

*Capitalist democracy: elective affinity  
or beguiling illusion?*

We are not, as some fondly suppose, all democrats today because of our unerring taste. The honorific prevalence of democracy in modern political speech is a historical product, like the market economies now commonly seen as its necessary complement. The regime title *democracy*, which now dominates the struggle for political legitimacy, is not a definite and coherent political form, nor has it been adopted so widely because it has some irresistible allure.<sup>1</sup> We are still some way short of fathoming the political meaning of the word's passage through space and time, or seeing just how its insistent rise relates to the concurrent ascent of capitalist economic institutions.<sup>2</sup>

This much is clear: while, in America, Tom Paine and James Madison both imagined that a commercial society

could coexist happily with a representative republic, others elsewhere, from Filippo Buonarroti and the first Duke of Wellington in the 1830s to the Guild Socialist G. D. H. Cole in the 1920s, were just as certain that the inequalities generated by a market economy were incompatible with a truly *democratic* republic.<sup>3</sup> Whatever else may be

1 John Dunn, *Setting the People Free* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005); John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006).

2 John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). Here, as elsewhere, I cite my own texts, plainly, not as authorities for the judgments conveyed but to indicate where to find my reasons for making them.

3 For a brief moment of particular clarity in the drawing of the lines of battle, see Dunn, *Setting the People Free*, chap. 3. For Buonarroti's own striking picture of the basis of alignment, see Filippo Michele Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l'égalité dite de Babeuf*, vol. 1 (Paris: Editions sociales, 1957), 25–28. For Wellington:

[A] democracy . . . has never been established in any part of the world, that has not immediately declared war against property – against the payment of the public debt – and against all the principles of conservation, which are secured by, and are, in fact, the principal objects of the British constitution,

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said against it (and always can and probably always should be), capitalism has shown itself convincingly over the last two centuries a much less imprudent way of organizing some of the more fundamental aspects of economic life than any vaguely specifiable rival.<sup>4</sup> It frames all our lives, and it is to more or less adroit modulations of its dynamics that we must look for any hope of reversing its cumulatively disastrous impact on the setting in which we and all our foreseeable descendants will have to live.<sup>5</sup>

In the struggle to make these adjustments, the toxic and deeply confused character of our current understandings of democracy is a formidable impediment. Until we learn to distinguish better among the elements in our understanding of democracy that do and should attract us, those on which it is wise for us to rely, those that often do not or certainly should not attract us, and those on which it would be demented for us to rely, our political approach to the challenge of fostering our collective survival will remain the shambles that for the present it unmistakably is.

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as it now exists. Property, and its possessors, will become the common enemy.

Speech against the Great Reform Bill in the House of Lords, October 4, 1831, in George Henry Francis, *Maxims and Opinions of Field-Marshal, His Grace, The Duke of Wellington* (London: H. Colburn, 1845), 253.

4 John Dunn, "The Identity of the Bourgeois Liberal Republic," in Biancamaria Fontana, ed., *The Invention of the Modern Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 206–225.

5 John Dunn, "The Emergence into Politics of Global Environmental Change," in Ted Munn, ed., *Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change*, vol. 5 (London: John Wiley, 2002), 124–136.

When Buonarroti, in 1828, looked back on the French Revolution, the aged and by then compulsive conspirator drew a shimmering contrast between two shapes, or orders, within which human beings could henceforth choose to live: the order of egoism (essentially capitalism as glossed by Adam Smith and his subsequent admirers) and the order of equality (the political goal of eliminating privilege from the texture of collective social life). Buonarroti had bet his life on championing the second and gave an eloquent account of his reasons for doing so.

The order of egoism was real enough at the time and has since come close to imposing its rule upon the entire world. The order of equality, in contrast, has turned out to be a very abstract normative idea, and every wholehearted subsequent attempt to render it concrete has proved violently contradictory. It survives in polite intellectual circles<sup>6</sup> – sometimes in wonderfully fluent and ingenious interpretations – as a regulative ideal. But any impulse to apply it is crimped everywhere by the exacting requirements of the order of egoism. In states where electoral choice in some measure modifies governmental policies, one of the mechanisms that confines that impulse can be seen, reasonably if selectively, as the democratic choice of the people concerned.

At the time when Buonarroti wrote, the partisans of the order of equality were in the habit of calling themselves *Democrats*. It was a good clear name for the way they saw their political, economic, and social goals. Outside North America, at that point, very few parti-

6 Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Ronald Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible Here?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

sans of the order of egoism showed the least inclination to dispute their claim to the title.<sup>7</sup> But already in North America that simple clear contrast had blurred irremediably,<sup>8</sup> and today we have lost it irrevocably across the world. The time has come to face up to the consequences of that loss, and learn with some haste to talk and think more clearly about just what *democracy* implies.

