hunter, fisherman, shepherd, and critic: the busy citizen attending his endless meetings. "Society regulates the general production," Marx writes, "and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow."² If society is not to become an alien and dangerous force, however, the citizens cannot accept its regulation and gratefully do what they please. They must participate in social regulation; they must be social men, organizing and planning their own fulfillment in spontaneous activity. The purpose of Wilde's objection is to suggest that just this self-regulation is incompatible with spontaneity, that the requirements of citizenship are incompatible with the freedom of hunter, fisherman, and so on.

Politics itself, of course, can be a spontaneous activity,

² *German Ideology*, p. 22.

freely chosen by those men and women who enjoy it and to whose talents a meeting is so much exercise. But this is very unlikely to be true of all men and women all the time—even if one were to admit what seems plausible enough: that political life is more intrinsic to human nature than is hunting and cattle-rearing or even (to drop Marx's rural imagery) art or music. "Too many evenings" is a shorthand phrase that describes something more than the sometimes tedious, sometimes exciting business of resolutions and debates. It suggests also that socialism and participatory democracy will depend upon, and hence require, an extraordinary willingness to attend meetings, and a public spirit and sense of responsibility that will make attendance dependable and activity consistent and sustained. None of this can rest for any long period of time or among any substantial group of men upon spontaneous interest. Nor does it seem possible that spontaneity will flourish above and beyond the routines of social regulation.

Self-government is a very demanding and time-consuming business, and when it is extended from political to economic and cultural life, and when the organs of government are decentralized so as to maximize participation, it will inevitably become more demanding still. Ultimately, it may well require almost continuous activity, and life will become a succession of meetings. When will there be time for the cultivation of personal creativity or the free association of like-minded friends? In the world of the meeting, when will there be time for the tête-à-tête?

I suppose there will always be time for the tête-à-tête. Men and women will secretly plan love affairs even while public business is being transacted. But Wilde's objection is not silly. The idea of citizenship on the Left has always been overwhelming, suggesting a positive frenzy of activity and often involving the repression of all feelings except political ones. Its character can best be examined in the work of Rousseau, from whom socialists and, more recently, New Leftists directly or indirectly inherited it. In order to guarantee public-spiritedness and political participation, and as a part of his

critique of bourgeois egotism, Rousseau systematically denigrated the value of private life:

The better the constitution of a state is, the more do public affairs encroach on private in the minds of the citizens. Private affairs are even of much less importance, because the aggregate of the common happiness furnishes a greater proportion of that of each individual, so that there is less for him to seek in particular cares.³

Rousseau might well have written these lines out of a deep awareness that private life will not, in fact, bear the great weight that bourgeois society places upon it. We need, beyond our families and jobs, a public world where purposes are shared and cooperative activity is possible. More likely, however, he wrote them because he believed that cooperative activity could not be sustained unless private life were radically repressed, if not altogether eradicated. His citizen does not participate in social regulation as one part of a round of activities. Social regulation is his entire life. Rousseau develops his own critique of the division of labor by absorbing all human activities into the idea of citizenship: "Citizens," he wrote, "are neither lawyers, nor soldiers, nor priests by profession; they perform all these functions as a matter of duty."⁴ As a matter of duty: here is the key to the character of that patriotic, responsible, energetic man who has figured also in socialist thought, but always in the guise of a new man, freely exercising his human powers.

It is probably more realistic to see the citizen as the product of collective repression and self-discipline. He is, above all, dutiful, and this is only possible if he has triumphed over egotism and impulse in his own personality. He embodies what political theorists have called "republican virtue"—that

means, he puts the common good, the success of the movement, the safety of the community, above his own delight or well-being, *always*. To symbolize his virtue, perhaps, he adopts an ascetic style and gives up every sort of self-decoration: he wears sans-culottes or unpressed khakis. More important, he foregoes a conventional career for the profession of politics; he commits himself entirely. It is an act of the most extreme devotion. Now, how is such a man produced? What kind of conversion is necessary? Or what kind of rigorous training?

