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John Dunn

Excerpt

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'Actually, there always have to be chiefs.'

Mao Tse-Tung (6 February 1967) (quoted from Frederic Wakeman Jr, *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-Tung's Thought*, pb. ed. Berkeley, Calif. 1975, p. 315).

We are all democrats today. Mr Major and Deng Hsiao-Ping, Mr Gorbachev and President Yeltsin, Mr Mandela and even President de Klerk. In some countries, it is true, *armies* enjoy a suzerainty which they are at pains to proclaim as temporary. And around the Persian Gulf, in Morocco and here and there in the Himalayas and South East Asia a tatty monarchy or two still adorns the map. But even these strive to ingratiate themselves as best they may as the instruments of their people's purposes, tools of the *Demos*. Some monarchies are still fairly immodest both in the life styles of their royal houses and in the rhetoric of their public self-descriptions. 'Is it not passing brave to be a king/and ride in triumph through Persepolis?'¹ And nonetheless brave merely because your grandfather was no closer to being a King than – for example – Lady Thatcher's father. But the proudest kings today, the occupants of Peacock thrones, the orchestrators of OPEC, the flushest clients of Harrods and the British armaments industry, are – and know all too well that they are – not Kings by Right Divine but kings temporarily and on sufferance, kings by permission of the People. The techniques by which monarchs today retain their thrones are technically more modern than those which Machiavelli recommended in *The Prince* four and a half centuries ago; but they are conceived in much the same disabused terms. Kings today (real kings – kings that *rule*) survive for any length of time only by a deft

¹ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*, Part I, Act 2, Scene 5, 11.53–4 (*The Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. Roma Gill, London, 1971, p. 76). The Peacock Throne, of course, is no longer occupied. But, in view of what befell its then occupant in the year in which this book was first published, it will still serve well enough to make the admonitory point in question.

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balance of repressive capacity and utility. Such legitimacy as they can retain even among their own repressive instruments (army, secret police, state bureaucracy) depends upon their title to utility and thus in the last resort, however caricatured the claim may be in reality, it depends on their claim to represent the interests of their people.

This is all not how it used to be.

Nor, of course, is it very concretely how it now is, in social and political reality. To learn that all modern states claim to represent their population's interests and that almost all – all except a handful of monarchies – even claim that their political forms at present constitute (or will shortly, as soon as the emergency is over, come to do so) a government *by* the people themselves, to be told all this, is at first sight to learn little more than words. And words, as Thomas Hobbes said, 'are wise men's counters, they do but reckon by them; but they are the money of fools'.² Democratic theory is the moral Esperanto of the present nation-state system, the language in which all Nations are truly United, the public cant of the modern world, a dubious currency indeed – and one which only a complete imbecile would be likely to take quite at its face value, quite literally. But it is with democratic theory that it seems right to begin – not the reality of democracy, democracy as a social fact, a theme about which there being so little concrete evidence, so little social and historical reality actually to talk about, there might prove to be rather little to say. Democratic reality is certainly pretty thin on the ground.

But the intellectual origins and the historical development of the public cant of the modern world at least offers a subject to discuss which is as palpable, as historically given and as extensive as one could wish.

What *can* we reckon, then, in our sanguine wisdom from the sheer prevalence, the cosmopolitan charm of these words? If we are all democrats today in theory, *why* are we all so? And if we all used not to be – used to be nothing of the kind – how and why have we come to be so?

It will be best, perhaps, to start the historical inquiry by attempting briefly to give the flavour of the political convictions which made democracy politically unenticing in the past, either as a practical arrangement for organizing the government of a society or as a set of

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. M. Oakeshott, Oxford n.d., Part I, cap. 4, p. 22.

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more abstract political values. We may take first of all a passage from a pamphlet published in London in December 1648, purportedly by King Charles himself, at that time a prisoner in the hands of the Parliamentary army at Hurst Castle on the Solent:

'There is nothing [that] can more obstruct the long hoped for peace of this Nation, than the illegal proceedings of them that presume from servants to become masters and labour to bring in democracy.'³

There was a social hierarchy and a legal order, with both of which democracy was incompatible. Almost two months later, on 30 January 1649, on the scaffold at Whitehall, as Charles addressed his people for the last time – or at least addressed that handful of dependable enemies among them who were all that the soldiers permitted within earshot – he restated the same theme:

'Truly I desire their liberty and freedom as much as anybody whomsoever; but I must tell you their liberty and freedom consists in having of government, those laws by which their life and their goods may be most their own. It is not for having a share in government, Sir, that is nothing pertaining to them. A subject and a sovereign are clear different things.'⁴

Charles I, of course, was an obstinate man, a man of somewhat limited imagination, and a man the limitations of whose imagination may in a sense, if a little unkindly, be said to have been responsible for his very presence on the scaffold. He was also, of course, a King himself and thus perhaps occupationally liable to be oversensitive to the categorical character of the gulf between subjects and sovereigns. And despite the excellence of his artistic taste he was hardly an outstanding exemplar of seventeenth century intellectual high culture. Even so, his views on the merits of democracy were far from historically eccentric. A little later in the century, in 1683, we find the great philosopher Leibniz, the cleverest man in seventeenth century Europe, though it must be confessed not intellectually at his most commanding when reflecting on politics, writing in a private letter to a German aristocrat about the best and most Christian

³ *His Majesty's Declaration concerning the Treaty*, cited from C. V. Wedgwood, *The Trial of Charles I*, pb. ed. London, 1964, p. 71.

⁴ *King Charles his Speech made upon the scaffold*, cited from Wedgwood, *Trial of Charles I*, p. 217.

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form of government that: 'today there is no prince so bad that it would not be better to live under him than in a democracy'.⁵

No prince so bad. Today, no doubt, we would simply reverse the values – no prince so good that to live under him would be better than to live in a democracy. And it is clear that the enormity for the men of the seventeenth century (or at least for their rulers and the ideological apologists for their rulers) did not simply reside in the word 'democracy'. It was the idea of political authority depending at any point on the overt choice and will of the people at large which really chilled the holders of social authority in seventeenth century Europe, chilled even those, like Oliver Cromwell himself, who did not in the end shrink even from ordering the execution of their own King. Even those whose theories based political legitimacy upon the consent of the people could be expected to blench at the idea of such consent becoming too direct and too overt (and thus too blatantly reversible). The most withering early critic of John Locke, the non-juror Charles Leslie, savaged Locke for the evasiveness, the sheer disingenuousness of his theory. Reducing the consensual basis of government to a crushing absurdity, he sneered at Locke: 'Would they send men about to poll the whole nation?'⁶

Today, of course, most whole nations (or at least the adult segments of them) have been polled at some time or other. But in 1703, it is well to remember, no *whole* nation in the modern sense *had* been polled – anywhere – ever: not even half a whole adult nation, the male adult half. Nor had anyone ever so far as we know, even among the denizens of Christopher Hill's *World Turned Upside Down*,⁷ proposed seriously that

⁵ *The Political Writings of Leibniz*, ed. Patrick Riley, Cambridge 1972, p. 186. (Leibniz was writing to Landgraf Ernst of Hesse-Rheinfels.)

⁶ Charles Leslie, *The New Association of Those Called Moderate-Church-Men with the Modern Whigs and Fanatics . . .*, Part II, London, 1703, Appendix p. 10. The precise sense in which Locke's political theory in the *Two Treatises of Government* (1690) does base governmental legitimacy upon popular consent remains disputed. For a discussion see John Dunn, 'Consent in the Political Theory of John Locke', *The Historical Journal*, X, 2, June 1967, pp. 153–82. For the historical context of Leslie as a critic of Locke see John Dunn, 'The Politics of Locke in England and America', in J. W. Yolton (ed.), *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, Cambridge 1969, esp. pp. 61–4; Gordon P. Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought*, Oxford 1975, esp. pp. 221–4; Martyn P. Thompson, 'The Reception of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* 1690–1705', *Political Studies*, XXIV, 2, June 1976, 184–91; Jeffrey M. Nelson, 'Unlocking Locke's Legacy: A Comment', *Political Studies*, XXVI, 1 March 1978, 101–8.

⁷ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, London 1972.

