American political theorist Jeffrey C. Isaac in this thoughtful article offers a critical interpretation of the prevailing, often contradictory, viewpoints regarding the revolutions of 1989 and the role of dissident notions of freedom and rights in the dismantling of the Leninist regimes. Inspired by Karl R. Popper’s critique of historicism, Isaac rejects monistic interpretations that assign one single meaning to these events and proposes a multifaceted approach that would recognize the plurality of significations associated with them. The most important element in his analysis is the effort to recuperate and deepen the vision of political life and action developed in the thinking and practice of East Central European dissent. In this respect, his approach is radically different from G. M. Tamás’s and Tony Judt’s visions of dissidents as naive dreamers, deprived of profound connections with the societies they claimed to speak for.

Readers should notice Isaac’s plea for an open-minded, nondogmatic vision of democratic politics. Acknowledging the merits of liberalism, he argues that the legacy of what East European critical intellectuals used to call “antipolitics” should not be lightly dismissed. In other words, unlike those who herald the advent of liberal democracy as a nonproblematic accomplishment, Isaac thinks that the new ideas and styles of politics generated in the experience of dissent, including nonparliamentary forms of participation and the ethos of civil society, represent democratic possibilities relevant for the future of democracy in the “East” and the “West”.

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History, as an entirety, could exist only in the eyes of an observer outside it and outside the world. History only exists, in the final analysis, for God. (Camus, 1956, p. 189)
The historicist does not recognize that it is we who select and order the facts of history…Instead of recognizing that historical interpretation should answer a need arising out of the practical problems and decisions which face us, the historicist believes that…by contemplating history we may discover the secret, the essence of human destiny. Historicism is out to find The Path on which mankind is destined to walk; it is out to discover The Clue to History or The Meaning of History…[Yet] history has no meaning.

(Popper, 1971, p. 269)

In 1789 the Ancien Regime fell, accompanied by the crash of falling ramparts (Camus, 1956, p. 26). Punctuating an age of democratic revolution, the upheaval caught the attention of the world. Immanuel Kant spoke for many “enlightened” thinkers when he observed that: “The revolution of a gifted people which we have seen unfolding in our day may succeed or miscarry…this revolution, I say, nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators…a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm…” (1963, p. 148). Almost exactly two hundred years later ramparts again came crashing down, this time in the East of Europe. Symbolized so dramatically by the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the entire edifice of Communist rule—a truly immense superstructure weighting down upon its people—and with it the “Iron Curtain” dividing Europe from itself, came tumbling down, and democratic oppositions long subjected to persecution and marginality were swept into power.

What do these events mean? What is their significance for the citizens of what used to be called Eastern Europe? What is their significance for democrats at the dawn of a new century? Intellectual history since 1789 proves that it is impossible to arrive at a single interpretation of events of such magnitude. For over two hundred years writers have argued about the meaning of the French Revolution. As we continually reassess ourselves, our political communities, and the problems facing them, we quite naturally reconsider those foundational episodes and events that have shaped our past and help to define our political identities. In this sense, history has no absolute or final meaning; it is continually, historically, interpreted and reinterpreted. On this most philosophers and historians would probably agree.

There is surely a range of possible interpretations of 1989. And yet at present a powerful consensus has taken shape on behalf of an avowedly liberal interpretation. The most famous, indeed notorious, exponent of this view is a writer who, intoxicated with Hegel, has clearly not yet properly learned the lessons of historicism. Francis Fukuyama, in his influential essay “The End of History” and later in his book by the same name, proclaimed that we have reached “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (1989, p. 4). Fukuyama was not alone in his enthusiasm. Marc Plattner, co-editor of the Journal of Democracy (founded in 1996), seconded this
view, declaring that we now find ourselves in “a world with one dominant principle of legitimacy, democracy” (1992).

Such Hegelian optimism has been challenged by many liberal democrats. Jean-Francois Revel has cautioned against “an overhasty assumption that the movement toward democracy represented a sort of reverse millennium, the arrival of the eternal kingdom of history” (1991, pp. 14–15). Perhaps the most serious statement of such skepticism has been articulated by Samuel P. Huntington. “To hope for a benign end to history,” he writes, “is human. To expect it to happen is unrealistic. To plan on it happening is disastrous” (Huntington, 1989, pp. 3–11). Yet one need not be Hegelian in order to hold that the revolutions of 1989 represent the triumph of liberalism. Indeed, Huntington’s own sophisticated account of the current “third wave” of liberal democratic transformation is one of many efforts to develop more realistic, constructive policies to assure the triumph of liberal democracy that Fukuyama only prematurely heralds.\(^4\) In spite of significant disagreements, many liberal analysts concur that the transition to liberal democracy is the principal issue on the agenda today.

While I believe that there is much merit to this liberal interpretation, I consider it both politically and morally flawed. It is politically flawed because it marginalizes and/or ignores important forms of politics that were practiced by the Central European democratic oppositions, forms not adequately covered by liberalism. It is morally flawed because, in doing so, it prematurely forecloses some very complex questions about the meanings and legacies of 1989, thereby precluding certain important avenues of political action. More specifically, it minimizes the importance of nonelectoral, nonparliamentary forms of political activity—in particular the kinds of civic initiatives that played an important role in resisting communism—in opposing authoritarianism and constituting genuine spaces of democratic politics. While the “high politics” of normal liberal democratic institutions are important, these need to be supplemented by—and sometimes challenged by—more vigorous, grass-roots forms of citizenship. This is particularly true at a time when masses of people experience economic difficulty and frustration, and the institutions of mass democratic politics cannot compensate for these sufferings and indeed are often viewed as part of the problem. The liberal interpretation of 1989 that I criticize fails to see this.

It bears emphasis that in criticizing this liberal interpretation I do not wish to indict liberalism as a whole. A number of liberal democrats have developed criticisms of really existing liberal democracy that overlap substantially with the democratic arguments defended in this paper.\(^5\) It would be a serious mistake to lump all liberals together and declare them celebrants of existing liberal institutional arrangements. Yet there is currently prevailing a liberal viewpoint that does celebrate such arrangements and that seeks to incorporate the democratic revolutions of 1989 neatly within them. This version of liberalism—a monist liberalism if there ever was one—merits criticism.
In the spirit of Popper’s critique of historicism, I will reject the idea that 1989 has a single meaning. It has many meanings. While in some ways it suggests a triumph of liberalism, in other ways it presents more democratic and participatory possibilities. While it would be mistaken to overestimate these possibilities or their significance, it would equally be mistaken to ignore them. For at a time in which liberal democracy is suffering from its own forms of legitimacy crisis, these more democratic possibilities have relevance for the future of democracy in the “East” and the “West.”

The triumph of liberalism?

While Fukuyama’s 1989 essay articulated a sense of liberal enthusiasm that was fairly widespread among politicians and media commentators, liberal scholars who saw the weaknesses of his historicism did not fully dissent from his prognosis regarding the end of ideology. Stephen Holmes, for example, in his scathing review of Fukuyama’s book, noted that, “Throughout the post-Communist world…we are observing waves of radical change that look so far like a liberal revolution.” “Is liberal revolution,” he asked rhetorically, “not the most significant fact of contemporary political life?” (Holmes, 1992a, pp. 27, 33). Contra Fukuyama, liberalism is not eschatological; but it is stable, fair, open, and free. What is taking place, Holmes suggests, is surely a liberal transformation, one more complex, and problematic, than the triumph proclaimed by Fukuyama but a vindication of liberalism nonetheless.

As Gale Stokes writes in his recent history of the Central European revolutions: “Theirs was not a revolution of total innovation, but rather the shucking off of a failed experiment in favor of an already existing model, pluralist democracy” (Stokes, 1993, p. 260). This is surely the dominant interpretation of 1989. Thus, Bruce Ackerman identifies 1989 with “the return of revolutionary democratic liberalism,” the revival of a political project inaugurated by the framers of the United States Constitution (Ackerman, 1992, p. 1). Ralph Dahrendorf, in his subtle Reflections on the Revolution in Europe, writes that: “At its core, the European revolution of 1989 is the rejection of an unbearable and, as we have seen, untenable reality, and by the same token it is a reaffirmation of old ideas. Democracy…pluralism…citizenship…are not exactly new ideas.” What has triumphed, Dahrendorf insists, is nothing but the idea of an “open society,” a liberal idea whose progenitors include Locke, Hume, Madison, Kant, and, more recently, Raymond Aron and Karl Popper (Dahrendorf, 1990, pp. 27, 75–6). This thesis has been stated most forcefully by Timothy Garton Ash, who maintains that the European revolutions “can offer no fundamentally new ideas on the big questions of politics, economics, law or international relations. The ideas whose time has come are old, familiar, well-tested ones”—liberal ideas about the rule of law, parliamentary government, and an independent judiciary (Garton Ash, 1990a, p. 154).
Those who subscribe to this view do not necessarily believe that the triumph of liberalism has yet been assured. Indeed, most emphatically do not believe this. Valerie Bunce (1990) articulates a common concern when she notes that “the question foremost on the minds of people in the East and the West alike…is whether the new regimes in Eastern Europe will succeed in their desire to become genuine liberal democracies.”9 Because this is a question, liberal political scientists and constitutional theorists have turned their attention to matters of constitutional and political engineering. As Stephen Holmes notes in the inaugural issue of the *East European Constitutional Review*, the journal of the newly established Center for the Study of Constitutionalism in Eastern Europe at the University of Chicago Law School: “From Albania to the Baltics and, more recently, in Russia itself, attempts are being made to design liberal-democratic political institutions…Chances for a successful transition to liberal democracy vary from country to country…but institutional design will have important long-term consequences for the stability and effectiveness of democratic government” (Holmes, 1992b). Bruce Ackerman echoes this sentiment. At a time of enormous turbulence and uncertainty, he insists, “the challenge for statecraft is to use these fleeting moments to build new and stronger foundations for liberal democracy” (Ackerman, 1992, p. 27). Western analysts have turned their attention to this challenge of statecraft with a vengeance. A proliferation of books and scholarly articles debate the virtues and vices of alternative electoral schemes, the perils of presidentialism or parliamentarism, the character of judicial review, and the logic of constitutionalism. New journals, like the *Journal of Democracy* and *East European Constitutional Review*, focus their attention on how better to effect a transition to functioning and stable liberal democracy in Central Europe.

