

## INTRODUCTION

**T**HERE ARE MOMENTS that define an epoch. Such a moment came on January 6, 2021, when white supremacists, incited by Donald Trump, broke through police barriers and stormed the U.S. Capitol. The world watched in disbelief as the doors to the House chamber were barricaded and members of Congress fled for safety while Trump supporters, sporting confederate flags and fascist insignia, roamed the halls looking for legislators they had branded as “traitors.” Some had come with zip-tie cuffs to take hostages and hang those who had opposed Trump’s efforts to overturn the presidential election. Outside the Capitol, a gallows had been built, complete with noose. Vice President Mike Pence and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi were high on their hit list.

Stunning images have emerged from that harrowing day. Some show the assembled mass thronging the steps and plaza of the Capitol building. Others show men in tactical gear scaling the perimeter walls. The image that best captures the *esprit* of the moment is that of 60-year-old Richard Barnett, a gun rights advocate from Arizona, lounging in the chair of the House Speaker, one boot propped on her desk, his grizzled face smiling in satisfaction. Before leaving, he scrawled a warning: “We will not back down.” The insurgents rampaged through the Capitol for three hours, rifling through offices and defecating on the floors before walking out calmly, snapping selfies as police ushered them out like it was closing time at the Louvre. It was lost on no one that had this been a crowd of black

or brown people, the Capitol would have been turned into a killing field. By the end of the day, five people lost their lives and a nation no longer recognized itself.

To most, the insolence and the violence were appalling. However, Barnett and millions of others like him see themselves as patriots. The insurrection of January 6 was the bursting of an abscess that has been growing in the U.S. for years. Trump merely brought it to a head. The taking of the Capitol by fascists tore asunder the national myth of America. It traumatized a nation. But the U.S. was only the most recent country to be shaken by the rage of its citizens and the cynicism of its leaders.

On the morning following the 2019 EU elections, the French populace also awoke to a radically altered political reality. In a country that had come to symbolize the ideals of liberal democracy, Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally Party had won the European elections, eclipsing the centrist party of French President Emmanuel Macron. Fuelled by a campaign of anti-immigrant rhetoric and the promise of jobs and "France for the French," the appeal of Le Pen's neo-fascist message had been gaining ground steadily among the country's bitter and growing underclass. As one supporter put it, "the veiled ones receive everything, and the French have nothing. It's not normal. Before, there was the rich, the middle class, and the poor. Now you have the rich and the poor. There is no longer any middle."<sup>1</sup>

Le Pen is not alone. As in France, the disappearing middle class in other European countries, not to mention the U.S., has resulted in the collapse of middle-of-the-road politics in Italy, Greece, Germany, Austria, the U.K., Sweden, The Netherlands, and Hungary. People are no longer content with the traditional safe solutions that reflect the status quo. Far-right figures are emerging victorious from Britain to Brazil. In India, Narendra Modi has marshalled a brand of Hindu fascism to wreak havoc in the world's largest democracy. In the U.S., far from rejecting the rising tide of fascism, the 2020 elections revealed a divided nation in which Donald Trump exerts a satanic spell on half the voting population.

But the political picture that is emerging from these events is not so clear-cut. The unprecedented electoral success of the Greens in these same European countries is evidence of a polarizing trend that has been growing for a decade. The mood is angry, volatile, insurrectionary. Political parties and the institution of government itself are deeply suspect. People are voting for change; for a shakeup of the old order. The more radical the political rhetoric, the more in keeping it is with the temper of the times. And in countries such as Portugal, Spain, Finland, Mexico, Bolivia, and New Zealand, political programs that are bold and unapologetic about challenging the status quo from a progressive perspective are also finding a ready audience. In his first address to Congress, Joe Biden explicitly rejected neoliberalism, asserted the centrality of government to the public welfare and announced the most ambitious program of social and economic reforms since the New Deal. His proposals for free college, a universal preschool program, an elder-care program, support for unions, and massive investment in public infrastructure found favour with 80 percent of viewers. Even 40 percent of *Republicans* supported his plan.<sup>2</sup> This signals a momentous ideological shift for America.

Central to these successes is a vision of government and the state that is in direct opposition to the neutered and passive role that has come to define the state over the last forty years. Moreover, the thirst for change has triggered a global groundswell of protest that is being felt from Asia to South America. As I write these lines, demands for radical system change are shaking governments in France, Hong Kong, Thailand, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Ecuador, Chile, Honduras, Haiti, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and the list is growing. In Chile, where neoliberalism first took shape under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in the 1970s, the government came under siege to dismantle the capital-friendly policies that have since been replicated in every corner of the globe. The U.S., coming late to the party, finally exploded in a wave of protests not seen since the days of the civil rights movement. Against the backdrop of a pandemic that was out of control, the police killing of George Floyd marked a flashpoint

in which widespread disgust over racism was soon transfigured into protest over the system and the status quo that perpetuates it.