The view that has held sway in America for well over two hundred years – through the distractions of slavery, civil war, and European socialist ideas – is that representative democracy (a phrase Alexander Hamilton appears to have coined impromptu in a private letter)<sup>9</sup> was a clear improvement on participatory democracy. It somehow winnowed out the latter’s conspicuous and historically well-attested hazards, yet retained its imaginative appeal across a citizen body. It did so, above all, through the claim to deliver political justice by according each citizen equal political rights and an equal entitlement to exert (or seek to exert) political power.

7 Dunn, *Setting the People Free*; Dunn, *Democracy: A History*, chaps. 2, 3. For Buonarroti’s own contrast, see Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l’égalité*, vol. 1, 25–38. Even then it was a good clear name for a political purpose, and not for an institutional form (ibid., 38).

8 Dunn, *Democracy: A History*, 76–84. The best history of the normalization of the category in American political self-understanding is now Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

9 Alexander Hamilton, letter to Governor Morris, May 19, 1777:

When the deliberative or judicial powers are vested wholly or partly in the collective body of the people, you must expect error, confusion and instability. But a representative democracy, where the right of election is well secured and regulated & the exercise

Naturally, opinions about the basis of this improvement differed. For Paine, in debate with Edmund Burke in 1790, grafting representation upon democracy did not merely extend the territorial scale on which democracy could function, or hope to persist for any length of time if it ever were established; it also provided a clearly superior form of rule, which would have enhanced the quality of political life in Athens itself had the Athenians been discerning enough to invent it.<sup>10</sup>

To the cooler eye of James Madison – planning the political structure of the new American state and very conscious of the need to guarantee the property rights of its creditors – the advantage of practicability on the required territorial scale was at least matched by the obstructions it provided to hasty and indiscreet exertions of popular will through the need to compete across such a wide arena and to do so through institutions that ensured more than one basis of representation.<sup>11</sup> For Madison, who firmly avoided Hamilton’s new coinage, the *representative republic* marked a clear advance over the notoriously erratic and violent democracies of the ancient world, both in its prospective longevity

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of legislative, executive and judiciary authorities, is vested in persons chosen really and not nominally by the people, will in my opinion be most likely to be happy, regular and durable.

Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke, eds., *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 255.

10 Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1792) (London: J. M. Dent, 1916), 176–177.

11 Bernard Manin, “Checks, Balances and Boundaries: The Separation of Powers in the Constitutional Debate of 1787,” in Fontana, ed., *The Invention of the Modern Republic*, 27–62.

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and the social peace and economic security it could be relied on to promote. Representation would enhance democracy, not by rendering it more democratic but by preventing it from acting hastily, unwisely, and destructively.

This was not a viewpoint the Equals could have endorsed. For Babeuf, even early in the Revolution,<sup>12</sup> every concession to representation, every alienation to another person of the right and power to judge for oneself and act on one's own judgment, had a clear cost: a loss in freedom and an inroad into equality. The systematic refusal of such alienations defined the order of equality. It is easy to sneer at the psychological assumptions required to credit its normative status (fatally dependent on reading the logic of its ghostly adversary, the order of egoism, as a full and fair expression of the motivations of its participants). Clearer-headed interpreters – from Benjamin Constant and Oscar Wilde to Joseph Schumpeter and Mancur Olson – have discredited the political expectations implied in its resolute obtuseness to opportunity costs. The normative imagery at its heart has been deconstructed irreparably by far cleverer thinkers with the leisure to bring their own intuitions to a very high degree of resolution.<sup>13</sup>

As a vision of what the human world could readily become, the order of

12 On Babeuf, see R. B. Rose, *Gracchus Babeuf: The First Revolutionary Communist* (London: Edwin Arnold, 1978). Babeuf, in the *Journal de la Confédération*, July 4, 1790: "If the People are the Sovereign, they should exercise as much sovereignty as they absolutely can themselves . . . [T]o accomplish that which you have to do and can do yourself use representation on the fewest possible occasions and be nearly always your own representative." *Ibid.*, 77.

13 See again, notably, Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*.

equality has disintegrated too thoroughly to leave any prospect for resuscitation. What it has not lost, however, is its claim to register the political idea of democracy more literally and with greater imaginative cogency than more sophisticated contemporary interpreters can convincingly claim.