Yet the view that 1989 set Central Europe on the path of liberal democratic transition is not simply the view of many important Western theorists; it is given credence by the reflections of Central Europeans themselves, including many who are quite famous for their roles in the democratic oppositions to Communism. János Kis, for example, has maintained that:

> The alternative Hungary is facing now is to create a constitutional, multiparty democracy and a mixed, market economy, or to regress into economic decay and political Balkanization. The chance for the former to happen seems to be slim. Still, this is our only chance for the next generations. We cannot choose another terrain, more favorable to the realization of the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. We have to try to use this tiny bit of chance, here and now.

(Kis, 1989, p. 241)10

Adam Michnik has frequently sounded a similar theme—there are but two futures for Eastern Europe, the Western future of liberal democracy and political
compromise or a descent into xenophobia and fractious tribalism (Michnik, 1990a, 1990b). In defense of the former, he writes that:

liberal values in the era of post-communism, values codified in the writings of John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, and also those of Hayek, are meeting with their true renaissance. Through their resistance to communism, they rediscovered their vision of civil liberty, their dreams of parliamentarism, of cultural and political pluralism, of tolerance, and their desire for a country free of any kind of ideological dictatorship.

(Michnik, 1991a, pp. 70––2)\textsuperscript{11}

George Konrád, whose book *Antipolitics* was a veritable bible of democratic opposition to Communism, has perhaps best summed up this selfunderstanding: “Why am I a liberal? Because I am skeptical about everything human, about our collective self; because for me there are no institutions, persons, or concepts that are sacrosanct or above criticism… For me, liberalism, is, first of all, a style: worldly, civilized, personal, ironic…” (Konrád, 1990, p. 189).

What are we to make of this apparent convergence between Western scholars and Eastern former dissidents on a liberal interpretation of 1989? There is reason, I believe, at least to discount the liberal enthusiasm among Central European intellectuals. As one commentator has noted, it is not liberalism as a philosophical or political doctrine so much as liberalism as an attitude that has experienced the renaissance to which Michnik refers. “Liberalism,” Szacki writes, “appears to Eastern Europe as a utopia, as a vision of the good society most glaringly opposed to the realities of the communist system” (1990, p. 472). The senses in which former oppositionists declare themselves to be liberals need to be unpacked; their own self-understandings, in other words, cannot be taken at face value if we wish to understand their current allegiances. Beyond this, there is no reason to privilege their views of the revolutions they helped to happen. Tocqueville long ago pointed out that revolutionaries can misperceive the events in which they participate. Unintended consequences, and possibilities too quickly foreclosed, seem almost inevitable features of revolutionary transformations. While the words of Michnik and Konrád tell us something important, then, there is no reason to treat them as the last words on our subject.

One way to get a better handle on the supposed triumph of liberal democracy would be to disaggregate this idea into a number of distinct claims, each of which needs to be judged on its own merit. The question, then, is not whether or not liberalism has triumphed, but in which sense or senses has it triumphed. Let me suggest that there are at least three distinct senses in which liberalism might be believed to have triumphed. In each sense liberalism has triumphed but not unambiguously.

First, we might speak of the practical triumph of liberal democratic institutions. It seems pretty clear that with the downfall of Communism monopolistic political regimes have given way to more “polyarchal”
arrangements. The various “civic forum” type oppositional coalitions quickly gave way to Round Table negotiations between communist leaderships and democratic political elites about the transition to a liberal democracy. Constitutions, in some cases final, in some cases provisional, have been established, formally organizing public offices and containing bills of rights. Liberal democratic institutions—separation of powers, regular competitive elections, party systems—have been put into place. Political parties have supplanted and co-opted democratic opposition movements, channeling and “aggregating” political demands in manageable, politically “normalized” ways. More or less free and fair elections have been held, and successful alterations of government have been accomplished. In this sense we might speak descriptively of the institutionalization of liberal democracy, a process that could be explained partly by the structural imperatives of organizing political disagreement in a large-scale modern society, and partly by the financial requirements of a modern market economy operating in a global capitalist economy. It would be impossible to deny the political triumph of liberalism in this sense.12

And yet, of course, political processes in Central Europe are still very much in flux. Many crucial constitutional issues—the restitution of property nationalized under Communism, the so-called “lustration” of former Communists, and the status of the nomenklatura more generally—remain outstanding. The drastic and precipitous transformation of economic life, and with it the marked decline in the standards of living of many Central Europeans, have fed a widespread sense of popular resentment that has fueled chauvinistic ideologies. The problem of national minorities that is endemic to the region has exacerbated such ideologies. Authoritarian populism, in other words, is a real competitor of liberal democracy.13 Perhaps equally ominous is the geopolitical uncertainty in the former Soviet Union and the brutal dismemberment of Yugoslavia, both of which add to the sense of popular anxiety and symbolize the insecurity of liberal democratic institutionalization in Central Europe. The tribalistic alternative against which Kis and Michnik caution still remains.

The limits of the triumph of liberalism in this first sense bring us to a second sense in which we might speak of a liberal vindication—the triumph of liberalism as an ethical-political imperative. Few liberal theorists would deny the great difficulties currently besetting liberalism in Central Europe. The point, I think, is that these are viewed as obstacles to the project of constructing liberal democracy rather than as plausible alternatives in their own right. From this point of view, while the success of liberalism is not yet assured, the alternatives to it are demonstrably undesirable. Whatever its problems, liberal democracy is, we might say, following Churchill’s famous quip, the least bad form of government. If we wish to live in and enjoy the advantages of a modern market economy, and if we wish to avoid civil war in societies characterized by all kinds of ineliminable differences, then liberal democracy is the order of the day. What Holmes calls “constitutional design” and Ackerman “statecraft” thus becomes a pressing need.
There is much truth to this claim as well. It is impossible to consider the Bosnian tragedy, or the rise of chauvinistic ideologies in Slovakia, Romania, and the Baltic states, or the disturbing ascendency of politicians like Zhirinovsky in Russia, or the anti-Semitic rhetoric of Csurka in Hungary and to question the attractiveness of liberal constitutionalism. The wave of anti-communist witch-hunting that has plagued political debate, threatening to engulf Central Europe societies in bitter recrimination about the past and offering fertile ground for political demagoguery, makes evident the importance of typically liberal civil liberties like the presumption of innocence and legal due process. The insensitive and at times hostile ways in which national and religious minorities have been treated underscores the importance of liberal toleration.

As Ulrich Preuss has argued, two competing logics of citizenship continue to jockey for position in Central Europe: a civil conception that defines as citizens those who are subject to a common law, and an ethnic conception that defines citizenship in terms of membership in a distinct ethnic or national group (Preuss, 1993). The latter conception is profoundly hostile to the proceduralism of liberal representative government, and, mirroring the writings of Carl Schmitt, it relies upon appeals to an ethnically homogenous popular will against those “special interests”—national minorities, foreign capital, politicians—held to stand in the way of authentic popular sovereignty. Such a vision, not without its appeal in Central Europe today, is simply another right-wing version of the “totalitarian democracy” long ago identified by Jacob Talmon (1970). In light of all this, it is hard to disagree with the judgment of Stephen Holmes:

The main political danger, conversely, is...the spirit of antiparliamentarism...Hence, the challenge in Eastern Europe today is to prevent extraparliamentary leaders from building public support on the basis of nondemocratic and nonelectoral forms of legitimacy.

In this sense, liberal democratization is an ethico-political imperative. For the only macro-political alternative seems to be some combination of authoritarianism, civil war, and economic decline. And yet even here some caution is in order. For what is the relationship between the liberal project and the other possibilities liberals like Holmes and Garton Ash frighteningly project? Are these alternatives simply obstacles to be combated? Do they answer to pressing concerns that derive from inadequacies of the liberal democratic transition itself, especially the endemic problems of economic dislocation and political alienation? Can these challenges be so readily dismissed? For the purposes of my argument I will put aside what we might call the authoritarian populist alternative, for it is clearly both anti-liberal and anti-democratic, an
alternative to be opposed however politically viable it may seem. But are there no other alternatives to liberal democracy? And might not a more radically democratic alternative in fact play some role in combating authoritarian populism?