In the current maelstrom of political upheaval, the ships of state that have offered direction and refuge in times of crisis are themselves in turmoil, rudderless, seemingly helpless to address the deep-seated fears that are radicalizing populations across the globe. From the destruction of social safety nets, to rising levels of debt and declining living standards, to the catastrophic effects of global warming, governments have been abdicating any meaningful role in providing the kind of determined leadership or direction that could conceivably meet such global threats head-on. Disillusion with the state as the steward of public welfare is deepening—and with good reason. From this vacuum of state leadership, there has arisen a resurgence of the right *and* demands for radical reform on the left. These are the twin forces unleashed by a global capitalist imperium that has set the world on a suicide course to extinction.

These deep systemic issues of collective life and the role of the state have now taken center stage as the world grapples with a pandemic. When I began writing this book in the fall of 2019, the issues described above were reaching a trigger point. But the coronavirus contagion and the skyrocketing fatalities have further exposed the dysfunction of our political economy. By the time this book comes out, the virus in the U.S. will have claimed 600,000 souls. The failures of the capitalist state are evident in the stark differences between those countries where the common welfare is still a principle of government and those in which the rule of markets reigns supreme. Measures that were unthinkable and would have been dismissed as radical and socialist before the contagion are now being deployed by governments to keep economies from tanking and to reassure a fearful and precarious citizenry. Discussions of a universal basic income (UBI) have now gone mainstream.

Everyone is confronting what it means when a state doesn't have a functioning public health system, when food and essential supplies are imported from half a world away, and when the economy is managed by a billionaire class that feeds off a vast and growing

precariat. The failures of a broken system have come into full view, and the sense that something fundamental has to change is pervasive. What has also come into public consciousness, felt now as never before, is the interconnectivity of the world. Every individual on the planet is susceptible to what the pandemic is doing and feels the consequences of the choices made—or not made—as much by their government as by their next-door neighbour. We are in this together, and the reality of this fact has shifted from abstraction to lived personal experience.

What does this mean for the path ahead?

The empire of capital has split the world into two great and opposing forces: the upperworld of wealth and global civil society. But the seismic struggle for change extends far beyond politics and economics. The turmoil that is playing out in the world is as much a crisis of the spirit as it is of failed systems. The anguished calls for reform are not merely for changes of policy or political direction. They are the birth spasms of a new system of values and a vision of human community that are struggling to be born. The globalization of capitalism has not only engendered the injustices that are mobilizing populations to resistance. The projection of human power and greed on a global scale has ruptured the balance between humanity and the world's life systems. Ecosystem collapse is demanding a level of global response that is unprecedented. Change in our time means *transformation*. And while right wing populism appeals to the authoritarian tropes of the past, the struggle to fashion a real alternative to the status quo entails an altogether different, and more challenging, path forward. A fully sovereign and transfigured civil society—from local neighborhood to global stage—is at the heart of this vision.

It is an act of radical hope to strive for change in our times, and it is born of radical necessity. We are living through a crucible moment. What is done or left undone today will mark the future in indelible ways. And if we remain passive, if we are immobilized by cynicism, it is a future whose contours are already legible for those who care to read it.

For very many of us, the worry and unease we feel are reinforced daily by the echo chambers we inhabit online and from whence we receive our increasingly controlled sense of the world around us. We can feel the anxiety building on the streets of the world, on the lighted screens of our laptops, and in our bones. But what we are exposed to is a distorted and truncated view of things. Too often, we are left in the dark about those stories that reflect an altogether different picture of the world and of the people who are forging pathways for change that are both hopeful and indispensable if we are to navigate the uncertain terrain ahead. For this journey, we need an entirely different vision of what the future may hold and the pathways that may lead us there.

The threats posed by the politics of the status quo and its defenders are now not merely a question of political ideology or even of class. They have morphed into an existential threat to the survival of any form of humane civilization at all. The appearance of the coronavirus is like a call for an awakening.

I believe that the scope of the change that is needed is profound. A transformative vision that is equal to the challenges we now face as a species is not merely an accumulation of incremental steps within the current setup. It is to understand and relate to the world in an entirely different way and to fashion a political order that reclaims and elevates those attributes in us that have always been the foundation of humane societies. Co-operation and the instinctive bonds that unite us with each other and with the natural world are central to this vision. The task of politics now is to make such a vision manifest.

My aim in this book is to expand on some key themes I introduced in *Humanizing the Economy: Co-operatives in the Age of Capital*. In that work, I attempted to show how a set of values based on democracy, co-operation, social justice, and the pursuit of the common good could, *and are*, being realized daily in the practice of co-operative economics the world over. In the work that follows, my aim is to show the implications of these values for the broader questions of political economy that are essential if we wish to alter the suicide course we are on.

My underlying hypothesis is that a deepening of democracy and co-operation for the common good are the only means by which the changes we seek might be realized. Contrary to the individualism and self-interest that sustain the capitalist worldview, the common good proposes an alternative framework for our political aims and a pathway through the crisis of legitimacy that imperils democracy itself. Both these tendencies—co-operation for common benefit and competition for self-interest—are embedded in every human society. How the human species handles these contending forces will determine the future that lies in store—for people and planet alike. But the values I treat here also deal with issues of spiritual renewal. I hope to show that co-operation and the common good are both the manifestation *and the means* by which a transformative vision of human community—and human consciousness—is made real.