The strongest ground for employing *democracy* to describe the regimes that now claim its mantle is purely negative. Even a regime that still has a monarch no longer draws its legitimacy from possessing that facility. Nor does any regime derive its authority from being the political embodiment and instrument of an explicitly privileged social grouping among their subjects – a nobility of birth or achievement. Among the simple forms of regime envisaged in the ancient world, that leaves just one, namely, democracy *faute de pire*.

But it also leaves open the possibility that the sort of regime that now claims the title of democracy is not well conceived as simple. Instead, it is closer in style, basis, and potential solidity to the favored admixture of democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical elements espoused in one version or another by Aristotle, Polybius, most Romans who bothered to think about the issue and pass their thoughts on, and a very large proportion of subsequent European political thinking from the Middle Ages up to the end of the *ancien régime*. Madison and Hamilton clearly belonged within this very broad persuasion, as did thinkers as opposed in other respects as James Harrington, John Locke, and the Baron de Montesquieu.

When it reappeared in modern history as a consciously chosen label for a political force, *Democrat* signaled an opposition in the first place to political power in the hands of aristocrats, and then to

monarchs discredited by their defense of the political and social interests of aristocrats. It certainly was not intended to signal commitment to any model of mixed government.

It is not hard to see why it was not mixed government that in due course came to serve as the most evocative political slogan across the non-European world. It had had fairly muted resonance for most of the population at any point, even in Europe. Iran's president Ahmadi-Nejad may be confident in his assessment that "liberalism and Western-style democracy have not been able to realize the ideals of humanity."<sup>14</sup> But he does not equate their failure with the failure of an Iranian version of democracy; and has, in fact, exploited a host of duly illiberal methods to elicit the electoral support of the Iranian people in public competition, and evoke the authority it gives him when he makes decisions that vex his religious sponsors and superiors.

In other settings, too, where the state now conforms quite closely to the liberal-democratic model, it is clear that democracy retains a sense quite distinct from its prevailing institutional routines of popular election and representative legislation. When a South Korean man chose to slash, with a box-cutter, the face of the principal opposition party's leader, Park Geun-hye (daughter of the military dictator Park Chung-hee, who ruled the country with some brutality for nearly two decades and presided over the decisive phase of its modern

14 Letter from Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad to George W. Bush, *Financial Times*, October 5, 2006: "Liberalism and Western-style democracy have not been able to help realise the ideals of humanity. Today these two concepts have failed. Those with insight can already hear the sounds of the shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems."

development), he explained his savage act to the Seoul police by saying he had been "upset at a society that lacks democracy."<sup>15</sup> Sane or otherwise, there is no reason to presume him unaware that Korea's last two presidents were each elected against the party of government – the second by a substantial majority. Indeed, it is likelier that what Park Geun-hye's assailant feared was precisely that Korea's increasingly volatile, confident, and demanding electorate would choose at its next opportunity to elect the Grand National Party's chairwoman as president. If the prospective outcome of an uncoerced popular vote can be a sign that a society lacks democracy, there are still audibly *Babouviste* echoes in the word, even in East Asian translation.

Do these echoes evince atavistic confusion on the part of those who hear them, or do they indicate an instability and opacity within the idea of democracy itself as we now entertain it, which cannot be laundered out by greater resolution or clearer thought? Social scientists may hope to clarify and decontaminate such terms by a blend of intellectual concentration, precision in the use of language, and determined frankness, an aspiration that goes back as far as John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. But considered inductively, such programs for the rectification of names all but invariably fail. No one alert to the tangled political history of the word *democracy* could be surprised at the scale of their failure in its case.

At present, the cumulative energies of social scientists are in little immediate danger of explaining the shape of modern world history, whatever success they may sometimes achieve in clarify-

15 "South Korean Opposition Leader Assailed," *Financial Times*, May 22, 2006, 10.

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ing the local fortunes of its assorted components. To explain the vicissitudes of *democracy* as a term within that history, it would be necessary at a minimum to explain the incidence and course of three vast global conflicts; the changing fortunes through time of a bewildering variety of economic strategies on every scale, from the adult individual to the erstwhile World Socialist System; the erratic susceptibilities of entire populations to the political conceptions presented to them; and the confused and urgent struggles to get their own way of all who look to politics as a medium for doing so. No one today has the faintest idea how these four arenas interact with one another,<sup>16</sup> despite the highly illuminating studies of the territorial advance of democracy in its present sense over the last century, its contrasting fates in different areas of the world, and the conditions that favor its survival once established (notably those of Adam Przeworski and his pupils in the latter case).<sup>17</sup>

As of now, we have very little grip on the central question of just what we can trust modern representative capitalist democracy to do on our behalf. This is more alarming if we regard it, as on its present record we surely must, as congenitally indiscreet and often wantonly harmful to the environment; and if we

16 Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason*.