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such promiscuous and comprehensive adult participation by both sexes and throughout the population of an entire territorial society could possibly be a sane procedure for arranging the government of that society. The Levellers in England during the Great Rebellion had, it is true, argued for something which – at least to Cromwell and Ireton, if not to Professor Macpherson⁸ – sounded suspiciously like adult male suffrage. They had argued their case on fairly naturalistic grounds: as Colonel Rainborough famously put it: ‘really I think the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he’.⁹ But whereas there may be little conviction to the view that what Rainborough really meant was not ‘the poorest he’ but rather ‘the poorest economically independent agent on the market’, there are no grounds for doubting that what he meant was indeed literally ‘the poorest *he*’ – the poorest male adult – and not as one might today put it, the poorest *person*. There were, of course, those whose rejection of seventeenth century English society and its values went still deeper than that of the Levellers, Winstanley the Digger,¹⁰ the Ranters,¹¹ or the

⁸ The text of the Putney debates is conveniently available in A. S. P. Woodhouse (ed.), *Puritanism and Liberty*, London 1938. For recent dispute about the qualifications for the franchise favoured by the Leveller writers both in the Putney debates and subsequently see C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, Oxford 1962, pp. 107–59; Keith Thomas, ‘The Levellers and the Franchise’, in G. E. Aylmer (ed.), *The Interregnum: the Quest for Settlement*, London 1972, pp. 57–78; Iain Hampsher-Monk, ‘The Political Theory of the Levellers: Putney, Property and Professor Macpherson’, *Political Studies*, XXIV, 4, December 1976, 397–422. Cromwell and Ireton’s interpretation can be judged from the text of the Putney debates themselves. For an especially interesting discussion of the rationale of Leveller attitudes see Edmund Leites, ‘Conscience, Leisure and Learning: Locke and the Levellers’, *Sociological Analysis*, XXXIX, 1, 1978, 36–61. The best recent account of Leveller political thinking is David Wootton, ‘Leveller Democracy and the Puritan Revolution’, in J. H. Burns & Mark Goldie (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450–1700*, Cambridge 1991, pp. 412–42.

⁹ For Rainborough’s famous speech see *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 53; and compare Ireton’s reply pp. 53–5, especially p. 53: ‘Give me leave to tell you, that if you make this the rule I think you must fly for refuge to an absolute natural right, and you must deny all civil right ... For my part, I think it no right at all.’ See also Rainborough’s formulations, p. 55 ‘any man that is born in England’ and p. 56 ‘the meanest man in the kingdom’.

¹⁰ Hill discusses Winstanley extensively in *World Turned Upside Down* and has edited a valuable collection of his writings (Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and other Writings*, pb. ed. Harmondsworth 1973). A fuller (though not a complete) edition of his writings is G. H. Sabine (ed.), *The Writings of Gerrard Winstanley*, Ithaca 1941. For an extensive secondary study see David W. Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War*, London, 1940.

¹¹ For the Ranters see especially Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*.

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outriders of the Fifth Monarchy, eager, as they somewhat presumptuously put it, 'to help Christ to the throne of England'.¹² But none of these envisaged clearly a settled political form, whether secular or sacred, for England as a whole. None had a coherent theory, that is to say, of the character of the post-revolutionary state; and, if their critique of hierarchy was still more radical than that of the Levellers, it left them either with no coherent theory of terrestrial political action at all or else with one which (as with some other later revolutionaries) may have promised eventual freedom for all but in the meantime offered a crisply elitist doctrine of political authority for themselves.

It is, then, no simple matter even to identify a set of persons in the seventeenth century who were with any certainty convinced secular democrats. Democracy was notoriously a form of political regime which had played a major role in the history of Ancient Greece. But Ancient Greece was distant by virtually two millennia and no one at all in the seventeenth century as far as we know, identified their *own* political values by *calling* themselves 'democrats'. As a term of political self-description 'democrat' does not reappear in any western European language until the late eighteenth century and when it does appear, it appears in political antithesis to the word 'aristocrat'.¹³ The late eighteenth century assault on the closed privileged caste order¹⁴ of the post-feudal Ancien Regime, in Europe as a whole and of course above all in France, was responsible for the resurrection of the term 'democrat' as a term of political self-identification. Until the 1780s it was semantically possible (and politically quite effective) to describe the political principles or aspirations of one's opponents as 'democratic' or 'democratical' (one can find Boswell,

¹² As John Simpson urged his congregation at All Hallows the Great from prison at Windsor. See B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men*, London 1972, p. 102.

¹³ R. R. Palmer, 'Notes on the Use of the Word "Democracy" 1789–1799', *Political Science Quarterly*, LXVIII, 2 June 1953, 203–26.