Rousseau set out to create virtuous citizens, and the means he chose are very old in the history of republicanism: an authoritarian family, a rigid sexual code, censorship of the arts, sumptuary laws, mutual surveillance, the systematic indoctrination of children. All these have been associated historically (at least until recent times) not with tyrannical but with republican regimes: Greece and Rome, the Swiss Protestant city-states, the first French republic. Tyrannies and oligarchies, Rousseau argued, might tolerate or even encourage license, for the effect of sexual indulgence, artistic freedom, extravagant self-decoration, and privacy itself was to corrupt men and turn them away from public life, leaving government to the few. Self-government requires self-control: it is one of the oldest arguments in the history of political thought.⁵

If that argument is true, it may mean that self-government also leaves government to the few. At least, this may be so if we reject the disciplinary or coercive features of Rousseau's republicanism and insist that citizens always have the right to choose between participation and passivity. Their obligations follow from their choices and do not precede them, so the state cannot impose one or the other choice; it cannot force the citizens to be self-governing men and women. Then only those citizens will be activists who volunteer for action. How many will that be? How many of the people you and I know? How many ought they to be? Certainly no radical movement

⁵ It is sympathetically restated by Alan Bloom in his introduction to Rousseau's *Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*, in *Politics and the Arts* (Glencoe, Illinois, 1960), pp. xv-xxxviii.

³ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, bk. III, chap. 15.

⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, in *Political Writings*, trans. Frederick Watkins (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 220.

or socialist society is possible without those ever-ready participants, who "fly," as Rousseau said, "to the public assemblies."⁶ Radicalism and socialism make political activity for the first time an option for all those who relish it and a duty—sometimes—even for those who do not. But what a suffocating sense of responsibility, what a plethora of virtue would be necessary to sustain the participation of everybody all the time! How exhausting it would be! Surely there is something to be said for the irresponsible nonparticipant and something also for the part-time activist, the half-virtuous man (and the most scorned among the militants), who appears and disappears, thinking of Marx and then of his dinner? The very least that can be said is that these people, unlike the poor, will always be with us.

We can assume that a great many citizens, in the best of societies, will do all they can to avoid what Melvin Tumin has called "the merciless masochism of community-minded and self-regulating men and women."⁷ While the necessary meetings go on and on, they will take long walks, play with their children, paint pictures, make love, and watch television. They will attend sometimes, when their interests are directly at stake or when they feel like it. But they will not make the full-scale commitment necessary for socialism or participatory democracy. How are these people to be represented at the meetings? What are their rights? These are not only problems of the future, when popular participation has finally been established as the core of political and economic life. They come up in every radical movement; they are the stuff of contemporary controversy.

Many people feel that they ought to join this or that political movement; they do join; they contribute time and energy—but unequally. Some make a full-time commitment; they work every minute; the movement becomes their whole life and they often come to disbelieve in the moral validity of life out-

⁶ *Social Contract*, bk. III, chap. 15.

⁷ Melvin Tumin, "Comment on Papers by Riesman, Sills, and Tax," in *Human Organization*, 18:28.

side. Others are established outside, solidly or precariously; they snatch hours and sometimes days; they harry their families and skimp on their jobs, but yet cannot make it to every meeting. Still others attend scarcely any meetings at all; they work hard but occasionally; they show up, perhaps, at critical moments, then they are gone. These last two groups make up the majority of the people available to the movement (any movement), just as they will make up the majority of the citizens of any socialist society. Radical politics radically increases the amount and intensity of political participation, but it does not (and probably ought not) break through the limits imposed on republican virtue by the inevitable pluralism of commitments, the terrible shortage of time, and the day-to-day hedonism of ordinary men and women.