Here things become complicated, and we move on to the third sense in which liberal democracy can be said to have triumphed, not simply as the practical result of structural forces or as an ethical-political imperative, but as the fulfillment of the democratic opposition to Communism. Let us return to some of the historical claims cited above, that “theirs was not a revolution of total innovation, but rather the shucking off of a failed experiment in favor of an already existing model…,” that “the common goal was not just throwing the rascals out, but also building liberal democracy” (Stokes, 1993, p. 260; Bunce, 1990, p. 403). Many liberal commentators have not simply offered a political prognosis but a historical interpretation, to the effect that liberal democratic institutions are the intended outcome of the revolutions, or at least of the most advanced democratic leaderships of the revolutions. Such a view recapitulates a nice, neat nineteenth-century progressivist scheme, pitting the forces of liberation against the forces of reaction, liberal democratic reformers against Communist reactionaries in league with nationalist ideologues. Revolutionary success versus reactionary failure. The choices seem clear.

Like the other senses in which liberal democracy can be said to have been vindicated, there is much truth to the view that liberal democracy has long been the goal of the revolutionaries themselves. The remarks of Michnik, Kis, and Konrád cited earlier certainly lend plausibility to it. At an even deeper level, the major democratic oppositions in Central Europe—the Movement for Civil Liberties and later the Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia, the Democratic Opposition in Hungary, and the Committee for Social Self-Defense and Solidarity in Poland—had by 1989 all demanded an end to Communist rule and the institution of multiparty liberal democracy, demands that accurately reflected the long-standing positions of leading activists, many of whom had begun their careers as human rights dissidents.21 At an even deeper level still, if we examine the major writings of the principal dissident intellectuals—Havel, Konrád, Michnik, Kuroň, Kis—it is not hard to discern that a recurrent theme is the need for limits in politics, surely a theme with liberal resonance.

And yet here too things are more complicated. For if we examine the views of the democratic oppositionists more deeply, we will discover that while they are democratic, it is not clear that they are unambiguously liberal democratic. This is not to say that they are antiliberal.22 Liberal ideas of individual liberty and liberal institutions of constitutional government are surely valued as necessary ingredients of human freedom and dignity. But they are not viewed as sufficient for many of the democratic oppositionists. There is, if you will, a democratic “surplus value” that the liberal interpretation of 1989 quietly expropriates.

Indeed, liberals admit as much in passing. Ackerman, for example, both praises and criticizes the “antipolitical” vision shared by people like Konrád and Havel.
Its resistance to totalitarianism was meritorious. But its calls for existential integrity, he maintains, are insufficiently practical for the task of liberal construction. Havel’s “Heideggerian contempt for the Enlightenment in general and Western consumerism in particular has an authoritarian ring.” Indeed, the very idea of “living in truth”—a hallmark of the democratic opposition—is “positively dangerous if the truth is understood with grim philosophical passion” (Ackerman, 1992, pp. 32–3).

Just what Ackerman means by this last remark about grim philosophical passion is made clearer by a similar observation offered by Timothy Garton Ash:

Now we expect many things of politicians in a well-functioning parliamentary democracy. But “living in truth” is not one of them. In fact the essence of democratic politics might rather be described as “working in half-truth.” Parliamentary democracy is, at its heart, a system of limited adversarial mendacity, in which each party attempts to present part of the truth as if it were the whole.

(Garton Ash, 1990b, p. 52)

Garton Ash makes explicit what Ackerman keeps implicit—that too much integrity, conscientiousness, “authenticity” is anathema to liberal democracy, which requires a certain cavalierliness about truth and honesty if it is to function properly.23 The most sophisticated argument to this effect has been presented by Elisabeth Kiss, who maintains that while the vision of “antipolitics” developed by the democratic oppositionists played a very important role in inspiring and organizing opposition to Communism, this vision is insufficient as a model for ongoing, normal politics in a complex society. “The new social order that will emerge in East-Central Europe, and the extent to which it fosters democratic aspirations,” she avers, “will depend in large measure on governments, parliaments, and parties.” Because the “antipolitics” of the oppositionists abjured such institutions in favor of more genuine agencies, it “translates badly into the post-communist era” (Kiss, 1992, pp. 230, 226).

Kiss frankly puts her finger on the problem with the idea that 1989 represents a fulfillment of the opposition vision by identifying the striking tensions between the liberal democracy currently being instituted and the aspirations of many of those who struggled most vigorously against Communism. With this in mind, we can return to Holmes’s observation that the principal task facing liberal democrats is “to prevent extraparliamentary leaders from building public support on the basis of nondemocratic and nonelectoral forms of legitimacy.” The question is simple. Are all extraparliamentary efforts to build public support on the basis of nonelectoral forms of legitimacy anti-democratic? Or are there forms of democratic politics that are democratic precisely by virtue of going beyond parliamentary and electoral institutions? What I will argue is that there are such forms of politics, and that they were pioneered by the democratic oppositionists.
Among the many meanings of 1989, one is the continuing importance of such forms of politics.

**Antipolitical politics revisited**

In many ways the Central European democratic oppositions can be seen as animated by liberal principles of state neutrality, the rule of law, the accountability of government, and the inviolability of private life. Confronting an arbitrary and repressive Communist state, these oppositions began as human rights initiatives, monitoring governmental abuses, petitioning for redress of specific grievances, and publicizing egregious violations of human rights recognized by international law and the Communist constitutions themselves.

And yet such initiatives implicated a more radically democratic kind of political praxis. The political aspect of their activity derived in part from the simple fact that in a totalitarian state all independent initiatives of any kind assumed a political importance, at least implicitly challenging the party’s monopoly of political legitimacy. In this sense it can be viewed as no more than a tactic or at best a strategy of achieving a liberal democratic opening over time. But what came to be known as “antipolitical politics,” whatever its initial motivations—which surely differed from person to person—was more than a strategy. It developed into an alternative form of politics. Its very means—which were ever so scrupulously selfmonitored—became its ends. Antipolitical politics was, in short, what antipolitical politics did. What it did was to organize forms of solidarity and assistance for the persecuted and marginalized under conditions of extreme duress. A strong ethos of solidarity and participation was necessary to support such initiatives in the face of state repression and mass indifference when not outright hostility. As one of the first appeals of KOR, the Polish Committee on Social Self-Defense, put it:

> the independent social activity reemerging in the course of the past several years is based above all on the organization of authentic public opinion, on the defense against reprisals, on the formulation of genuine social demands, and on the interruption of the state monopoly over the dissemination of information. Participation in these activities is open to everyone...It is necessary to organize to defend one’s rights.

(“Appeal to Society,” 1985, pp. 481–2)

In what ways did this practice of organizing “civil society against the state” in order to “to defend one’s rights” implicate a non-liberal but democratic form of politics? I will suggest an answer by analyzing a single initiative, the Czechoslovakian human rights group Charter 77.

As is fairly well known, Charter 77 was formed in 1976 as an ad hoc community of individuals who sought to protest the arrest of an avant-garde rock bank called Plastic People of the Universe. The Charter was formed around the
drafting of a declaration of protest that appealed to the principles of legality affirmed by the Helsinki Accords, to which the Czech regime had been a signatory. But it soon became the nucleus of a number of independent initiatives aimed at the democratization of Czech society.\textsuperscript{25}

In some ways Charter 77 was the declaration of protest, for from the very beginning it forswore any formal organization or explicit membership. Whoever signed the Charter simply was by the very act of having done so a “Chartist.”\textsuperscript{26} The Chartists considered themselves a “civic initiative” rather than a “classic opposition” or a “movement.”\textsuperscript{27} As one Charter document (Document No. 9/1984) put it, a civic initiative is “an ongoing common initiative by individual citizens of all ages, callings, political opinions and religious beliefs. They are linked by a sense of public responsibility for the way things are and a determination to take action to correct the present depressing state of affairs” (“Open Letter…,” 1984, p. 16). A civic initiative is an open-ended form of voluntary association, an exercise of civic responsibility for the “state of affairs.” But it is not an interest group or a mass movement, for it avoids formal organization and abjures political power. It operates in the sphere of civil society, independent of official and formal political institutions, and it seeks to influence “public opinion” rather than directly to exercise political power.

In many ways this conception of civic initiative was adopted as a strategic necessity out of a desire to avoid a frontal challenge to totalitarian state power.\textsuperscript{28} But it also reflected a specific theoretical understanding of modern politics consistently elaborated in Charter documents. The 1984 “Open Letter to the British Peace Movements,” for example, states that:

Charter 77 does not constitute a movement in the accepted sense. (These are not, however, “sour grapes” on the part of some cryptooppositional group vegetating in a totalitarian society, but a policy we have pursued consistently on the basis of our conviction that it represents a new factor in overcoming the global political and moral crisis.) Charter 77 is far more concerned to promote and extend the aforementioned sense of responsibility than to become a mass movement and win the maximum possible number of supporters; it is hardly in any position, anyway, to set itself specific political goals, leastways not in the sense that the word “politics” has been understood heretofore [sic].

(“Open Letter…,” 1984, p. 16)

This point is made even more emphatically in one of the most serious and revealing Charter documents, the “Statement on the Occasion of the Eighth Anniversary of Charter 77.” The Charter rejects formal political organization or objectives, it argues, not out of opportunism or strategic necessity. It does so because:
its goal is really fundamentally different. It is deeper and more farreaching: its goal is to rehabilitate people as the true subjects of history…[which] by its very nature radically transcends the framework of mere changes of the system of power, i.e., the framework of eventual exchange of one official ideology for another, one group of rulers for another. This effort represents potential criticism of every system because every system, even the best, conceals within itself a tendency to elevate itself above people. Therefore, Charter 77 has a valid purpose under any circumstances.