17 Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Adam Przeworski et al., *Sustainable Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Bernard Manin, Adam Przeworski, and Susan C. Stokes, eds., *Democracy, Accountability and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

see it as locked tightly into a mechanism of sharpening economic inequalities in the leading world economies from the United States to China.<sup>18</sup> The second effect is plainly as much a political as an economic outcome – the consciously engineered victory of some over others<sup>19</sup> – and equally political means might in principle reverse it. The first is presumably also just as political in its genesis, but potentially effective means for reversing it are harder to discern. Here, a central ambiguity in the contemporary understanding of democracy seriously impedes political progress as much as it does intellectual advance. Is modern capitalist democracy simply a system of political authorization, or does it offer, as it certainly purports to, a definite and prospectively coherent approach to formatting political deliberation on all major issues of public choice?

Liberal democracy, the regime form commended by President Bush and reviled by President Ahmadi-Nejad (and perhaps, in some sense, the principal bone of contention between the two), certainly qualifies democracy as a conception, and confines the usage of the noun, by superimposing additional criteria upon it. What it does not do is clarify the idea of democracy itself. It is also less than explicit about the basis from which we are to impose the new confines. Whatever else democracy was at

18 Edward Luce, “Out on a Limb: Why Blue-Collar Americans See Their Future as Precarious,” *Financial Times*, March 5, 2006, 15. For comparative background, see Harold L. Wilensky, *Rich Democracies: Political Economy, Public Policy and Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

19 Michael Graetz and Ian Shapiro, *Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight Over Taxing Inherited Wealth* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

its outset, it did at least identify the human sources of its authority. Over every public decision on what to do within the territories of Athens it left the choice firmly to the citizens themselves.<sup>20</sup> As a result, they made a great many decisions. Not even the individual Cantons of the Swiss Republic consult the will and judgment of their citizenry today with comparable assiduity; and no modern state could contemplate putting itself at popular beck and call in a similar fashion.

Liberal democracy blurs the issue of authorization in all but the last instance. It is less than forthcoming in its conception of just how or why the apparatus of civil and political rights that confines the political choices of executive and legislature at any given time is itself ultimately subject to the people who still supposedly authorize it. More importantly, it is inordinately vague, and either confused or systematically deceitful, about just what it implies about the formatting of deliberation in the making of public decisions.

From the outset, the fiercest suspicions of democracy centered on the relation between its allocation of power to particular social groups and its exposure to the vagaries of their judgment.<sup>21</sup> Liberal democracy has finessed the first suspicion with remarkable efficacy and without prescinding from its formal commitment to political equality. It has handled the second by oscillat-

ing between evasion and prevarication. Some of its subtlest champions, in the settings where it has had to fight hardest in recent decades, see its key merit as its commitment to public reason, the free discussion of public issues in a public setting.<sup>22</sup> That emphasis offers an important corrective to Western complacency and ignorance of the history of the rest of the world. But it illuminates the structure of liberal values more than it does the predictable commitments of democratic choice, and it cannot plausibly be said to issue from the idea of democracy itself. Whatever his other excellences, the Emperor Akbar cannot readily be mistaken for a democrat.

Liberals must stand for the right to think and speak freely to the bitter end. But democracy can and often does face two ways on issues of free speech. It prescribes an equal entitlement to every citizen to form their views on every public issue and to press these on one another. But it also strongly suggests a joint entitlement on their part to consider, judge, and decide together just what limits to impose on what can be advocated in public. The Athenians, who often and realistically supposed themselves under challenge, interpreted the latter entitlement with some ferocity and invented very concrete procedures to implement it. Ostracism is scarcely a liberal expedient, but it would be an error about the Greek language to deny that it was an eminently democratic expedient. If it is not an abuse of the American language today to deny that ostracism was (or even could be) a democratic expedient, that may be less an index of clear cognitive advance than of depletion in our capacity to speak and think clearly about the structuring of political choice.

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20 Mogens H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 306–314; Mogens H. Hansen, *The Tradition of Ancient Democracy and Its Importance for Modern Democracy* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2005).

21 Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

22 Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 15–19, 287–291.

It would help us to think more clearly about what democracy means today if we distinguished political authorization sharply from the formatting of public deliberation, and recognized the more direct ties between the democratic element in existing arrangements across the OECD and their procedures for eliciting and displaying political authorization. Democracy may be a fulsome description of a regime in which those entitled to give orders and receive obedience are, in the end, intermittently selected to do so by those they force to obey. When in working order, that arrangement guarantees that there cannot be a closed, self-selecting group of rulers who rule indefinitely in the face of the loathing of most of their subjects, until the latter take up arms against them and have the good fortune to win the ensuing struggle – what John Locke called “the appeal to Heaven.” Seen in those terms, contemporary democracies offer a crude but reliable remedy for a grave political ill, one memorably incarnated by Saddam Hussein.