The civilizing values that are the foundation of humane societies are present in every community. They have been with us always. The forms they take are prismatic. Like a light source refracted through the prism of time and place and culture, their manifestations in the world of politics are as various as the circumstances in which they are applied. Their realization is a continuous—and collective—labor of social and spiritual evolution.

The roles of the state and of civil society are at the center of this story. If the state has abandoned its duty as steward of the common welfare, if it has betrayed the only purpose that gives it legitimacy, it has not done so accidentally. And if the average citizen is left confused and uncertain of his or her place in the larger scheme of their community or country, it is the price we pay for the catastrophic erosion of the social values and basic trust that binds communities together. This, too, is a vacuum that is exploited by the demagogues of nationalism, of ethnicity and tribal identity whose politics serve not to heal and unite, but to sow hatred and division.

We seek something better. And, contrary to the fatalist's view that there is nothing to be done, that all politics is the same, that one government is as bad as the next, we will point to those examples that show how a different kind of politics and a different view of the future is possible. It is a hope that burns in the breasts of the

millions that have been marching for change the world over. And, as the world confronts the consequences of a deadly pandemic, the deep reservoir of co-operation and concern for the common welfare that sustains all societies will be the key to weathering this crisis, as with every previous crisis.

Ultimately, this book is a work of hope and perhaps a torch in darkening times. I do not hide my sense that what I share here is also a work of experimentation—an extended reflection on what a very particular set of beliefs and values discloses when we begin to take them seriously as a foundation for a new political order. Nor do I hide my own ambivalence about whether such a vision as I present here is at all likely to be realized in the near future, or at all. But that isn't the point.

Those who dreamt and fought for the ideals of democracy, liberty, and equality in the time of monarchs were indispensable precisely *because* their hopes seemed so distant to the times. They were torchbearers. They called upon values in the human condition that are innate in all people and all societies. These same values are vibrant and alive today, and it is precisely their violation that I believe is fuelling much of the rage and resentment we now witness. The task before us is to take up these same values and to invest them with the power and the means to remake the world in their image. What is this image?

That is the purpose of this book.

I have structured the narrative in three sections. The first three chapters set out the nature of the task before us. They include the historical and political antecedents to the present moment, to the formation of the political and economic powers that govern our present condition, to the systemic plunder of the planet's commons, and to the deepening crisis of legitimacy that has sparked resistance and reaction the world over.

The middle section delves into the ways in which widely divergent communities are remaking their politics and economics to reflect their vision of democratic governance and the pursuit of the common good. From the mass uprisings of the *Indignados* movement

in Spain to the Kurd's battle for survival in the bedlam of Syria, these are also stories of bitter struggle in the face of seemingly impossible odds. As far as possible, I try and situate these stories in their political and historical context and extrapolate general principles from the particulars of the case. The examples here establish a bridge to the final section of the book.

The closing section attempts a synthesis of the ideas, values, models, and practices that together frame a vision of political economy and the relationship between citizenry and the state that offers a new narrative for the necessary work that lies ahead, and perhaps a compass to guide us toward the foundational aims we hold in common. A central theme in this section is an elaboration on the idea of the Partner State, which frames a new understanding of the state from the perspective of a sovereign society and the precepts of civil economy.

We are not alone in this work. People the world over are striving to realize a set of values that have always been at the foundation of humane communities and the source of sustenance and well-being for people in every age and every place. The recovery and reinterpretation of these values today is a matter of personal happiness, of human welfare, of reframing social purpose to preserve what is best in us and to treasure and protect the abounding beauty of the world around us.

I read once that what humankind dreams it is compelled to realize in real life.<sup>3</sup> We are called upon to dream well. Now, it is a matter of survival.

## TREASON OF THE STATE<sup>1</sup>

**O**N THE SWELTERING SUMMER day of August 22, 1996, Bill Clinton signed into law the most momentous change to U.S. social policy since the passage of FDR's Social Security Act in 1935. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act promised to "end welfare as we know it." Indeed, it did. Surrounded by cabinet members and American flags on the sunlit lawn of the White House, Clinton abolished the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC)—the primary safety net protecting poverty-stricken mothers and children—and replaced it with the Temporary Aid to Needy Families program (TANF). The sign in front of him bore the slogan A New Beginning—Welfare to Work. It was a fitting sentiment to characterize this monumental shift in social policy.

Among the group standing next to him on that day was Lillie Harden, a 42-year-old black woman from Little Rock, Arkansas. Clinton had met Harden on a panel ten years earlier. Impressed by her story, Clinton invited her to tell how her own escape from welfare was due to the welfare-to-work policies that he had implemented in Arkansas while he was governor. In her speech, Harding recounted how she had used AFDC while unemployed for two years, until enrolling in one of Clinton's workfare programs and landing a minimum-wage job as a kitchen helper. She remarked how important this was to her as a badge of success and the recovery of

her self-esteem: "When I got my job, my son was so proud of me, but I made a deal with him, I told him, I'm going to work every day and take my work seriously."