Three key ideas are expressed in these documents: that there is a “global crisis” of political and moral responsibility, that the participation of ordinary citizens is necessary to address this crisis, and that this makes the Charter as a set of ideas and initiatives relevant “under any circumstances” as a response not simply to totalitarianism, but to a crisis of modern politics more generally.

These ideas have long been associated with the writings of Václav Havel. But the extraordinary diversity of Chartist documents makes clear that however influential Havel undoubtedly was, these ideas had fairly wide currency among the Czech democratic oppositionists. Indeed, while the Charter included individuals from many different political tendencies—radical democrats, democratic socialists, reform Communists, independent Trotskyists, liberals, religious conservatives—the very form of Charter initiatives led them to a remarkable convergence on a common understanding of the politics of their activities. They spoke of an “anti-political politics” of a kind of ethical responsibility and initiative that went beyond politics “in the ordinary sense” or “as commonly understood.”

This was a republican politics with deep Arendtian resonances.

It was anti-teleological in the sense that what was central to the Chartist was less the motives or the goals of action than the modes of action themselves. And it was an effort “to reach for a new type of politics, or rather, a revival of what was once understood by the term ‘politics,’ the way it was practiced, and which has, today, been almost forgotten”—an effort to revive active citizenship (Document No. 2/1985, “Commission…,” 1988, p. 161; Document No. 1/1987, “Commission…,” 1988, pp. 276–85). These themes were elaborated in a remarkable essay by Václav Benda entitled “The Parallel Polis,” which was originally published in *samizdat* in 1978 and spawned a vigorous debate among the Czech democratic opposition. A number of important themes emerged from this discussion.

First, the Czech democrats viewed politics in non-strategic, though not anti-strategic, terms. While they always sought particular objectives—indeed, in their revulsion against grandiose ideologies they turned particularity into a virtue—they had little aspiration directly to influence public policy. For them politics was primarily a way of being and acting so as palpably to experience one’s power
and affirm one’s dignity. As Ivan Jirous, musical director of the Plastic People and an important cultural radical, wrote of the “parallel polis:”

It does not compete for power. Its aim is not to replace the powers that be with power of another kind, but rather under this power—or beside it—to create a structure that respects other laws and in which the voice of the ruling power is heard only as an insignificant echo from a world that is organized in an entirely different way.

(Benda et al., 1988, p. 277)

It is, of course, important to remember that the “entirely different way” to which he refers is the deadening and repressive mode of decaying totalitarianism. But his point has perhaps a broader relevance. In the face of a political system whose power seems secure and beyond radical transformation, he insists on the necessity of creating independent poleis beneath and beside it. Such communities do not principally direct themselves toward the state or the formal political system; the activities they sustain “are their own goals. In them, the intrinsic tendency of people to create things of value is realized. By giving meaning to their lives and the lives of those close to them, people are able to resist the futility that threatens to swallow them up” (Benda et al., 1988, pp. 228–9).

Ladislav Hejdanek sounded a similar theme:

Such a [democratic] regeneration is possible only in the form of free initiatives undertaken by individuals and small groups who are willing to sacrifice something in the interest of higher aims and values...The beginning of all independence is taking our lives seriously, deciding for something that is worth taking responsibility for, being prepared to devote our energy, our work, and our lives to something of value, or, more appropriately, to someone rather than something.

(Benda et al., 1988, pp. 242–3)

The Arendtian resonances—creating value, resisting futility, regenerating democracy—are striking. The Chartists saw themselves as resisting the “worldlessness” and deracination characteristic of totalitarianism, and of modern life more generally.

The Chartists described their community as a “small island in a sea of apathy,” the “visible tips of the iceberg” of discontent (Benda et al., 1988, p. 232). For the Chartists, the insularity of the parallel poleis was one of their prime virtues. Such insularity afforded protection from a repressive state, but also established protective walls around activities otherwise threatened with being “swallowed up” by the conformity and consumerism of modern industrial society. As Havel wrote: “It seems to me that all of us, East and West, face one fundamental task from which all else should follow. That task is one of resisting vigilantly, thoughtfully, and attentively, but at the same time with total dedication, at every
step and everywhere, the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal and inhuman power—the power of ideologies, systems, apparat, bureaucracy, artificial languages, and political slogans” (Havel, 1987a, p. 153).

The islands of civic engagement and solidarity improvised by the Czech democrats represented for them the most effective way to practice such a resistance. The courage and conviction exhibited by the citizens of such islands distinguished them from the mass surrounding them, threatening to engulf them. The proximity of membership, and of objective, bound them together in ways that mass organizations could never hope to accomplish. These citizens could see and hear their fellows. They could directly experience the results of their action. They could personally be affirmed by their citizenship. Who were these citizens? Artists, writers, historians—persecuted, underemployed, insecure to be sure—but also shopkeepers, housewives, students, even factory laborers. They came from all walks of life, and what distinguished them was their commitment to principle, not their origins or their social status.

Charter 77 and its adjuncts were not elites in the conventional sense. They were elites only in the sense of people bound together by a common refusal to be swallowed up by the conformity that surrounded them. Their members “lived in truth” where most lived a lie. Where most lived as subjects, accepting the disempowering structure of society, performing rituals of obedience in spite of their misgivings, the Chartists lived as citizens who had the courage of their convictions. Yet the Chartists refused to consider themselves a higher type of person, just as they refused to consider more ordinary, conformist individuals to be inherently corrupt. As Václav Havel noted in his famous essay, “The Power of the Powerless,” it is impossible categorically to distinguish between the conforming member of society and the true, independent citizen, for the line separating the two “runs de facto through each person.” Everyone is in some respects complicit in the ongoing structures of mass society; and no one is so utterly entrapped within them that he or she is incapable of some kind of independence on some occasion. The boundaries separating the islands and the seas are thus ever-shifting. At the same time, the connections between islands and seas vary. As Havel maintains: “It is probably not true to say that there is a small enclave of ‘completely independent’ people here in an ocean of ‘completely dependent people’ with no interaction between them. There is an enclave of ‘relatively independent’ ones who persistently, gradually, and inconspicuously enrich their ‘relatively dependent’ surrounding through the spiritually liberating and morally challenging meaning of their own independence” (Benda et al., 1988, p. 237). In this way the parallel poleis are not wholly self-absorbed in spite of their insularity. They point beyond themselves, having a “radiating effect” on their environment, an effect caused by the force of their example, by the embarrassment of those who failed to act, by the indirect moral pressure exerted on the regime. At the same time they discover the appropriate locus of political responsibility—the civic initiative of concrete
human beings acting on their own behalf, thinking and speaking for themselves (Havel, 1987b, pp. 103–4).

As should be clear, the independent initiatives of Charter 77, especially the vigorous quasi-public debate about opposition that itself constituted perhaps its most significant kind of initiative, implied a theory of democratic power, the most articulate statements of which were Havel’s famous essays, “The Power of the Powerless” and “The Politics of Conscience.” On this view, totalitarianism was a most extreme, malignant, and grotesque version of the more general tendency of modern society to subject individuals to “the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal, and inhuman power—the power of ideologies, systems, apparat, bureaucracy, artificial languages, and political slogans.” Modern politics, in other words, including liberal democratic politics, is a politics of civic disempowerment justified by the advantages—sometimes palpable, often illusory—of a mass society. As Havel put it, man is treated as “an obedient member of a consumer herd”; “instead of a free share in economic decision-making, free participation in political life, and free intellectual advancement, all people are actually offered is a chance freely to choose which washing machine or refrigerator they want to buy” (Havel, 1992a, p. 60). The Chartists, agreeing with radical democrats like John Dewey and Hannah Arendt, considered this a Faustian bargain that doomed modern individuals to a life of passivity, conformity, and political irresponsibility. The acquiescence to totalitarianism was only the extreme form of such irresponsibility, but it was hardly the only form. For problems of human rights, ecological disaster, economic insecurity, and the threat of war all point toward the need for the kind of civic initiative that cuts against the grain of a modern industrial society.

It was this broader sense of civic responsibility that animated the Czechoslovakian democratic opposition, and, it would not be hard to demonstrate, it also played an important role in animating the other Central European democratic oppositions. This sense of responsibility led these oppositions to resist totalitarian power and to advocate liberal democratic institutions. But it also led them to consider such institutions insufficient insofar as “every system, even the best, conceals within itself a tendency to elevate itself above the people” (Document No. 2/1985, “Commission…,” 1988, p. 150). Because liberal democracy is itself a system, it is itself liable to this corruption. Yet in spite of their critique of liberal democratic party politics and its own “technologies of power,” the Chartists recognized the value of liberal constitutionalism at the same time that they recognized its limits in an age of consumerism and bureaucratic power. Both of these points were brought home in Charter 77’s open letter to the British peace movement:

Your “sideways” stand, as it were, in relation to the classical democratic structures and political mechanisms is very close to the sense and forms of our own efforts. (Here, again, we must stress, however, our deep conviction that these structures constitute a vital basis which has been
denied or falsified always at the cost of greater evil; but at the same time we are aware that the decline of those structures has done much to create the present global crisis, and that without radical new impulses and regenerating transformations no way out of the crisis can be found).


Liberal democratic institutions, in other words, are “a vital basis” of human freedom. But they need to be supplemented, and reinvigorated, by “radical new impulses,” civic initiatives that challenge the way these institutions typically function and the corruption to which they are perpetually liable.

