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978-0-521-19220-0 - Democratic Statecraft: Political Realism and Popular Power

J. S. Maloy

Excerpt

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## I

## Introduction

*Realism and Democracy*

Politics, *noun*. A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles; the conduct of public affairs for private advantage.

Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Between the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 and the Arab Spring in 2011, the conventional wisdom of global political discourse has been celebrating two decades of "democracy" triumphant. Within actually existing democracies, by contrast, citizens are in mourning over "democratic deficits." Obviously the dream of democracy is more pleasant than the nightmare of dictatorship, but don't dreams and nightmares alike plunge us into a vulnerable state of sleep? This book is about what sort of democracy we might wake up to after the harsh and invigorating salts of realism come under our noses.

Consider how the performance of rich constitutional states on the major issues of the twenty-first century threatens to spoil the democratic triumph. On international terrorism, many of them decided that exporting their own political systems through military invasion would be the cure, with the result that the lucky recipients thereof have descended to new levels of lawlessness and civil war. This sort of policy choice makes Western democracy look out of touch with the realities of various places and peoples. On two equally ominous global issues, financial volatility and ecological degradation, most of the rich republics look like uninterested or distracted stewards of the public business, suggesting a

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more basic problem than particular politicians' policy choices. Swaying delightfully down at the local saloon, the sheriff and deputies show little interest in the action around town, preferring to booze on ideological abstractions and ethnocultural myths: the sanctity of rights, the priority of liberty, the sovereignty of ballots, and so on. This is a good strategy, at least, for putting bullets in your own feet.

Reformers and revolutionaries in the non-Western world could be forgiven for not wanting to join the cast as extras in this movie western. But are idealistic reveries all the Western tradition of political ideas has to offer? Or can we find potential antidotes for democratic idealism in the more pragmatic, skeptical, and realistic corners of that tradition? By examining a range of key episodes and protagonists in the history of ideas, I'll be trying to piece together a compelling image of a political future that combines realism and democracy.

#### A MASSACRE IN PARIS

Bartholomew is the only apostle in the New Testament whose words and deeds are never specifically attested. In 1572, however, a remarkable sequence of events in Paris ended his relative anonymity. On St. Bartholomew's Day (August 24) of that year began a weeklong massacre which claimed the lives of several thousand French Protestants and made a durable mark on the political imagination of Europe.

French Protestants (a.k.a. Huguenots) and Catholics had been engaged in a sectarian civil war since the early 1560s. The Catholics were favored by national numbers, but the Huguenots dominated some regional strongholds. Key to the civil strife were the dukes of Guise, leaders of a prominent Catholic family close to the royal court, and Gaspard de Coligny, the leading Protestant statesman in the country. Fear of the Guises' influence over the king inspired a Huguenot troop to assault the royal compound at Amboise in 1560, but the conspirators were thwarted and then summarily executed. Two years later, while Francis of Guise was passing with his entourage through the town of Vassy, a

Huguenot church was destroyed – worshippers included. While Catholics held public celebrations in Paris, Huguenots got angry and organized. When Henry of Guise was murdered in 1563, Catholics believed the assassination had been plotted by Coligny in retaliation for Vassy.<sup>1</sup>

By 1572 hopes for an end to the off-and-on warfare were nourished by the marriage of Henry of Navarre, a Protestant nobleman, to Marguerite Valois, the Catholic sister of King Charles IX. This strategic union, however, was trumped by another piece of statecraft. On August 22, Coligny barely survived an assassination attempt by a lone gunman; two days later, on the feast day of St. Bartholomew, he was finished off in his bed by royal guards and members of the Guise family. Dozens of Huguenot noblemen were simultaneously murdered at various locations around Paris, and once again the Catholic majority held public celebrations. Coligny's death was widely understood to have royal sanction and was followed by the pillage and murder of Protestants in Paris and beyond. Over the course of several weeks they were shot, stabbed, impaled, and drowned, women and children included. Reports of these atrocities which circulated at the time are gruesome even by today's Hollywood standards, making William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, composed a few decades after the massacre, look like a heartwarming Steven Spielberg drama. Of the two thousand dead in Paris, half had to be dragged out of the river Seine; some three thousand more Protestants were killed in the provinces. The turbulent Huguenot minority, the crucible of so much discord in the kingdom, might finally have been quelled.<sup>2</sup>

The Bartholomew's Day massacre became a legend in its own time and remained one for centuries afterward. Catholics were forced either to defend it or to disown it; Protestants all over Europe considered it an unmistakable emblem of Catholic aggression. In England, for instance, a play about Bartholomew's Day was written by one of Shakespeare's colleagues. Titled *A Massacre*

<sup>1</sup> Garrison 1995, 333–4; Knecht 2000, 66–71, 80–3.