Harden, and her carefully crafted image as a reformed "welfare queen," was central to Clinton's success that day. Her presence bolstered Clinton's credentials as a compassionate reformer. It also gave credence to the image of the "welfare queen" peddled by Republicans. From the time Ronald Reagan used "welfare queens" to portray the poor as living off other people's money, Republicans have attacked welfare as an entitlement program that rewarded the lazy and the irresponsible. The image of the unwed black mother breeding children and sponging off welfare—an archetype of the undeserving poor—was embedded in the American imagination.

The passage of TANF in the U.S. was to inaugurate a new era of personal responsibility and hard work as the answer to systemic poverty. With the steep reduction in federal funding that followed, and the shifting of responsibility for the new program to the states, the federal government's role for the welfare of its citizens was not so much a new beginning as a return to a dismal past where the poor were blamed for their poverty.

This focus on personal responsibility (or lack thereof) as the root cause of poverty had been a principle of faith for Republicans and the right since the earliest days of the republic. It was balanced in their minds by the myth of personal merit as the root cause of wealth. Cynically believing that it would win him votes and neutralize Republicans in the coming elections, Clinton embraced it for the Democrats as well. It was a turning point for the Democratic Party and for the country.

Following her brief speech at the signing ceremony, Lillie Harden was forgotten, and she melted back into the obscurity from which she had emerged momentarily on that hot August day. But her story continued, invisible, unremarked, and ultimately ending as a tragic commentary on the policies she had praised and to which she would eventually fall victim. After suffering a stroke in 2002, Harden was no longer able to qualify for Medicaid as she had under AFDC, or

to afford her monthly prescriptions. In the end, like millions of other poor black women, Lillie lost the frail protection of the old welfare program in return for the promised benefits a job would bring to her and her family. Leaving behind three children, she died in poverty an agonizing twelve years later at the age of 59.<sup>2</sup>

Lillie Harden's story, and the circumstances of her brief appearance in the public eye, embody all that is irremediably wrong with the state of politics and public life today, not only in the U.S., but across a wide swathe of the capitalist world. It is not merely that the brief progress of social welfare in the postwar era had come to an ignoble end. There has always been opposition to the notion that the state has any responsibility in providing for the poor or indeed for the public welfare. It is the basis of the neoliberal ideas that now dominate public policy the world over.

But the rolling back of public programs, whether for the protection of the poor or for investment in education or health care, would not have been possible without the collusion of political parties that sold out the very people they claimed to represent. It was a betrayal born of cynicism, of political calculation, of the abandonment of principle, and, ultimately, of the absence of any progressive vision with which to oppose the disastrous free market ideology that was the driving force of a resurgent right.

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The start of America's reluctant experimentation with welfare came at the height of the Great Depression when Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act as part of his New Deal program. When the Great Depression began, about 18 million of the elderly, the disabled, and single mothers with children already lived at a bare subsistence level in the United States. By 1933, more than 50 percent of the elderly were living in poverty,<sup>3</sup> and another 13 million Americans had been thrown out of work.<sup>4</sup>

The Social Security Act established a national welfare system aimed at poor children and other dependent persons, and from the very beginning, Republicans, as well as conservative Democrats,

opposed it. Echoing the arguments used by corporations, opponents charged that the program was a “creeping socialism” that would destroy freedom, unfairly tax employers, and harm the economy. They were the same arguments that would later be used to attack the introduction of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965/66 and the Affordable Care Act in 2010. They are being used today to oppose the expansion of Medicare to universal coverage.

The charge of socialism was meant as a scare tactic, to be sure. But it pointed to a deeper conflict concerning the nature of government, its role as steward of the public welfare, and whether or not the state has any role to play in service to a common good. The issues raised in 1935 were hardly new. They go to the root of the relationship between state and society, and they are as pertinent today as they were then.

The origin of the modern welfare state dates to the improbable introduction of a national health insurance program in Germany by Otto von Bismarck, in 1883. With his walrus moustache and spiked helmet clapped to his bulldog head, Bismarck was not known for his democratic sensibilities or his social empathy. But this dour Prussian autocrat had a socialist problem. Revolutionary fervour had been sweeping the continent, culminating in the 1848 revolutions that affected 50 countries. It was a purely political calculation that led Bismarck to initiate a national health service to beat the socialists at their own game and to win popular support for the newly unified German state.<sup>5</sup>

Of Bismarck’s intentions, historian Jonathan Steinberg noted, “It had nothing to do with social welfare. He just wanted some kind of bribery to get social democratic voters to abandon their party.”<sup>6</sup> “Call it socialism or whatever you like,” Bismarck said during the 1881 Reichstag debates. “It is the same to me.”<sup>7</sup>

The German system provided retirement benefits as well as disability benefits. Participation was mandatory, and contributions were taken from the employee, the employer, and the government. Coupled with the workers’ compensation program established in 1884 and the “sickness” insurance enacted the year before, the pro-

gram provided a comprehensive system of income security based on social insurance principles.