Under these circumstances, words like citizenship and participation may actually describe the enfranchisement of only a part, and not necessarily a large part, of the movement or the community. Participatory democracy means the sharing of power among the activists. Socialism means the rule of the men with the most evenings to spare. Both imply, of course, an injunction to the others: join us, come to the meetings, participate! Sometimes young radicals sound very much like old Christians, demanding the severance of every tie for the sake of politics. "How many Christian women are there," John Calvin once wrote, "who are held captive by their children!"⁸ How many "community people" miss meetings because of their families! But there is nothing to be done. Ardent democrats have sometimes urged that citizens be legally required to vote: that is possible, though the device is not attractive. Requiring people to attend meetings, to join in discussions, to govern themselves: that is not possible, at least not in a free society. And if they do not govern themselves, they will, willy-nilly, be governed by their activist fellows. The apathetic, the

⁸ John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. David Constable (Edinburgh, 1855), I, 371. Of all alternate communities, the family is clearly the greatest danger to the movement and the state. That is not only because of the force of familial loyalty, but also because the family is a place of retreat from political battles: we go home to rest, to sleep.

occasional enthusiasts, the part-time workers: all of them will be ruled by full-timers, militants, and professionals.

But if only some citizens participate in political life, it is essential that they always remember and be regularly reminded that they are . . . only some. This is not easy to arrange. The militant in the movement, for example, does not represent anybody; it is his great virtue that he is self-chosen, a volunteer. But since he sacrifices so much for his fellowmen, he readily persuades himself that he is acting in their name. He takes their failure to put in an appearance only as a token of their oppression. He is certain he is their agent, or rather, the agent of their liberation. He is not in any simple sense wrong. The small numbers of participating citizens in the U.S. today, the widespread fearfulness, the sense of impotence and irrelevance: all these are signs of social sickness. Self-government is an important human function, an exercise of significant talents and energies, and the sense of power and responsibility it brings is enormously healthy. A certain amount of commitment and discipline, of not-quite-merciless masochism, is socially desirable and efforts to evoke it are socially justifiable.

But many of the people who stay away from meetings do so for reasons that the militants do not understand or will not acknowledge. They stay away not because they are beaten, afraid, uneducated, lacking confidence and skills (though these are often important reasons), but because they have made other commitments; they have found ways to cope short of politics; they have created viable subcultures even in an oppressive world. They may lend passive support to the movement and help out occasionally, but they will not work, nor are their needs and aspirations in any sense embodied by the militants who will.

The militants represent themselves. If the movement is to be democratic, the others must *be represented*. The same thing will be true in any future socialist society: participatory democracy has to be paralleled by representative democracy. I am not sure precisely how to adjust the two; I am sure that

they have to be adjusted. Somehow power must be distributed, as it is not today, to groups of active and interested citizens, but these citizens must themselves be made responsible to a larger electorate (the membership, that is, of the state, movement, union, or party). Nothing is more important than that responsibility; without it we will only get one or another sort of activist or *apparatchik* tyranny. And that we have already.

Nonparticipants have rights; it is one of the dangers of participatory democracy that it would fail to provide any effective protection for these rights. But nonparticipants also have functions; it is another danger that these would not be sufficiently valued. For many people in America today, politics is something to watch, an exciting spectacle, and there exists between the activists and the others something of the relation of actor and audience. Now for any democrat this is an unsatisfactory relation. We rightly resent the way actors play upon and manipulate the feelings of their audiences. We dislike the aura of magic and mystification contrived at on stage. We would prefer politics to be like the new drama with its alienation effects and its audience participation. That is fair enough. But even the new drama requires its audience, and we ought not to forget that audiences can be critical as well as admiring, enlightened as well as mystified. More important, political actors, like actors in the theater, need the control and tension imposed by audiences, the knowledge that tomorrow the reviews will appear, tomorrow people will come or not come to watch their performance. Too often, of course, the reviews are favorable and the audiences come. That is because of the various sorts of collusion which presently develop between small and co-opted cliques of actors and critics. But in an entirely free society, there would be many more political actors and critics than ever before, and they would, presumably, be self-chosen. Not only the participants, but also the nonparticipants, would come into their own. Alongside the democratic politics of shared work and perpetual activism, there would arise the open and leisurely cul-

ture of part-time work, criticism, second-guessing, and burlesque. And into this culture might well be drawn many of the alienated citizens of today. The modes of criticism will become the forms of their participation and their involvement in the drama the measure of their responsibility.