<sup>2</sup> Knecht 2000, 163–7; Holt 2005, 82–95.

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at *Paris* (1593), Christopher Marlowe's rendition was a straight morality tale, pitting satanic Catholic criminals against innocent Protestant victims. The staying power of this traumatic episode of collective memory lasted into the twentieth century. D. W. Griffith, the United States' most famous director of silent films, included Bartholomew's Day in his epic *Intolerance* (1914), alongside such other historical case studies of his theme as the fall of Babylon and the persecution of Christ.

The implications of Bartholomew's Day were also long-lasting for European politics and ideology. The massacre was an extreme, concentrated expression of what was becoming a familiar, protracted reality: the wars of religion which wracked the continent from the middle sixteenth century to the middle seventeenth. It was also an apt emblem for, and a strong provocation toward, new strains of realism in political thought, particularly those associated with the catch-phrase "reason of state." In the wake of catastrophe, we sometimes find that numerous observers from various vantages wake up to similar insights and undertake a kind of collective mental shift in response to them. Bartholomew's Day was that kind of disaster.<sup>3</sup>

#### REALISM AND IDEALISM

The ready way to pass judgment on events like Bartholomew's Day is to take the idealistic road of righteous condemnation. Idealism is tempting because it appeals to the most exalted notions of the spiritual and intellectual potential within humans, what makes them distinctly "humane" and "civilized" by comparison with the nonhuman world. For idealists, passing judgment and perhaps even molding the world accordingly are expressions of the fundamental truth of "mind over matter." Idealism demands the assertion of simple, categorical truths against realities that, unfortunately, sometimes go awry.

<sup>3</sup> The year 1572 was the start of a distinct epoch in European political theory, according to a book titled *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Tuck 1993).

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Realism, by contrast, bends to worldly complexity and sees adaptation as the characteristically human response. A realist doubts whether the unique spiritual or intellectual traits of humans are clues to any definite meaning, purpose, or teleology in the universe. For the sake of practical adaptation, realism prepares us to compromise abstract ideals, even “humane” and “civilized” ones.

The dichotomy of realism and idealism involves some of the most basic features of how humans think about politics. Realism requires the human mind to be humbled by imperious facts; idealism requires the status quo to be humbled by imperious values. Of course what could be better than occupying a middle ground of perfect harmony between the two, having your cake and eating it too? In human affairs, unfortunately, hard choices must often be made on one side or the other. Whether you’re a realist or an idealist might determine whether you support particular policies or abandon your inherited allegiances – or indeed whether you bother to notice public affairs at all.

In response to cases like Bartholomew’s Day, for instance, nothing’s easier than paying verbal tribute to ideals like peace and justice. It’s more of a challenge to suspend judgment in order to give fair consideration to the variety of circumstances that surround the case. The complexities of Bartholomew’s Day come to the fore when we consider the unavoidable comparison with September 11, 2001: both were swift, surprising events of mass murder which altered the collective mentality of their respective eras. But there are other possible parallels to consider, if we’re being realistic.

Any event is part of broader processes, plans, strategies, projects, and campaigns, and several events leading up to 1572 formed a process to which the massacre belonged. The murder of Henry of Guise in 1563 was a grievance for one side; for the other, the massacre of Protestants at Vassy the year before. The conspiracy of Amboise in 1560 could go either way: Protestant rebels attacked the king’s compound, but his Catholic retainers summarily butchered the surrendered conspirators. All these events took place within the context of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, of

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decades-long sectarian warfare over church and state, in France and all over Europe. The Huguenots launched campaigns for preserving their place within French society or even expanding it; the Catholics launched campaigns for containing the Protestant menace or even extinguishing it. A realist's judgment depends in part on these circumstances and processes.

