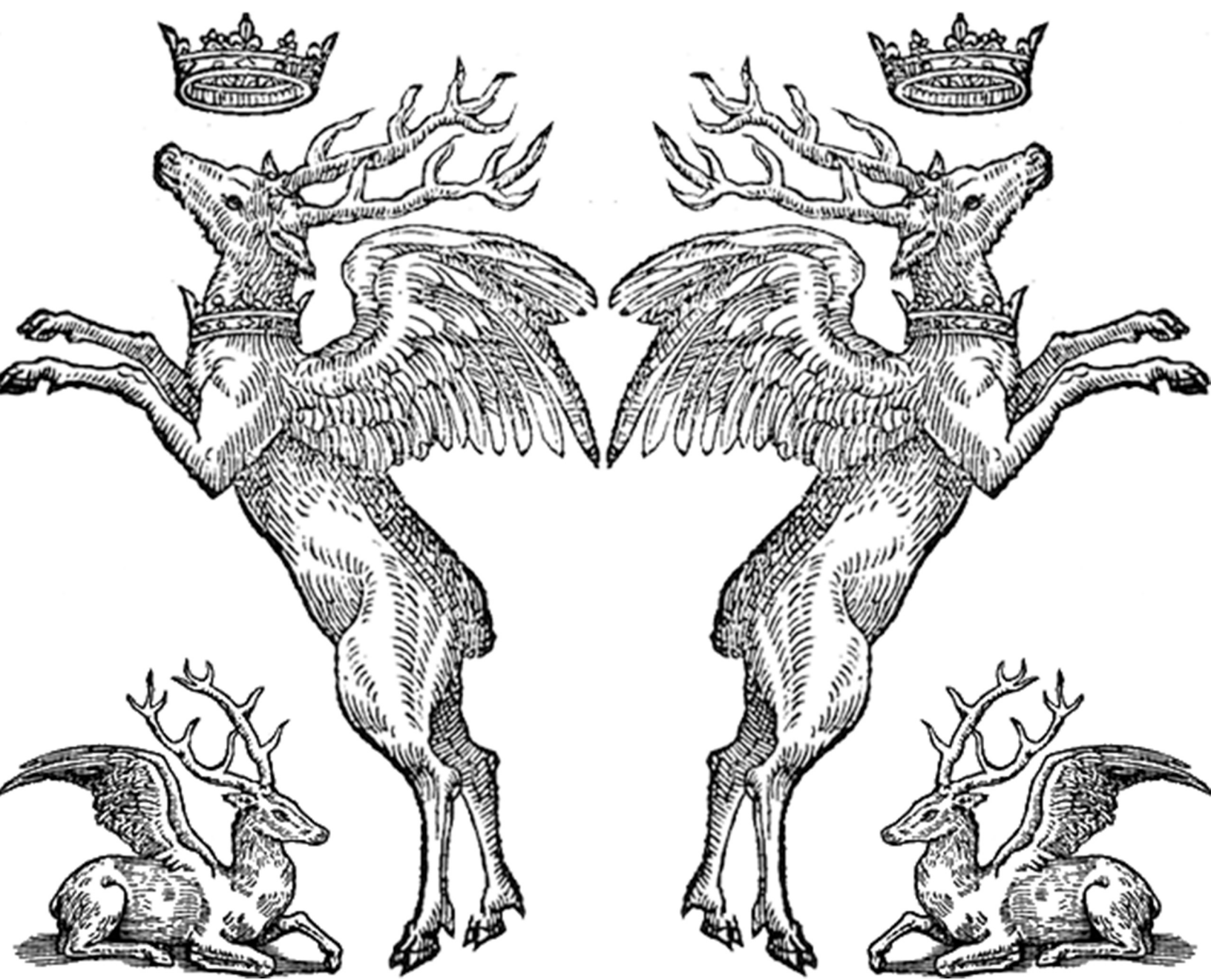


# THE PALTRY IDEAL OF DEMOCRACY

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HELP THE READER FOCUS ON READING  
THEIR TEXT IF THEY SO DESIRE



FROM THE STORE DISTRICT

In recent years, the ideal of democracy has achieved global dominance. Organizations from the U.S. government to the EZLN to the United Nations call for more democracy on both the local and the global scale, and many revolutionaries let themselves be drawn into this chorus of bleating sheep and calling shepherds. A mythology develops in which the goddess Democracy is flanked on the one side by Liberty and on the other by Justice and together, it is said they will bring peace and prosperity to the world.

Reality, of course, never lives up to the myths by which it justifies itself. The ideas, perspectives and social systems promoted by the rulers of the present society are those that serve to maintain and expand their power. In this light, those who seek the destruction of the social order would do well to look at democracy with a cruel and penetrating eye in order to examine its real nature. I think we'd find this "goddess" to be, in fact, a shabby deceiver, wooing us into our enslavement, wed to the masters of power.