**Civic initiative and liberal democracy**

As I have already alluded, in many ways this vision of civic initiative that resists intolerable power seems liberal. It affirms the importance of setting limits to this exercise of collective authority. It values liberal democratic political institutions. Its emphasis on the importance of protest and dissent is surely consistent with liberal political theory and the practices of liberal constitutionalism. In all of these respects, the politics of Central European democratic opposition falls squarely within liberal parameters. On an even deeper level, the injunction to “live in truth” seems perfectly consistent with the Rawlsian view that there are a multitude of ways to live “the good life,” and that the great evil in politics is to make one of them mandatory (Rawls, 1993). For the Central European antipolitics of civil society was explicitly voluntary and self-consciously insular. While open to all who might be interested, it never intended to incorporate masses of people into a hegemonic political project, much less coerce people to live “authentically.” In this sense, it saw itself as one way of being among many others and was remarkably respectful of other ways of being, a political orientation wholly consistent with liberal theory and practice.

And yet it would be a mistake to infer from this that it therefore fits neatly into a liberal perspective. Antipolitical politics is clearly not antiliberal. But this does not make it liberal. While there is much common ground with liberalism, there are also important points of tension.

At the political level, there is a profound empirical disagreement not about the importance of liberal democratic institutions, but about the way that they typically function in a modern industrial society. In the liberal democratic view, the principal task of politics is to provide limited, accountable institutions that are responsive to claims of justice. The great virtue of really existing liberal institutions—representative parliaments, competitive parties, independent judiciaries, impartial legal systems, civil service bureaucracies—is that they fulfill this task not, to be sure, perfectly, but better than all possible alternatives. For this reason, the imperative of liberal democratic politics is to strengthen
these institutions and, through “institutional design,” to make them work better, more fairly and responsively.

Antipolitical politics questions whether existing liberal institutions do fulfill this task. What emerges clearly from the Chartist literature, and from the literature of Central European dissent more generally, is the belief that the impersonality and consumerism of modern society, the bureaucratization of political agencies, and the debasement of political communication through the cynical manipulation of language and images produce a shallow politics, a disengaged citizenry, and the domination of well-organized, entrenched corporate interests.

In this sense, there is a striking parallel to the writings of pragmatist critics of American democracy like John Dewey and C.Wright Mills. Like these writers, the Chartists seem to believe that in an age of mass consumerism and bureaucratic administration the utopian energies of liberalism have been depleted. In 1956 C.Wright Mills wrote that:

> Perhaps nothing is of more importance than the rhetorical victory and the intellectual and political collapse of American liberalism…liberalism has been organizationally impoverished… liberalism-in-power devitalized independent liberal groups, drying up the grass roots, making older leaders dependent upon the federal center and not training new leaders…. It is much safer to celebrate civil liberties than to defend them; it is much safer to defend them as a formal right than to use them in a politically effective way…as a rhetoric, liberalism’s key terms have become the common denominators of the political vocabulary; in this rhetorical victory…liberalism has been stretched beyond any usefulness as a way of defining issues and stating policies.

(Mills, 1956, pp. S33–35)37

Mills’s point was not that there is anything wrong with liberal values of individual autonomy or liberal practices of constitutional government. It is that the actual institutions of liberal societies pay lip service to but do not effectively support such values and practices.

A very similar sentiment is developed by the Chartists when they note that while liberal democratic structures are vitally important and cannot be dismissed, “we are aware that the decline of those structures has done much to create the present global crisis, and that without radical new impulses and regenerating transformations no way out of the crisis can be found” (Document No. 9/1984, “Open Letter…,” 1984, p. 17). Because the liberal democratic structures have “declined,” it is necessary to foster new impulses and undertake civic initiatives simply in order to realize liberal values. Because the Central European democrats operated with a highly critical understanding of the actual functioning of liberal democratic politics, they saw such civic initiatives as being significant not only as a way of opposing communism, but as a way of sustaining individual freedom and empowerment in a modern mass society.
The kind of civic initiatives that they practiced—petitions, protests, vigorous critical debate, civil disobedience—are not illiberal. But they are in deep tension with the “normal” institutions of liberal politics. They are, as Holmes says, extraparliamentary. They impose ethical demands upon politicians contrary to the organized “adversarial mendacity” of which Garton Ash speaks. They involve a different style of politics, one more rebellious and more participatory than the normal forms of liberal democratic politics. They do not present themselves as wholesale alternatives to liberal democracy. For the Chartists, it is both inconceivable and undesirable that everybody could “live in truth” together in a modern, industrial society. Most people are preoccupied with other things, and the institutions of liberal democracy, imperfect as they are, typically suit them just fine. But these institutions are chronically liable to corruption, and the advantages they confer—security, economic opportunity—are, therefore, precarious. A more rebellious politics is, therefore, necessary to reinvigorate them and keep them honest.

Just as these political practices are in tension with normal liberal politics, so too are their guiding ideals in tension with certain liberal values. Liberal political philosophy is often distinguished by what Rawls has aptly called a “thin theory of the good” (Rawls, 1971). In this view, liberal justice is the codification of certain basic rights and liberties which allow individuals to pursue their own versions of the good life. Liberal politics is the legitimate avenue for protecting basic rights and liberties, for making sure that the exercise of political power is responsive to public opinion yet does not infringe upon individual liberties. This view of “the priority of right” over public goods has concisely been stated by Benjamin Constant: “Our freedom must consist of peaceful enjoyment and private independence. The share which in antiquity everyone held in national sovereignty was by no means an abstract presumption as it is in our own day… Lost in the multitude, the individual can almost never perceive the influence he exercises. Never does his will impress itself upon the whole; nothing confirms in his eyes his own cooperation” (Constant, 1988, p. 316). Constant does not deny that politics is important. Liberal representative government is a device intended to regulate common affairs so that individuals can pursue their private goods. It is thus essential for individuals to monitor their government and hold it accountable through the political process. But for Constant politics is in the service of a civil society that is itself properly beyond politics. Like Rawls, he sees the creation of any public goods beyond a certain “thin” minimum as threatening to the civil liberty that modern liberal individuals prize.

Writers like Havel and Konrád share the liberal belief that the effort to constitute a single, homogeneous “general will” is tyrannical. They support the idea that any free society must provide spaces for autonomous individual initiative. But they question the faith that liberals place in representative institutions, and implicitly they challenge the view of civil society as properly beyond politics. Recall Ivan Jirous’s remark that civic initiatives allow people “to resist the futility that threatens to swallow them up.” For antipolitical
politics, the impersonality, bureaucratization, and domination characteristic of modern society threaten to swallow people up in manifold ways. On this view, Constant’s description of liberal man—that “nothing confirms in his eyes his own cooperation”—is an all too accurate description of the political disempowerment and alienation characteristic of modern industrial society. If such experiences are not to produce frustration and resentment, they need to be channeled in healthy ways and resisted by civic initiative. Wherever injustice is experienced, then, it needs to be challenged. And while the state is a principal source of much injustice in our world, it is not the only source.\footnote{41}

Freedom, then, requires a conscientious engagement in public affairs. While such engagement is not contrary to liberal individualism, it relies upon a stronger sense of solidarity than that typically supported by liberal political theory or liberal political institutions. While liberal ideals tend to emphasize the importance of protecting individuals from extra-individual - typically political—forces, antipolitical politics involves a more Arendtian view of individuals as inhabiting a common world that in complex ways imposes on them certain ethical responsibilities. To ignore these responsibilities is to lack care for the world; it is also to be untrue to yourself, to exchange your dignity for certain advantages, to submit yourself to some kind of \textit{diktat} in the name of convenience or sociability. Such submission is dangerous, short-sighted, wrong—it is hard to find exactly the right moral term here—though it does not follow from this that it could or should be proscribed. Civic responsibility is, thus, not a strictly political imperative; it would be both impossible and undesirable to mandate it. Indeed, the effort to mandate it is inconsistent with it, for civic initiative is essentially voluntary. But it is more than a moral imperative in a Rawlsian sense, a matter of simple and wholly capricious individual choice. It is an ethical imperative, a strong obligation to act in the name of a dignity that is jeopardized by the tendencies of modern social life.\footnote{42} It occupies a middle ground between individual liberty and state power, and its proper sphere of expression and assertion is civil society.\footnote{43}

It is understandable why people like Kis, Konrád, and Michnik would gravitate toward liberalism, both because its rights-based philosophy offers a powerful antidote to the kind of collectivism long enforced by Communism, and because it is the only feasible macropolitical alternative to right-wing populism. The practice of antipolitical politics under the conditions of postcommunism has great risks, for it is an unsettling politics, and the conditions of postcommunism seem to demand settlement and order; and it is an ethnically exacting politics at a time when most people seem to want normality. If Holmes is correct, and the building of stable parliamentary institutions is the order of the day, it would seem a strategic imperative to abjure antipolitical politics, and to take the liberal side. But two important caveats are in order.