The revolutions that had shaken Europe in 1848 haunted and terrified ruling elites. But Bismarck's social welfare strategy did not succeed in derailing the socialist threat. Socialist ideas continued to radicalize and mobilize large sections of the populace not only in Germany after 1883 but across the continent. The issue of class, of the misery of working life, of constant precariousness, and of the duty of the state to protect and provide for its citizens remained at the forefront of political struggle across the continent.

With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of an urban working class came the struggle for trade unions and worker protections, the fight for universal suffrage, and the push for an interventionist state. These became essential components of the socialist project in Europe and beyond. The co-operative societies of the early industrial era were the seedbeds of socialism, trade unionism, women's rights, and the push for the radical economic and political reforms that defined the shape and direction of political struggle down to our own time. The primary battleground for this struggle was the state—its purpose, its organization, and its control.

When Lenin wrote *The State and Revolution* in the summer of 1917, he believed that Europe was on the brink of revolution and that the dawning of a new age was at hand. Having fled from Petrograd to Finland to escape arrest, Lenin authored the book as a treatise to guide socialists on how to bring about a new political and economic order. It was written large, taking in the whole sweep of his political vision, and fuelled by a mixture of certainty, arrogance, contempt for his opponents, and exulting in the violence and destruction that a workers' revolution would require. In it, he made control of the state the pivotal point around which the future of the socialist revolution would turn.

The capture of the state by the working class was the first step that would pave the way for a transition from capitalism to communism, with the state eventually withering away as communism eliminated the exploitation of one class by another. This followed

from the Marxist principle that the state was a bourgeois creation, a product of capitalism, and operated essentially as a mechanism for the control and oppression of the working class by the owners of capital. The elimination of class would lead naturally to the demise of the state. It did not lead to democracy. It led to a stateless dictatorship of the proletariat and the liquidation of the bourgeoisie.

For Lenin, the withering away of the state required the erasure of any distinction between the state as a governing apparatus and the population as a whole. It was a view of a society in which every member is required to become part of a single productive system, a "huge single syndicate" as Lenin put it, controlled and administered by a revolutionary party. It was, in short, a totalitarian vision.<sup>8</sup>

Oceans of ink have been devoted to the dissection and interpretation of this theory. Its influence in shaping the course of socialism and the politics of revolution in the 20th century is unparalleled. So too, is the suffering inflicted by its deficiencies as a theory of change and its consequences when put into practice. The view of the state as a mere by-product of capitalist economic forces is also wrong, contradicted by the evidence of history, archaeology, and anthropology and questioned even within the Marxist tradition.

Lenin's conception was premised on the idea that economics drives social order and that the conflict between classes necessitates the imposition of a control apparatus by the ruling minority upon the majority. It was a vision that accepted violence and competition as the natural order of society and was, in effect, a reverse image of the social Darwinism embraced by capitalism to justify this very inequality. Both Marx and Engels were admirers of Darwin and attributed to him the discovery in the natural world of the materialism they espoused in the historical evolution of society.<sup>9</sup>

For anyone studying history, it is hard to deny the hard kernel of truth embedded in this vision. But unlike Marx's view, Darwin's theory is not teleological. Natural selection is a never-ending process with no ultimate end point. The Marxist conviction that the strife between classes will ultimately end with the collapse of capitalism and the triumph of a communist society is, in effect, the end of historical evolution.<sup>10</sup>

Darwin's theory of natural selection, and its immense relevance to political theory, was heavily influenced by the Victorian ethos and the competitive individualism that dominated the economic and political ideology of the time. This was, after all, the era that established laissez-faire capitalism as the template for human progress. Competition for survival was accepted as the driving force of evolution. But this view did not go unchallenged.

An opposing view of the natural world and the evolution of human society was proposed by Peter Kropotkin, a contemporary of Marx and one of the founding fathers of anarchism. For Kropotkin, co-operation and mutual aid were as much a part of the natural order as competition and the bloody violence of nature as described by Darwin. Kropotkin, a member of the Russian aristocracy and a hereditary prince, was an esteemed scientist whose work on the geology and geography of Siberia placed him in the front rank of the scientific community. But it was his research into the survival tactics of animal species and the publication of *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, in 1902, that earned him his place as a leading figure in both the anarchist and co-operative traditions. His investigations into the prevalence of co-operation in animal species offered a compelling case against the competitive individualism that characterized the Darwinian worldview and the economic and political theories of both capitalism and socialism that were based on it.

*Mutual Aid* became a seminal work for a long line of research and theory on the evolution of natural systems and also of human societies, economic systems, and politics. This work, and the stream of co-operative thought that flowed from it, have lain buried and neglected to this day. It was only in 2009, when Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize for her ground-breaking studies on the commons, that serious interest in co-operation was reignited and a window thrown open to this forgotten legacy. Her work on the commons upended two centuries of bias concerning collective governance and the co-operative use of resources. Its significance for understanding the organization of human societies and the implications of co-operative and commons theory for system change is impossible to overstate.