Which moment in recent history, then, forms the straightest parallel to 1572? September 11 isn't the best candidate, realistically. Bartholomew's Day featured an assault by an established government which triggered mob violence against a minority group. By contrast, the victims of September 11 weren't members of a vulnerable minority, and the assault wasn't a bid to use the power of a modern state, or even a spontaneous majority, to restore unity to a fractured world. Only by stipulating a shared moral rectitude or vision of civilization between the Huguenots and the modern United States could anyone (step forward, heirs of D. W. Griffith) take Bartholomew's Day and September 11 as parallels. Consider instead the conspiracy of Amboise: members of the Protestant minority besieged a citadel of the established regime, resulting in carnage and reprisals. From this angle, Bartholomew's Day looks like an instance of Catholic counter-terror in response to the Protestant terror. Perhaps the genuine parallel to Bartholomew's Day in our times, then, must be found in the "wars on terror" which followed September 11. Arguably counter-terrorism today is as big a problem for democracy as terrorism, since wars of democratization in previously autocratic countries have caused massive problems there, with delegitimizing effects.

#### THE THEORY OF STATECRAFT

The relation between ethical and political deliberation is a perennial human concern because it builds bridges between personal judgment and public action. The comparison of Bartholomew's Day and September 11 doesn't have to be taken very far to indicate the potential for realism to make a difference in personal judgment, with ramifications for public action. Of course, there

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can be no objection in principle to seeking a balance between realism and idealism – just don't expect me to do that sort of seeking here. Given how politics gets discussed in established democracies like the United States and Great Britain, at least in the public domain, what's needed is a hefty dose of realism. That's why the statecraft tradition is the subject of this book.

Statecraft amounts to political realism plus political strategy: it's about how to make things happen in the real world of politics. Its practitioners often act and talk like experts in stagecraft or witchcraft, except focused on matters of state. Political consultants and party managers may play the role of obsessive directors able to plan and to orchestrate complex artistic performances, or occult conjurers able to summon the right tricks at the right time. We tend to view statecraft as the kind of secret knowledge that gray eminences impart to rulers behind the scenes, like Karl Rove to George W. Bush or Peter Mandelson to Tony Blair. Niccolo Machiavelli, of course, is the legendary icon of statecraft. Rove used to brag that he rereads Machiavelli's *Prince* on an annual basis, inspired by the example of Lee Atwater, the famed adviser to Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. James Carville and Dick Morris would be eligible for the same reading club, having also served as counselors to recent U.S. presidents on how to frame opponents and manipulate constituents.<sup>4</sup>

Merely to mention these names reminds us that to speak of statecraft and democracy in the same breath savors of paradox. The tradition I'll be examining has attempted above all to teach those who wish to get power and to use it; it has advised them what they might do, perhaps at the expense of what they ought to do; it has instructed them to respond to cold realities more than warm ideals; it has, apparently, exalted performance over purity and interest over justice as pole-stars for navigating the political

<sup>4</sup> On the parallel of political action and artistic performance in the thought of Machiavelli and Friedrich Nietzsche: Vacano 2007. On Rove and Atwater: Alexander 2008, 13. Carville's consulting firm even took its act on the road to Bolivia in time for the 2003 elections there, with results both amusing and disturbing (Boynton 2006).

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world. The exalted, aspirational, righteous precepts of democracy appear to have no place here.

Accordingly, the conventional wisdom imagines that statecraft is a school for tyrants and oligarchs. The historically based portrait I'm about to draw suggests that the conventional wisdom is misleading: statecraft is also a school for democrats.

The interpretation of Machiavelli himself often embodies this common mistake, but there are other figures and episodes from Western political and intellectual history which are needed to paint a portrait of democratic statecraft. My method of composition will be to identify interesting examples of political realism as it intersects with various thinkers' consideration of democratic ideas, to draw out the essential and distinctive traits of realist thought, and to see what lessons emerge about how popular power does and can operate in the real world of politics. These lessons often take the form of paradoxes: whereas idealists insist on eliminating or ignoring paradoxes, realists believe they can be managed to yield usable maxims about personal judgment and public action.