First, it is important to see that such a move would involve a taking of sides, a marked \textit{shift} from a politics of civic initiative and suspicion of institutionalized power to a politics of political “normalization.” In this sense, we must reject the
Whiggish reading of liberal democratization as a fulfillment of the democratic opposition. Second, having learned, with Popper, of the dangers of acting according to a confidence that our tasks are prescribed by History, we should proceed with caution before the suggestion that a single choice is “the order of the day.” Indeed, many of the democratic oppositionists sympathetic toward liberalism, like Havel and Konrád, have proceeded with such caution. They have managed to navigate a difficult path in which support for liberal democracy is combined with more radical civic initiatives. This path deserves more attention. In the spirit of Popperian skepticism, then, we must see that the antipolitics of the Central European democratic oppositions is not passé, that it is of continuing relevance, both to the “emerging democracies” of Central Europe and to democratic politics in advanced industrial societies more generally.

The legacies of antipolitical politics

Stephen Holmes is right; the institutionalization of parliamentary democracy is a pressing task. But we need to see that he is only partly right. For it does not follow from this that all energies must be channeled in this direction, nor that those energies that are channeled elsewhere constitute extraparliamentary threats to a democratic transition. While in the postcommunist era antipolitical politics cannot claim to be the sole vehicle of democratic politics, this does not mean that it must now be liquidated in the name of democracy. Indeed, I would suggest, in many ways antipolitical politics can be seen to occupy the same space that it occupied under communism—that of a marginalized minority of democrats undertaking civic initiatives in the hope, perhaps faith that “a purely moral act that has no hope of any immediate and visible effect can gradually and indirectly, over time, gain in political significance” (Havel, 1990, p. 115). There are at least three ways in which such a politics remains of continuing relevance to Central European politics. A brief consideration of these ways will also lead us to a broader assessment of the relevance of antipolitics to democratic politics in general.

The first is organizational. Put simply, antipolitical civic initiatives continue to operate in the postcommunist era. Charter 77, for example, has not dissolved, in spite of the fact that many of its founders and leaders have now become active in partisan politics. While in many ways it has been deprived of its principal raison d’être—opposition to the Communist party-state—it continues to act on behalf of human rights and in support of democratic civil liberties. It also continues to have a “radiating effect” on democratic efforts in other parts of Central Europe.

In late 1991, for example, many members of the Hungarian democratic opposition constituted Charter ‘91, a “civic initiative” in many ways like the Czech Charter 77. Reacting to the perception that the Hungarian government—led by the conservative party called Hungarian Democratic Forum—was endangering constitutional liberties, the Charter presented seventeen points on
behalf of liberal democracy. Within two months over 5,000 people had signed. George Konrád, one of the co-founders, described Charter ’91 as

a made in Hungary civic initiative…Civil society continually searches for and experiments with appropriate forms for expressing itself. It does not want to replace representative democracy, only to place the political class, and, more narrowly, the governing administration, in the environment of a democratic society…. It is important that politics, or the polis, namely the discussion of all of our affairs, should not become some far-off chattering on high.

Konrád emphasizes that the Charter is not a new discovery but “a further development of the tool-box of the democratic movement, in the genre of self-organization of civil opinion, the genre, above all, for individuals” (Konrád, 1992, pp. 36––7).46

The Charter is an explicitly pro-liberal democratic initiative. But it is also explicitly extraparliamentary and “antipolitical,” seeking to raise the level of public debate about the political system and to nourish a more participatory political culture. It sees a liberal democratic political class as being necessary and dangerous, in need of support and intense, sceptical civic monitoring and criticism. As one commentator points out, the Charter emerges out of the disaffection of many former members of the democratic opposition with “the new power-oriented and bureaucratized politics.” The Charter

shows that this intelligentsia is partly returning to its pre-1989 role: as the “mediacracy” in the forming of cultured public opinion… Because its voice will no longer be as influential as it was; it will be lost in the din of battle between different social interests. The former Democratic Opposition’s task will be to articulate the opinions of different politicizing groups, and once again to expand and explore the space between state and society. In this respect, the Democratic Charter has given the old opposition a chance to find a new role for itself.

(Bozoki, 1992, pp. 13–17)

Another initiative drawing on the experience of antipolitical politics is the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, an outgrowth of the international links formed between Central European dissidents and West European peace activists. Inspired by Charter 77’s famous 1985 “Prague Appeal,” the Assembly was established in 1990 in order to nurture an “international civil society,” a network of citizens’ organizations and initiatives that transcends the borders of the nation-state. As Mary Kaldor, one of the Assembly’s founders, has described its politics: “It is not addressed to governments except in so far as they are asked to guarantee freedom of travel and freedom of assembly so that citizens’ groups can meet and communicate. It is a strategy of dialogue, an attempt to change society
through the actions of citizens rather than governments...in short, to create a new political culture. In such a situation, the behaviour of governments either changes or becomes less and less relevant” (Kaldor, 1989, p. 15). As the Assembly’s 1990 Prague Appeal states: “overcoming the division of Europe is the job above all of civil society, of citizens acting together in selforganized associations, movements, institutions, initiatives and clubs across national boundaries” (“Helsinki Citizens’...,” 1991, p. 72).

The Assembly is organized into six ongoing working commissions on problems of democratization. It monitors human rights and discrimination against minorities and women, publishes a regular newsletter and special reports, and provides networking and support for civic initiatives throughout Central Europe. It sees itself not as an antagonist or rival of, but as a democratic adjunct to the formal process of liberal democratization, offering outlets for a more vigorous and direct participation in grass-roots politics and the formation of public opinion. As Kaldor notes:

So what kind of organization are we?...We are not a representative of civil society; we are a part of civil society. If we were representative of civil society we would be no different from a parliament In fact, we don’t represent anyone except the movements and institutions in which we are involved. In many cases, we represent no one but ourselves. And our power rests not on whom we represent but in what we do—in what we say, in our ideas, in our quest for truth, in the projects we undertake. It rests on our energy and commitment.

(Kaldor, 1991, p. 215)

As Bozoki points out, such initiatives will necessarily be marginalized in the postcommunist period, by the structural logics of liberalization and marketization, and by the general banality brought on by the ascendancy of consumerism. But they were marginalized under the Old Regime as well. A cynic could claim that when Kaldor states that the Assembly’s power rests on civic initiative, she is really saying that it has no power at all, for the power of civic initiative surely pales in comparison with the power of more organized, well-connected political forces. Indeed, whether the issue is European integration, the rights of minorities, or peace in Yugoslavia, it is clear that the Assembly’s efforts have borne little fruit. And yet their failure to make a clear and immediate impact on policy does not make them without moral and even political significance. If the experience of democratic opposition under Communism has taught anything, it is that such efforts can have a surprising, and incalculable, impact below the surface of appearances, helping to incubate certain values so that they might surface with effect under the right circumstances.

This leads us to the second sense in which antipolitical politics remains relevant, the more directly political sense. While any such assessments are
necessarily impressionistic and incomplete, it is possible to make some judgments on this score, and the Czech case is instructive. There is first the example of Havel himself, who in a matter of months went from being an imprisoned dissident writer to President of a newly liberated republic. What is most remarkable about Havel is that he seems to represent a new type of politician, someone capable of personal reflection and public articulation of the difficulties of practicing democratic politics and the need for more responsible forms of citizenship. Havel has issued a steady stream of public addresses on the challenges of the new situation. In his Address to the Opening Session of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly he reflected on the readjustments made necessary by the transition from dissidence to leadership. He observed:

It turns out that no matter how difficult it is to bring down a totalitarian system, it is even more difficult to build a newer and better system from its ruins. Since we entered the world of high politics, we have realized that in this world one has to take account of various interests, of various ambitions, of the balance of power represented by different groupings…. Thus a person in the world of high politics is forced to behave diplomatically, to maneuver. Simply, we now find ourselves in a different area… and have a totally different kind of responsibility from when we were in opposition.

This sounds like a concession to Garton Ash; “living in truth,” it would seem, is now passé. And yet Havel continues that the requirements of “high politics” cannot alter “the essence of our efforts and ideals, even though the forms and the ways in which these ideals are being implemented have been modified” (Havel, 1991, p. 74).

The refusal to allow the new circumstances to change his essential ideals and efforts explains, of course, why this head of state, alone among European heads of state, considered it worthwhile to address the Assembly. Havel’s book, Summer Meditations (Havel, 1992b), presents a telling and personal account of his efforts to advance and incarnate the ideals of “living in truth” in a way that remains consistent with the requirements of public office. What is the significance of this? Is Havel simply a unique individual whose leadership style has no general importance? What good has this leadership style gotten him anyway? It certainly failed to prevent the breakup of Czechoslovakia; nor has it been able to stem the tide of political recrimination. These are legitimate questions. But, in the case of Czechoslovakia, it is worth considering how much more difficult things might well have turned out had Havel not been the kind of President that he is.

Yet the political relevance of antipolitics extends beyond the question of Havel’s rhetoric or leadership style. For Havel recently has engaged in a highly charged and politically significant public debate with Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus over the meaning of civil society. Klaus, following Hayek, has
maintained that civil society is the sphere of individual transactions. Havel, conversely has insisted that civil society “gives people social space to assume their share of responsibility for social developments, cultivates the feeling of solidarity between people and love of one’s community, and makes it possible to live a full, varied life.” At stake in this philosophical debate are a number of very important political issues.