To advocates of co-operation, Ostrom's confirmation that human societies all over the world successfully manage resources held in common was old news. But in this present moment of global crisis and the competitive individualism that drives it, the work of Ostrom, Kropotkin, and other thinkers in the co-operative and commons tradition is a crucial resource for rethinking how human societies work, the values that shape them, and our understanding of what is possible for the future.

There is a certain folly in grafting evidence from the natural world onto the human experience and the conduct of human society. For nothing is more clear than that humankind is distinguished from the natural world precisely *because* of our capacity to act in ways that, if anything, contradict the natural behavior of other species to the point of undermining even our own prospects for survival. The human condition is not fixed. Our circumstances are as much a consequence of our actions as are the external pressures of place and environment. Global warming, the extermination of other animal species, the incessant wars, and the ecocide we are practicing are terrifying cases in point. What is also true is that the propensities for co-operation and competition are hardwired into our makeup, just as they are in the natural world.

Darwin and Kropotkin were both right. Co-operation and competitive individualism are not mutually exclusive. They are the twin poles of the natural order. Human society is evidence of that. But to a very large extent, how human societies evolve, how our political systems and power relations are constructed, and how we understand and interact with each other and our environment is a matter of choice. There are biological determinants, to be sure. But how we live them out in the context of human society is in our hands. The challenge before us is how to draw upon and strengthen those elements in our human makeup—both individually and socially—that conduce to the humanist values we espouse.

If we trace the evolution of human societies from the earliest evidence, it is astonishing how recent are the patterns of social life that we now take for granted. This is most evident in how we per-

ceive our forms of governance. The organization of human societies into states appears only around 2,600 BCE with the city of Uruk, in ancient Mesopotamia. With a population of about 25,000, Uruk was the earliest example of what may be considered the basic matrix of the state: an agricultural economy based on grain and fixed field farming, social stratification and specialization, control over a specified territory, an armed force, taxation, and walls.

Slaves and the domination of a ruling elite were also characteristic of Uruk, and of early states from Mesopotamia to Southeast Asia and China.<sup>11</sup> The later city-states of classical Greece, which we take as models of democracy, were slave states where the rights of citizenship excluded women and, obviously, slaves.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as James C. Scott has suggested, the process of domestication that was the foundation of the hierarchical state was not restricted to plants and animals. It extended equally to humans.<sup>13</sup> Human domestication and the natural impulse to resistance represent the antipodes of a perennial struggle between domination and freedom.

The state became, and remains, the basic framework within which human societies play out the dynamics of group conflict on the one hand and collective needs on the other. However, all nation-states are also a form of deception. Like the individual ego, the state is an abstraction constructed through the simplification and idealization of a set of attributes selectively chosen by those powers that are able to impose them. These attributes may be linguistic, cultural, historical, religious, racial, political, or any combination of these and others. The nation-state exists via a simultaneous act of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and alienation, of acceptance and rejection. Like all identities, nation-states are defined equally by what they embrace as by what they reject as "other." The exclusion or repression of difference is in their makeup. But above all, the state as we know it is validated by its monopoly on power and the submission to this power by its subjects.

It was not until the 18th century that democracy was seriously advanced by the Enlightenment philosophers as a mortal challenge to the hierarchical systems of church and monarchy that defined the

nation-states in Europe and the colonial territories they controlled. Democracy, as we have come to understand it, is a very late arrival on the historical stage. And, as events unfolding around us testify, it is an open question what role it will ultimately play or for how long. Historically, democracy appears as an exotic plant amidst a forest of authoritarian political forms, ranging from local dynasties, to regional theocracies, to monarchic empires. Today, despite its promising expansion in the late 20th century, its existence remains fragile, under threat, with its institutions in retreat globally.<sup>14</sup>

However constructed, the form of politics that a society creates is ultimately a function of how power is accumulated, deployed, and, above all, in whose benefit. The perpetual interplay of social versus personal interest is central to this process. This is as true of human societies as it is of the natural world. These observations may strike one as banal, but the interplay of the social versus the individual, of co-operation versus competition, and the manner in which a political system manages this fundamental dualism is the basis of all political economy and a key to understanding the vast ebb and flow of political systems. Moreover, it is not a case of assigning a superior moral value to one element over the other—social and individual identities are essential components in the human makeup.

What concerns us is how political systems mitigate, or magnify, the damage done by those human impulses that, left unchecked, destroy the quality of life—the prospects for happiness—both for individuals and societies. Chief among these is the lust for power, *titonolatry*, and the greed and selfishness that it fosters. Power in this sense is an instrument of predation. Those who pursue it are those least to be trusted with it. The pursuit of power for its own sake is a social pathology that manifests at the level both of the individual and class. The case I want to make is that democracy is essentially a system to mitigate this damage through the broadest possible diffusion of political power. It is a process of political dilution. Whether operating at the level of consensual decision-making at the scale of the tribe in times past or acting as a check on the power of elites at

national or even global levels today, democracy is society's way of protecting itself against the abuses of its most predatory members.