My attempt to reconstruct the tradition of democratic statecraft is a response to a growing sense among observers of politics that democratic ideas are losing touch with the substance of real politics. Some academic writers have even started to repent of their profession's traditional focus on the abstract properties of reason at the expense of the concrete realities of power, bemoaning the "illusions" and "flights from reality" which are implicated in established schools of thought like Rawlsian liberalism, "deliberative democracy," and "rational choice" theory. The phrase "democratic realism," meanwhile, is sometimes associated with Joseph Schumpeter and his heirs, who've argued off and on since the 1940s that popular government requires only a "minimalist" regimen of periodic elections, reauthorizing political elites through processes of mass voting. Compared to the tradition under scrutiny in this book, the Schumpeterian theory is only half realist and even less democratic. Democratic statecraft is an alternative to this theory as well as to its "participatory" and "deliberative" rivals. In short, the theory of statecraft opens



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the door to an old yet unfamiliar kind of realism in democratic thought.<sup>5</sup>

In a similar spirit, recent efforts in historical scholarship have sought to identify a single author as an intellectual model of democratic thought, focusing particularly on Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. These figures are well worth biographic and theoretic study in their own right, but what I've done, instead of an intensive portrait of a single exemplary figure, is to consider several different episodes from several different eras in the history of ideas. It'll be useful for us to consider the intersections of realism and democracy in varied historical settings, since one of the keys to political realism itself has always been adaptability to circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

A theory of democratic statecraft must first recognize what makes a system of power democratic rather than non-democratic, and then find out which factors promote or retard the foundation and preservation of a democratic system. "Democracy" means "people power," after all, and power is the basic currency of real politics. There's a positive side of democratic statecraft in promoting popular power, as well as a negative side in retarding non-democratic alternatives like autocracy and oligarchy. What we'll find across several case studies in statecraft is that a democratic system must rely on power as well as reason, hard power as well as soft, sanctions as well as deliberation. As we're roused out of drowsy idealism, this tradition will give us a sharper image of real democracy.

## SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2 deals with the multidimensional character of realism and idealism, explaining various ways that ethical principles of personal judgment can be translated into political judgments and used as building blocks for the theory of statecraft. I make a case

<sup>5</sup> For recent academic realism: Shapiro 1999 & 2005; Geuss 2001 & 2008. For minimalism: Schumpeter 1942, chs. 21–2; Przeworski 1999.

<sup>6</sup> For Machiavelli as a model democrat: McCormick 2011. For Hobbes: Tuck 2002, 2004, & 2006.

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study of Reason of State, a type of political literature which flourished in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, nourished by the general crisis of civil and international wars which wracked Europe and by the shocking example of Bartholomew's Day in particular. The popularity of absolutist theories of centralized monarchy during these turbulent times seems to confirm the suspicion that democratic statecraft is an oxymoron, but I'll show how some versions of Reason of State theory accommodated democratic power.

Having used this early-modern story to outline the basic conceptual framework of Western theories of statecraft, I turn in Chapter 3 to the ancient Greek origins of European philosophy. The memorable confrontation between two characters in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates and Thrasymachus, provides a starting-point for the opposition of idealism and realism. Multiple generations of readers ever since have taken their orientations toward politics from the choice between these two, but Plato's own student Aristotle made a surprising move. Rather than siding wholeheartedly with Socrates, he steered a middle course. More to the point, he sided with Thrasymachus on key questions about the role of formal institutions in political life, especially with his skepticism about the translation of justice into political practice, yielding the first of four lessons of democratic statecraft: institutions lie.

We move in Chapter 4 to the relation between Aristotle and Machiavelli. Against the background of changing interpretations of Aristotle in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, from the 1200s A.D. to the 1500s, we can see Machiavelli's legendary realism continued on the same trajectory that runs from Thrasymachus to Aristotle. The latter's realistic analysis of democratic power, in particular, was further developed by Machiavelli in two key areas, popular judgment and institutionalized accountability. The upshot was a class-based and power-centered conception of popular government with teeth, leading to a second lesson: democracy bites.

We then turn from legendary, canonical figures in European political thought to two relatively obscure movements within Anglo-American radicalism. First, in Chapter 5, I trace the lines of influence from Machiavelli to English Puritanism, especially