The arrangement’s decisive weakness, especially in face of the cumulative ecological damage inflicted by capitalist advance (or, if you prefer, simply by the increase in human power), lies in its failure to register either the practical significance of the political division of labor – or the cognitive demands of judging what to do and what to avoid having done – in any realistic way. There is one tie between the idea of democracy and the structuring of political deliberation: that each citizen should have not merely an equal formal right to contribute to it, but a real substantive opportunity to do so. The claim to provide that opportunity, *isegoria*,<sup>23</sup> was a key value for the

23 Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy*, 83 – 85, 306 – 314.

democrats of Athens. Even there, it was a strained description of how political deliberation worked in a public setting; but at least it answered to clearly identifiable formal features of the mode through which decisions ultimately had to be made if they were to have authority. No capitalist society has ever provided its citizens in practice with anything remotely resembling that opportunity. It is not intuitively clear how any could.

The tie between democracy and the role of individual citizens within public deliberation today is not one that equalizes power, but one that acknowledges both the personal entitlement to try to persuade and the cognitive advantage of inserting all potentially relevant considerations into such deliberation. Because it does not, and plainly cannot, equalize power among citizens, it carries no implications for the fate of the considerations they deem relevant once these are duly advanced, and clearly mischaracterizes the sense in which most have effective opportunity to advance them at all. It does not envisage the structuring of public deliberation as a causal field, but instead dissolves it into an aspect of political authorization. Whatever ideological services that conflation may render, it does not provide a promising approach to understanding what in fact happens through formally democratic institutions.

Democracy, in any understanding, has always been a singularly weak conceptual candidate for specifying deliberative rationality. It may, as Aristotle conceded, have the advantage of preventing the exclusion of potentially relevant considerations, but it conscientiously refrains from imposing any other constraints on deliberative outcomes. Moreover, it does nothing to clarify which reasons are better and should therefore carry greater force, and which are more alluring and



popular and hence carry greater immediate power. Looking at the process of global ecological depletion from this angle and at this level of abstraction, it is hard to doubt that on this point Plato was right, and Pericles, as Thucydides reports him,<sup>24</sup> was as overoptimistic in the long run as Buonarroti himself.

Most contemporary partisans of democracy can accept with equanimity Buonarroti's verdict that none of France's revolutionaries embraced democracy in the ancient sense or contemplated summoning the entire people to deliberate on acts of government.<sup>25</sup> But very few are equally happy to acknowledge his concomitant judgment that aristocracy, or sovereign power exercised by one part of the nation over the whole of it, is an inevitable consequence of the inequality consecrated by the order of egoism.<sup>26</sup> It is reasonable to suspect some failure here either in nerve or in honesty. Where such failure matters most is in the analysis of massive infelicities in contemporary political choice. How many of these infelicities are at present a product of aristocracy (i.e., veiled or blatant inequality in political access)? How many continue to come from quite different sources?

As a system of authorization, contemporary democracy rests on equality, and intermittently verges on ensuring it at just one point in time. When it comes to determining outcomes, however, it gives no comparably specific assurance on how public deliberation will or should

be structured, or how it will square up against more private deliberation. Those captivated by Buonarroti will do their best to ascribe its more aberrant outcomes to its systematic and often covert subversion of equality. But there is more to deliberative rationality than undistorted communication between equals or pseudoequals. All deliberation is permanently at the mercy of the cognitive resources available to its participants. Besides the hallowed and always reasonably plausible model of actively sustained domination by sinister interests, there is the still less encouraging model of somnambulistic collective greed and stupidity. Even today democracy offers a better banner for defying or seeking to combat the first than for blandly endorsing it. It offers no discernible remedy for the second.

For the present the sole minimally plausible remedy still touted for the second is the deep abstract cunning of the market: perfect proxy for deliberative rationality all on its own. If the order of egoism has gotten us into this fix, perhaps if left severely to itself, the same facility may in due course get us out of it? The providential wager on the market is the last faith left on this particular battlefield, lacking, for those who can believe it, only a plausible recipe to ensure its implementation in face of powerful would-be molesters (aristocratic or democratic). Somewhere within this murky space, contemporary political thinking appears for the moment to have well and truly lost the thread.

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24 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Books I and II, trans. Charles Forster Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928), xxxv – xlvi, 318 – 341.

25 Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l'égalité*, 38.

26 *Ibid.*, 32n.