Marxism addressed this by identifying capitalist owners of property as a predatory class feeding off an exploited working class. This is not far wrong. But it overlooked the fact that any group or class that exercises undisputed political power inevitably becomes an exploiting and predatory power. Contrary to Marxism's hopes, there is nothing inherently virtuous about the working class that would inoculate it against the abuse of power, should it ever attain it. Moreover, it does not suffice to speak of class interests when, in practice, it is always individuals that exercise power (ostensibly) on behalf of those interests. In worst-case scenarios, the monstrous appetites and disorders of the dictatorial personality supersede even class interests. Cases in point: Mao Zedong, Donald Trump.

This brings us to a second point concerning the actual operations of power in a supposedly egalitarian state. Engels himself recognized that the withering away of the state required the habituation of a population to live without the violence and subordination instilled by class oppression. But it is not solely class oppression that inspires in people the will to violence, to domination, or to subjection. In even the most egalitarian grouping of classless hunter-gatherers, we would not be surprised to find petty despots, bullies, or just your standard universal asshole. (As a human trait, assholery, we may safely assume, is classless, ubiquitous, and perpetual.)

Engels was certainly speaking of something more substantial in society, something *systemic* and *cultural* that required fixing, not isolated individual behaviors. It is true that the creation of a more just and egalitarian society requires a commensurate set of attitudes and behaviors on the part of its members. The essential question is, how does this come about? Changing political systems is difficult enough. Changing social attitudes is infinitely more so.

The standard account of social and political evolution is that humankind is engaged in an epic journey of progress, evolving from more barbarous to more civilized forms of social organization. This

story—the myth of human progress—was a product of the revolutionary forces that were unleashed with the dawning of the Enlightenment, the age of reason. These were both intellectual and material.

The unhindered application of reason in philosophy and the scientific discoveries that made possible the material advancements of the Industrial Revolution combined to provide a compelling tale of progress in which reason guided the moral and material improvement of humankind. In politics, its crowning achievement was the triumph of liberal democracy, a natural consequence of this conviction. For if humanity's destiny lay in the cultivation of reason, and if everyone was endowed with it, the source of political legitimacy lay not with the divine right of kings or the inherited privileges of nobility but in the rational acts and free choices of the individual. It was a revolutionary myth, a storming of the gates of both religious and secular authority, and its effects were as evident in the collectivist salvation mythology of Marxism as they were in the individualist free market credo of capitalism. The idea of the state, its role and ultimate purpose, was molded by these mythologies.

But no myth is without its basis in human experience. And the historical experience of humankind with respect to politics, with the perpetual strife and suffering of domination and exploitation, may be read as a story of the survival and self-defence of societies against predatory minorities. Karl Polanyi formulated this process as a Double Movement, in which societies defend themselves against the violation of social norms and values by the unchecked operations of capital. It is a never-ending dance of power where an advance by one side prompts a counter response by the other. For the most part, Polanyi developed his metaphor to describe the dynamics of a market economy, or to be more accurate, a market *society*, in which social values are subordinated to those of the market. But this insight concerning the perpetual interplay between the interests of capital and those of society, different from the Marxist formulation of class struggle, may be expanded to account for a far wider conflict that is entailed in the notion of *social predation*.

From the vantage point of collective well-being, progress in poli-

tics ultimately entails the creation of mechanisms for the advancement of the common good, a conception that goes all the way back to Aristotle.<sup>15</sup> For humanists, who believe that happiness and well-being should not be the preserve of a privileged minority, government and the state must ultimately be judged against this criterion. This was the aim of the democratic revolutions that shook Europe throughout the 17th and 18th centuries and whose ideals are being fought for still.

This reading of democracy as a form of social self-defence, however, is incomplete. The democratic idea, after all, concerns itself not only with the collective welfare but equally with the freedom and welfare of the individual as a political subject, as a free citizen of a political community. In this sense, democracy was the means by which the individual could realize his/her potential to the fullest and through this process of self-realization society as a whole was advanced. Liberal democracy was defined by this, as was the capitalist system that developed symbiotically alongside it. These principles were encoded, in one form or another, in virtually every constitution of the modern era, with eighty-seven countries now formally constituted as democracies.

That the state should be bound by these claims of democracy, that governments should be held accountable for the fulfilment of these ideals—both social and individual—is the basis of political legitimacy in the modern era. From the establishment of the first constitutional republic in the U.S. in 1776 to the pronouncements of virtually every despotic regime from China to Chechnya, this appeal to the preservation and welfare of a nation's populace, even when contradicted in practice, remains the foundation of political legitimacy in every corner of the globe. If this is true, a betrayal of this trust constitutes a form of treason by the state for no state is bound by any such allegiance to any other group. This unique allegiance and identity with a political community is a foundational principle of the nation-state.

What happens when this rather comforting ideal is exposed as a farce? When a state betrays the trust of its citizens? When, contrary

to the expectation of progress, of individual freedom or social justice, the old forms of privilege and plunder re-emerge stronger and more arrogant than ever? We are finding out.