One is the pace and character of economic reform. Klaus sees the rapid expansion of the market as the essence of freedom; Havel sees the market as a necessary institution but one that also threatens many important forms of association and thus needs to be regulated, and embedded, in certain ways. The second is regional administrative reform. While Klaus sees decentralization as a way of weakening the political agencies of economic shock therapy, Havel sees it as a way of providing important avenues of democratic citizenship. Perhaps the most interesting debate concerns the adoption of a law on nonprofit organizations. Havel has made clear that he sees such organizations as crucial elements of civil society and has strongly supported a law clearly laying out the rules for nonprofit organizations and exempting them from the payment of taxes. As Radio Free Europe reported, in his 1994 New Year’s Day speech, “Havel made it clear that he considered the decentralization of state administration and the adoption of a law on nonprofit organizations to be the two most important steps the Czech Republic should take in creating the social and legal conditions for civil society.”

Havel’s position in these debates suggests that antipolitical politics can inform important public-policy questions, placing an emphasis on the ways in which legal and political arrangements can provide support for the development of voluntary associations and civic initiatives. While civic initiatives are always voluntary and never the creation of the state, a democratic state may be able to nourish such initiatives. Between the “democratic tool-box” of grass-roots activity and the “institutional design” of political elites, then, there may be room for some creative political learning.

Antipolitical politics, then, continues to exist organizationally and to have some impact on Central European political culture and public policy. But perhaps its greatest relevance is hermeneutic or interpretative. Even if antipolitical politics currently had no palpable existence and no evident influence whatsoever, it would still remain relevant as a crucial historical moment of the recent past. In his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera presents a striking scene:

In February 1948, Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to address the hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens…. Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing next to him. There were snow flurries, it was cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. The solicitous Clementis took off his own fur cap and set it on Gottwald’s head. The party propaganda section put out hundreds of thousands of copies of a photograph of that balcony
with Gottwald, a fur cap on his head and comrades at his side, speaking to the nation.... Four years later Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history, and, obviously, out of all the photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only bare palace wall. All that remains of Clementis is the cap on Gottwald’s head.

(Kundera, 1981, p. 3)

Kundera’s target was the Communist obliteration of history, a common target of dissident writers. He points out the absurdity of the attempt to airbrush history, and indicates that the effort can never wholly be successful, for traces of the past remain. Kundera’s point has a broader relevance. “The struggle of man against power,” he insists, “is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Kundera, 1981, p. 3). Hannah Arendt offers a similar point: “What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in turn remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guideposts for future remembrance, and even for sheer reference, arise out of it” (Arendt, 1977, p. 220). The political initiatives of the Central European democratic opposition present a testimony to what conscientious and responsible citizens can do in order to defend their dignity and empower themselves under difficult circumstances. Such efforts may not be part of the normal repertoire of liberal democratic politics. They may represent fleeting moments of democratic action, destined to fade away or be incorporated by more bureaucratic organizations and institutions. But this is all the more reason to remember them. For the traces of such initiatives remain in the freedoms now recognized by the law, in the current initiatives that continue to be inspired by them, and in the fertile embryos of initiatives yet to be undertaken.

Timothy Garton Ash is onto this when he asks whether or not the onset of consumerism will sweep the “treasures” of the opposition period away in the rush of affluence. He answers that in such an eventuality, “something would remain, at least in memory, in culture, in spirit. At the very least the Europeans from over there would have offered us, with a clarity and firmness born of bitter experience, a restatement of the value of what we already have, of old truths and tested models…of liberal democracy” (Garton Ash, 1990a, p. 156). Garton Ash is right that the democratic initiatives leading to 1989 furnish a valuable symbolic legacy. But I find his view of them too reassuring. Surely they may remind us that liberal democracy itself is worth struggling for, and that liberal democracy is indeed the outcome of hard fought struggle. As Frederick Douglass long ago noted with reference to the American Revolution:

To say now that America was right, and England wrong, is exceedingly easy. Everybody can say it, the dastard, not less than the noble brave, can flippantly discant on the tyranny of England.... It is fashionable to do so;
but there was a time when…[it] tried men’s souls. They who did so were accounted in their day plotters of mischief, agitators and rebels, dangerous men. To side with the right against the wrong, with the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor! Here lies the merit, and the one which, of all others, seems unfashionable in our day.

(Douglass, 1950)

But for Douglass, the point of remembering the Revolution was not to assure Americans about the value of what they already had; it was to disturb their pervasive sense of assurance, to unsettle them, and to defend new, abolitionist initiatives that went beyond the constitutional politics of the day. Historical recollection of the antipolitics of democratic opposition, and the glorious revolutions of 1989 that it helped to bring about, can serve a similar function. It can also remind us of a kind of courage and conviction, and a kind of creative political agency, that cuts against the grain of liberal democratic normality.

Here we return to the question with which we began. Does 1989 simply represent the triumph of old, liberal values or of something new. It should now be clear that neither alternative as baldly stated is plausible. Liberal democracy has triumphed but haltingly and with uncertain results. Antipolitical politics does resonate with liberalism, and yet it is not unambiguously liberal. It is new, but it is not wholly new. The kinds of civic initiatives pioneered by the democratic oppositions did not spring up de novo. They had antecedents and exemplars and surely were inspired by previous revolts against Communism and by nonviolent political struggles in the twentieth century more generally. Garton Ash refers to them as a “treasure.” Perhaps unwittingly, this language recalls Hannah Arendt’s discussion of “the revolutionary tradition and its lost treasure” (Arendt, 1977). There were surely novelties in the “democratic tool-box” of the Central European dissidents—the concept of a “self-limiting revolution,” the successful practice of nonviolence against a post-totalitarian dictatorship, perhaps even the very idea of a “civic initiative.” But on a deeper level antipolitical politics can be seen as simply one of a number of instances in modern history where ordinary citizens have improvised new forms of democratic agency and new forms of opposition to oppressive power. It was not “new”; but neither was it assimilable to the repertoire of normal liberal democratic politics.

Such a treasure is now in danger of being buried. But it has not yet receded from politics, nor has it receded from memory. It will continue to play some role in Central Europe, a marginal one to be sure, but perhaps a significant role in sustaining a democratic political culture and in offering outlets for healthy political participation. Yet its significance is not limited to the postcommunist world. Indeed, it has a profound relevance for the “Western” world, the world of advanced capitalism and liberal democracy. For if I am correct, while antipolitical politics can remind us of the value of what we have, it can also remind us of the limits of what we have.
In the East, the tasks of liberal construction impose constraints on antipolitics. Political resources and energies are scarce, and while the “contest” between liberal democratic transition and civic initiative does not constitute a zero-sum game, there are surely many times when it must seem as though it does. And however much political theorists may endorse a healthy sense of the tragic ambiguities in politics, there are times in politics when important stakes are on the line and one must act. If liberal democrats in parliament are under attack from authoritarian populists, there are times when it may be necessary for a democrat to hold one’s tongue and allow liberal parliamentary mendacities to pass. At a time when anarchy threatens, it may be necessary to avoid civil disobedience even though it seems wholly justifiable in principle. In Central Europe, antipolitical politics still has a role to play, but there are times when it will take a back seat to more conventional liberal democratic politics. It is wrong to overestimate the “threat” that civic initiatives might pose to constitutional order. Indeed, as Charter ‘91 exemplifies, there are times when civic initiative provides indispensable support for such order. But there are other times when the claims of “normalization” will win out.

But if postcommunist societies experience a deficit of liberalism, liberal democratic societies might well experience a surfeit of liberalism. It is becoming increasingly obvious that liberal democracy in the West is suffering from a kind of legitimacy crisis, a growing and widespread concern that its institutions are no longer adequate, that they fail to live up to their own professed ideals, to support coherent public policy, a meaningful way of life, or a sense of popular empowerment. There are many symptoms of this crisis—a pervasive feeling of frustration with politicians, political parties, “special interests,” and the mass media; the rise of “new social movements” that operate outside of established channels and politicize new realms of social life, whether they be gender, sexuality, race, or ecology; the conservative and often xenophobic backlash against these movements that has acquired a powerful rhetorical force.

If democracy involves some kind of identification between citizens and the laws that govern them, what is most striking about the current moment is the pervasive sense of alterity and alienation experienced by ordinary citizens of liberal democracies. Just as Constant described, most citizens feel “lost in the multitude”; nothing confirms in their own eyes their “own cooperation.” As Constant saw, the “danger” of liberal democracy is that people will become so absorbed in private life that sources of power will evolve beyond their control. Lacking a sense of empowerment, and lacking a vision of healthy civic initiative, such a citizenry is fertile ground for anxiety, resentment, and authoritarianism.

It is this virtually total eclipse of democratic public life in Western liberal democracy that makes the experience of antipolitical politics supremely relevant, both as a source of inspiration and as a source of concrete examples. While the Central Europeans have much to learn from “us” about the workings of liberal democracy, we have much to learn from them about the practice of democratic citizenship.
What, then, are the meanings of 1989? One is that liberal democracy is the most attractive way to organize politics at the level of the nation-state, and that the transition to liberal democracy in Central Europe, and in other parts of the world, is an ethico-political imperative. Another is that civic initiatives continue to possess a remarkable power to resist “the irrational momentum of anonymous, impersonal, inhuman power” (Havel), and that it is imperative for civic initiatives to resist the corruption endemic to liberal democracy. How to reconcile these conclusions? Need they be reconciled? Perhaps the strategic requirements of political maneuvering or constitutional design require that a choice sometimes be made. But perhaps we should heed the words of Albert Camus: “In the difficult times we face, what more can I hope for than the power to exclude nothing and to learn to weave from strands of black and white one rope taughtenied to the breaking point?” (1968, p. 169). If 1989 has a single meaning, it is that any kind of monism, even liberal monism, is hostile to freedom, and the effort to exclude certain perspectives in the name of expediency of History is doomed to failure.