It would be a great mistake to underestimate the importance of criticism as a kind of politics, even if the critics are not always marked, as they will not be, by "republican virtue." It is far more important in the political arena than in the theater. For activists and professionals in the movement or the polity do not simply contrive effects; their work has more palpable results. Their policies touch us all in material ways, whether we go or do not go to the meetings. Indeed, those who do not go may well turn out to be more effective critics than those who do: no one who was one of its "first guessers" can usefully second-guess a decision. That is why the best critics in a liberal society are men-out-of-office. In a radically democratic society they would be men who stay away from meetings, perhaps for months at a time, and only then discover that something outrageous has been perpetrated that must be mocked or protested. The proper response to such protests is not to tell the laggard citizens that they should have been active these past many months, not to nag them to do work that they do not enjoy and in any case will not do well, but to listen to what they have to say. After all, what would democratic politics be like without its kibitzers?

Index

- Action: on behalf of others, 52-59
- Alien, alienage, 13-15, 100-113
- Alienation, 100, 112-119, 187, 217, 226-227, 238
- Arendt, Hannah, 68n.
- Aristotle, 19-20; on citizenship, 135n., 211, 211n., 213; on suicide, 170-174, 176
- Associations. *See* Secondary associations
- Athens, 106, 173-175, 209
- Australia, 118n.
- Authenticity, 52-53, 196n. *See also* Honor
- Auto workers, 36-43
- Bedau, Hugo, 3
- Blackstone, Sir William, 101-102, 112, 115; on suicide, 170-173, 176-177, 186
- Blanquists, 55
- Bodin, Jean, 205-207, 205n., 210-212
- Boule, Pierre, 165
- Brecht, Bertolt, 82, 181, 192
- Camus, Albert, 97, 189
- Castro, Fidel, 172-173, 180, 181, 183
- Civil disobedience, 11-12, 17-18, 20-22, 24, 43-45, 140-144; and corporate authority, 24-45
- Clark, Mark, 161
- Cleaver, Eldridge, 72-73
- Code of Conduct*, U.S., 149, 152-156, 160-161
- Coercion, 30-31, 39-40; and surrender, 150, 150n.
- Cohen, Carl, 129-130
- Commitment, x, 5, 9, 36, 53-59, 67, 139, 180-185, 192-194, 201, 233. *See also* Consent; Participation
- Communist Party, 182, 192-193, 195, 197, 200
- Conscience, 5, 121-124, 128-132, 144-145, 196
- Conscientious objection, 12, 19, 119, 120-145
- Conscription, 106-110, 116-119, 120-121, 136-138, 143-145, 158
- Consent, x-xvi, 7-10, 19, 108, 111, 193-194; tacit, xi, 28-29, 100-106, 110-117. *See also* Commitment; Participation; Social contract
- Contract. *See* Social contract
- Coriolanus, 200
- Corporations, 26-36
- Auto workers, 36-43
- Bedau, Hugo, 3
- Blackstone, Sir William, 101-102, 112, 115; on suicide, 170-173, 176-177, 186
- Blanquists, 55
- Bodin, Jean, 205-207, 205n., 210-212
- Boule, Pierre, 165
- Brecht, Bertolt, 82, 181, 192
- Camus, Albert, 97, 189
- Castro, Fidel, 172-173, 180, 181, 183
- Civil disobedience, 11-12, 17-