To understand democracy as it actually exists in the world, one must understand the nature of state power in its current form. In recent years, state power has decentralized itself. By this I do not mean that real power has spread into the hands of more and more people. Rather the administration of power has been spreading itself across the social territory through the development of an increasingly diffuse and complex techno-bureaucratic apparatus. This apparatus is the social and physical body of the democratic state.

Democracy is the political form best suited to the needs of capitalism. Capitalism needs a populace that is, at the same time, under control and

voluntarily participatory. After all, these are the traits of the perfect consumer. So it should be no surprise that the actualization of capital's global project is going hand in hand with attempts to enforce the creation of democratic states throughout most of the world.

The fact that democratic systems serve power becomes more obvious when we examine the nature of democratic participation. Democracy starts with the assumption that the "good of all" (or "the greatest good for the greatest number") takes precedence over the needs and desires of the individual. This collectivist assumption dates back to the early days of capitalism when it was worked out in the writings of utilitarian philosophers such as John Stuart Mills and Jeremy Bentham. Thus, a political decision-making process that separates decision from action becomes necessary. Decision and execution of the decision must be separated in order to guarantee that "the good of all" is, indeed what is carried out.

But what is this "good of all"? In practise, it could just as readily be called "the good of none". Within the democratic system, the method for finding the "common good" is to bring all sides or their representatives together to negotiate and come to a compromise. But what really is the nature of compromise? Each gives up a little of this, renounces a little of that, sacrifices a bit of the other thing (leaving aside the fact that a few are in a position to be able to sacrifice much less than most), until whatever they may have first desired has disappeared in the haze of the democratic "good of all". Here then is democratic equality: Each leaves the table of negotiation equally disappointed, equally resentful, equally taking solace in the fact that, at least, the others lost as much as oneself. In the end it is only

the two-headed hydra of power, the state and capital, that wins from this process.

The separation of decision from action and the consequent process of negotiation and compromise have the effect of flattening ideas. When ideas cannot be lived in practise, grappled with on the terrain of one's actual existence, the vitality drains out of them. When, in addition, They must always be put into a form aimed not at real discussion or debate, but at negotiation, at finding common ground, they flatten into a two dimensional form of thinking that fits well into a binary logic. Thus, democratic opinion is born, the massified world views that can be measured in opinion polls and voted for in elections. Such flattened ideas are, in fact, just another form of commodity in the capitalist marketplace. And it is only within this context that democratic dialogue exists, this context in which we have really been deprived of the ability to express anything real, anything living, anything with depth or passion. No wonder the democratic state so readily grants the right to "free expression", it has already made the reality impossible.

From the beginning, the capitalist, democratic state has tended to flatten ideas in this manner, but the development of mass media on a large scale has provided the technology necessary for universalizing this process. As life itself is flattened by work and commodity consumption, as the activities people go through every day become increasingly standardized and meaningless from any personal perspective, the media becomes our source of information about what is significant, what is "really happening", what there is to do, say and think. Here, we find the separation between decision



and action in its completeness. We read about this policy, see scenes from that war on television, hear of some corporate misconduct on National Public Radio; and we all have our opinions that we can express in the numberless polls and surveys, in letters to editors or congress people, in elections. But these opinions will never lead us to take real action that puts our lives at risk. After all, they are based on stories from the newspaper, from television, from the media, tales from which the life has been drained before we ever heard them about events quite distant and unreal. Meanwhile our own lives tick by as always in the tedious repetition of work and pay.

Opinion, the idea flattened and separated from real life, gives us the illusion of freedom. After all, can't I express my opinion? Can't I have my say? This is the supposed beauty of democracy. The entire process by which opinion develops, this process of separating ideas from life and flattening them into the basis for pub talk and opinion polls is the basis for the general consensus by which democracy justifies itself. It presents itself as the one political system that, unlike other political systems, allows the free discussion about all political systems. That such a construction determines the outcome of any such discussion in advance should be obvious. What is less obvious is the option that is left out: the refusal of every political system.

It should be clear from all this that there is an agenda behind democracy. The "common good" that it works for is actually the good of the present social order. What else do we really have in common beyond the fact that we are all exploited and dominated by this order? So the "common good",

in fact, means that which is good for the continuation of exploitation and domination. By drawing us into the process of fictitious participation outlined above, democracy becomes the most truly totalitarian political system that has ever existed. Our lives come to be defined in terms of its processes in ways that no other political system could accomplish. This is why democracy is the state structure best suited to the needs of capital. Capital needs to permeate every moment of life, to define it terms of the economy. To do so requires a transformation in the nature of human beings, the transformation of living individuals into producer-consumers. Democracy, by transforming the self-creating individual into a citizen of the state, that is into a cog in the social machine, in fact helps capital to accomplish this project.

So, in reality, this is what democracy looks: an empty existence devoid of vitality, given to the endless repetition of the same activities not of our choosing, compensated with the right to chatter on and on about that on which we cannot act. To wed revolution to this pathetic ideal would create a meager revolution. To wed anarchism to it would rain the life from all our finest passions and leave a stunted caricature for the amusement of academics and cultural theorists. Our revolution can't grow from such paltry ideals; it must spring from the great dreams of those who will not compromise their lives.



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