Notes

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1 See Palmer, 1959, and Miller, 1989.
3 See also Fukuyama, 1992, especially pp. 39–51.
5 See Note 6.
6 See Maier, 1994a.
7 “A new breeze is blowing and a world refreshed by freedom seems reborn,” declared President George Bush in his Inaugural Address, “for in man’s heart, if not in fact, the day of the dictator is over” (Vital Speeches..., 1989, p. 258). “The quest for democracy is the most vibrant fact of these times,” proclaimed Secretary of State James Baker. See “The Battle for Democracy,” U.S. News and World Report (May 22, 1989), p. 38.
8 See also Garton Ash, 1990b.

10 A very similar prognosis is offered by Mihaly Vajda (1990, pp. 51–3).

11 Michnik also mirrors Dahrendorf’s assertion that the crucial issue now is simply between those who prefer “what Popper calls ‘the open society,’ and those who prefer a closed society” (Paradowska, 1991, p. 101).

12 This claim is different from the view of Fukuyama, for it does not rely upon any historical metaphysic and can be causally explained in historically specific ways.

13 See Bozoki and Sukosd, 1993.


16 Jürgen Habermas has developed a similar distinction in Habermas, 1989, and more recently in Habermas, 1992.


18 Timothy Garton Ash has issued a remarkably similar assessment:

> The immediate question, therefore, is: What variant of democratic politics can, on the one hand, provide sufficiently strong, stable, consistent government to sustain the necessary rigors of fiscal, monetary, and economic policy over a period of several years, while, on the other hand, being sufficiently flexible and responsive to absorb the larger part of the inevitable popular discontents through parliamentary or, at least, legal channels, thus preventing the resort to extraparliamentary, illegal, and ultimately anti-democratic means?

(Garton Ash, 1990c, p. 54)

19 For a pessimistic assessment of the prospects for liberal democracy combined with an interesting defense of a third possibility—an authoritarian liberalism — see Jowitt, 1992, especially pp. 299–331.


21 See Tismaneanu, 1992; Stokes, 1993; and, for the clearest account of the final days of Communism, Garton Ash, 1990a.

22 The great weakness of Stephen Holmes’ passionately argued and insightful *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* is its refusal to take seriously the difference between the antiliberalism of writers like Schmitt and the nonliberalism of writers like Arendt or Lasch. In an ironic way, Holmes reiterates a classic Cold War rhetorical figure—
one is either with liberalism or against it. He elaborates on the Hobbesian anxieties that underly such a “liberalism of fear” in Holmes, 1994.

23 The most penetrating philosophical account of this position offered by a contemporary liberal is Shklar, 1984.

24 For important general accounts of antipolitics, see Garton Ash, 1990d, and Goldfarb, 1989.

25 On the formation of Charter 77, see Skilling, 1981. On the many initiatives that sprung up in conjunction with it, see the very informative Skilling 1989, especially pp. 26–32 and 43–156.

26 The Charter originally had 241 signatories, of whom 40 percent were workers; by 1987, 1,300 people had signed. Its influence extended far wider. As Ladislav Hejdane, one of its principal founders, noted:

To act and live in the spirit of Charter 77 was quite possible, even without signing. The purpose of the Charter was not to gain as many signatures as possible but to persuade as many people as possible that they could and should act toward the state as free and courageous citizens and that——this was the main thing——they could and ought to act toward their fellow citizens as friends, companions and comrades.

(quoted in Skilling, 1981, pp. 41–3)

27 See, for example, the interview with Marta Kubisova, Václav Havel, Peter Uhl, and other Charter leaders (“Polish KOR…,” 1979).

28 The classic exploration of this strategy was Michnik, 1985. Written in 1976 during the formation of KOR, the Polish Workers’ Defense Committee (later reorganized as the Social Self-Defense Committee), this essay had a strong impact on democratic oppositionists in Czechoslovakia and Hungary as well.

29 See, for example, Havel, 1987a. See also the influential Konrád, 1984.


31 Benda’s essay and many responses to it were published as a book (Skilling and Wilson, 1991). For a more abbreviated version of the debate, see Benda et al, 1988.

32 As the Hungarian dissident György Bence noted, “what the dissidents wanted to do was to erect their own ramparts and to live, behind them, a communal life worthy of free individuals” (quoted in Stokes, 1993, p. 22).

33 See Havel, 1987b, pp. 78–80, on how “dissident” is a label attached to “ordinary people with ordinary cares, differing from the rest only in that they say aloud what the rest cannot say or are afraid to say.”

34 While the insularity of civic initiatives was one of their principal virtues, it also posed problems that were continual sources of debate among Chartists, relating to questions of strategic effectiveness and a dangerous sense of moral superiority. On the first question, see, for example, Anonymous, 1988. On the second, see “Discussion…,” 1979.

Perhaps the most powerful articulations of this respectfulness are Adam Michnik’s essays “Why You Are Not Signing...” and “Maggots and Angels” in his Letters from Prison. There was also a fascinating debate among the Chartists on this theme, provoked by Vaculik, 1979.

For Dewey’s similar assessment, see Dewey, 1927.


There are, of course, liberal democrats who would go much further than Rawls in allowing the importance of participation in politics and the public sphere more generally. See Dahl, 1989, Guttman, 1993, and Ryan, 1993. These liberal democrats still tend to place more emphasis upon “constitutional design” then upon civic initiative and insurgency. But there are important points of contact between such participatory liberal democrats and Chartist views. For the clearest point of contact, see Walzer, 1984. Just as I have argued that one can only speak of the triumph of liberal democracy in specific senses, so I would argue that one needs to distinguish between different senses of liberalism and different kinds of liberalism and cannot speak about liberalism in general. For a clever suggestion to this effect, see Kolakowski, 1990.

On this see Cohen and Arato, 1992, pp. 29–82, 345–420.


The moral credo of antipolitics would go something like this: It is wrong to coerce, inconsistent with the demands of conscience and the requirements of civility; liberalism is the best system of politics insofar as it refuses to license legal coercion. But liberalism is insufficient in a world of injustice and evil. It is morally imperative to resist the sources of disempowerment, including those linked to liberal institutions themselves. But we cannot hope to achieve perfect justice. A self-limiting, modest search for justice is all that can be hoped for. We will practice civic initiatives, and hope that they will have some effect, without condemning those who do not or seeking to force them to do so. We accept liberal democratic values and institutions. But it is necessary and good that civic initiatives challenge them and contest their injustices.

For an interesting discussion of some of the implications of such a view, see Walzer, 1991.

As Claude Lefort insists: “Those who exercise public responsibility are under no obligation to swear allegiance to the constitution. It is possible, for example, that a certain individual’s disdain for elections, for the majority’s decisions, for party demagoguery be combined with desire for independence, freedom of thought and speech, sensitivity for others, self-examination, curiosity for foreign or extinct cultures—all of which bear the mark of the democratic spirit” (1990, p. 1).


This is not to deny that the new conditions have created problems for the former dissidents, who have had great difficulty adjusting to the complexities of the new environment and the noticeable decline in their stature now that communism has been supplanted. See, for example, Bauman, 1993, pp. 113–30, and Michael, 1991, pp. 141–54. Michnik has himself commented on this quite frankly: “Yes,
today politics is becoming normal, and for those who did not treat politics as a game but as a way to defend basic values it is becoming difficult to find a space. It will become even harder in the future. This could have been anticipated, and there is no need for despair” (Paradowska, 1991, p. 96).

49 In this Havel is close to the views of many Western liberal democrats, who reject the dogmatism of Hayekian philosophy. See Dahl, 1990, pp. 224–8, and Dahrendorf, 1990, pp. 90–108.

50 See Pehe, 1994, pp. 12–18.

51 For some interesting reflections on this theme, see Cohen and Rogers, 1992, and the responses by Paul Hirst, Jane Mansbridge, Philippe Schmitter, Andrew Szasz, and Iris Marion Young. See also Wainwright, 1989, 1994, especially pp. 115–236, and Walzer, 1994, pp. 189–91.

52 Jeffrey Goldfarb presents a penetrating discussion of these texts (1989, pp. 109–18).

53 The view of them as fleeting is most often associated with the writings of Hannah Arendt, especially her On Revolution (1977). For the most insightful discussion of this theme in her work, see Miller, 1979. See also Wolin, 1994. For the view of them as being part of a process of “dualistic politics,” whereby the normal routines of liberal democracy are periodically reconfigured by radical movements, see Ackerman, 1991, and Cohen and Arato, 1992, especially pp. 492–563.

54 For a similar argument regarding the United States civil rights movement, see the wonderful King, 1992. On a more theoretical level, it could be argued that antipolitical politics represented a radical democratic reappropriation of the nineteenth-century bourgeois public sphere under the transformed conditions of a late-modern industrial society, a view associated with the work of Habermas and developed by Arato and Cohen. Habermas himself suggests such an interpretation in Habermas, 1991.

55 This point is also made in different ways by Lefort, 1990; Reidy, Jr., 1992; and Elshtain, 1993.


58 For an interesting discussion, see Brown, 1993.

59 Harry Boyte, for example, writes about grass roots community organizing in a Chartist vein in Boyte, 1989. See also Flacks, 1993.

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