The betrayal of America's postwar social contract with which we started our account is but one instance of state treason that is reversing the political covenant of nations with their citizens the world over. A key symptom of this is the steeply rising rates of inequality in virtually every region of the world—particularly in the U.S.—and the precipitous decline in public wealth and state investment in social welfare, especially in areas like education, health, housing, and public infrastructure.<sup>16</sup>

The appearance of the welfare state coincides with the rise of the mass movements that shook Europe during the revolutionary upheavals of the 17th and 18th centuries. The transition to democracy and the triumph of capitalism that followed on the collapse of the old aristocratic regimes amounted to a mutation in the social order. Politics as a deliberative process that included the whole of a society had now become possible. It did not eradicate the power of elites. But it did change the dynamics of social power. Democracy transformed the state from being a mechanism of monopoly control to a political arena where power could be contested. The state became a formalized field of struggle in which the whole of society was to play a part. In the process, the art of politics became infinitely more complex, utilizing aspects of human mass psychology and social manipulation that were previously unknown—precisely because they had been unnecessary in authoritarian regimes where power is legitimized not through the winning of popular consent but through the exercise of brute force.

The electoral process meant that the collective interests of a population, however conceived, might be realized through politics. These interests were bound up with directing the behavior of governments toward ends that conduced to the welfare of society as a whole, not simply the interests of elites. Chief among these was protection against the damaging effects of the capitalist system. Over the course of 150 years, roughly from the late 1700s to the middle of

the 1900s, democracy became the primary means by which the rule of elites could be held in check by a population. It was the formalized instrument of collective power.

The rise of democracy coincides with the gradual introduction of programs that reflected this concern with social equality and the provision for individual and collective welfare. Conversely, the decline of democracy we are witnessing today entails exactly the opposite—the destruction of social welfare and the reassertion of privilege and inequality. This, in turn, requires the crippling of the state in its role as protector of the common welfare.

The conflict between the rights of private property and the common welfare is the central contradiction of the capitalist state. The reversal of policies that pay for the promotion of the common welfare is the main weapon in an arsenal aimed at the permanent disablement of government as an instrument of public power. Beginning in the U.K. and the U.S. during the Thatcher/Regan era, the rise of neoliberal policies spearheaded by tax cuts, public sector privatization, and “welfare reform,” have now become dogma-driving economic and public policy across the globe. The collapse of social welfare through the imposition of austerity policies in country after country is ultimately an assault on the legitimacy of government as the protector of the common welfare. The privatization of public wealth and the colonization of the public sector by capital is an essential part of this process. Another is the glorification of the individual and the demonization of the social.

### **Social Murder**

In his classic work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*,<sup>17</sup> Engels recounted the manner in which capitalist social relations in Victorian England produced conditions that killed and maimed working people. He cited “a pretty list of diseases engendered purely by the hateful money-greed of the manufacturers. Women made unfit for childbearing, children deformed, men enfeebled, limbs crushed, whole generations wrecked, afflicted by disease and infirmity, purely to fill the purses of the bourgeoisie.” These conditions

included poor diets, alcohol consumption, shoddy housing, fetid and unsanitary crowding, disease, violence, and the premature deaths of working people. As the effects of the actions of the bourgeoisie were both foreseeable and avoidable, Engels argued, they could be construed as social murder:

When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such injury that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his [sic] deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessaries of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live—forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence—knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual.<sup>18</sup>

Social murder applies equally to the destruction of lives brought on by the austerity policies implemented by governments of all stripes and aimed at the so-called excesses of the welfare state and the benefits enjoyed by the idle and underserving poor. In Engel's time, these were the consequences of an industrial system that was fed by an unending stream of precarious human labor—uprooted, underpaid, and ultimately disposable. The mass uprisings of the 17th and 18th centuries sought to address these very conditions—initially through the introduction of democracy and, later, via the social protections of the welfare state. Today, the reversal of those victories in the name of austerity hearkens not only to a feudal past but to an equally frightening future.

What, then, might we make of regimes, such as those of Trump in the U.S. or Bolsonaro in Brazil, where the foreseeable and preventable deaths of hundreds of thousands are brought about by the

deliberate deception of a populace and the neglect of basic protections against a global pandemic? Social murder seems an apt term.

Welfare “reform” and the disablement of government is the *raison d’être* of austerity. Always, it is the vulnerable individual and the programs that serve the weakest members of society that are in austerity’s crosshairs—never the excesses of the rich or the uncountable (and untaxed) wealth that has swollen the coffers of the one percent and the corporations they control. Meanwhile, the Lillie Hardens of the world are legion and growing.

In her remarkable work, *Democracy in Chains*, historian Nancy MacLean chronicles this process of democratic dismemberment in depressing detail.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, the recent origins of this process, at least in the U.S., are bound up in the inequalities of race and the efforts of government to impose restrictions on the powers of capital.

It is in this wider context that we must construe the notion of civilizing the state—as a process of democratic reclamation that restores the legitimacy of the state by conforming its operations to the material *and social* well-being of its citizens. This, in turn, is a continuation of that democratizing process that conceived of the state as an instrument of collective welfare. In our time, given the realignment of roles and powers that this will require, we can call this reimagined polity a Partner State. What this entails in practice we will examine in the examples that follow and in the concluding chapters of the book.