¹⁴ See e.g. Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* (tr. M. Blondel), London 1963, esp. p. 104: 'To think only in terms of wholesomeness, what kind of society is it in which you *lose caste* if you work? Where to consume is honourable but to produce is vile? and p. 177: 'Caste is the right word. It describes a class of men who although they lack functions and usefulness enjoy privileges attaching to their person by the mere fact of birth. It is truly a nation apart.' And see J. Q. C. Mackrell, *The Attack on 'Feudalism' in Eighteenth Century France*, London 1973. For the very late date at which this assault was mounted politically on at all a broad front see Colin Lucas, 'Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution', *Past and Present*, Vol. LX, August 1973, 84–126; and George Taylor, 'Revolutionary and Non-revolutionary content in the *Cahiers* of 1789', *French Historical Studies*, VII, 4, Fall 1972, 479–502.

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for example, doing so¹⁵); but no one, even the most radical, would describe their *own* political principles or aspirations firmly in these terms.

It is not difficult to explain why this should have been so. Democracy was a Greek word, a secular word and an intellectual's word. Such radical politics as one can find in Europe in the seventeenth and even for most of the eighteenth century, were either explicitly sacred or else populist and prescriptive in tone, fighting as the Levellers did for the restoration of what they thought to be *traditional* popular rights, the liberties of free-born Englishmen, to cast off the Norman Yoke of William the Bastard,¹⁶ or else they were very firmly intellectual indeed and set either in the language of autocratic reform or of explicitly Utopian moral aspiration. The populist politics were necessarily very firmly vernacular – Anglo-Saxon at all costs as opposed to Greek. The intellectuals' politics by contrast were either very firmly autocratic, committed, like reforming ministers such as Turgot,¹⁷ to the effective concentration of power in the hands of the royal government. Or else such intellectuals were intractable moralists, deeply pessimistic about the very possibility of restoring or creating a good society. Where it figures in the writings of any of these men, democracy figures as a theoretical term for a peculiarly accident-prone form of state, necessarily socially divided, exceptionally exigent in the type of political culture (the dedicated public virtue of its citizen body) which it required in order to survive at all – and radically unsuited both politically and militarily to compete against the modern state forms of the

¹⁵ See e.g. James Boswell on Johnson's critic Joseph Towers: 'I am willing to do justice to the merit of Dr Towers, of whom I will say, that although I abhor his Whiggish democratical notions and propensities, (for I will not call them principles,) I esteem him as an ingenious, knowing, and very convivial man' (James Boswell, *The Life of Dr Johnson*, 1775), London 1906 ed., Vol. 1, p. 529. For a balanced view of Johnson's own political attitudes see Donald J. Greene, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson*, New Haven 1960. Johnson himself freely employed the word 'Whig' as a term of abuse. ('Where you see a Whig you see a rascal' etc. See e.g. Greene, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–19.)

¹⁶ See Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, pb. ed. London 1962, cap. 3, 'The Norman Yoke'. And see from the Putney debates, *Puritanism and Liberty*, p. 52, p. 120 (Cowling), p. 122 (Wildman).

¹⁷ Franklin L. Ford, *Sword and Robe*, Cambridge, Mass. 1953, esp. cap. 12; and Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist*, Princeton 1959. For Turgot's career see Douglas Dakin, *Turgot and the Ancien Regime in France*, London 1939. And for a terse summary of his attitudes: 'Votre Majesté, tant qu'elle ne s'écartera de la justice, peut se regarder comme un législateur absolu' (quoted from Georges Weulersse, *La Physiocratie sous les ministères de Turgot et de Necker (1774–1781)*, Paris 1950, p. 111.

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time, the absolute monarchies of the West. If there was one wholly undisputed conclusion of academic political theory in the mid eighteenth century, the entire way across the political spectrum, it was that democracy as a distinct form of political regime had gone and gone to stay.¹⁸

We can catch the flavour of this assurance best perhaps from the comments of the greatest mid eighteenth century theorist of the European Ancien Regime, the Bordeaux magistrate, Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, on the fate of the Levellers' political ambitions. In his great book *De l'Esprit des Loix*, published in 1748, Montesquieu noted coolly:

'It was a fine spectacle last century to watch the helpless efforts of the English to establish democracy among themselves. Since those who were taking part in public life lacked virtue ... the government changed incessantly. The astonished people searched for democracy and could find it nowhere. In the end, after many movements, shocks and jolts, they were forced to come to rest in just the same form of government as they had earlier proscribed.'¹⁹

And so, he implied, it was bound to be – so, any competent political theorist could have told them before they had even started.

But if this dismissal of the viability of democracy as a political form was a fair summary of a European intellectual consensus which reached back at least to the Principate of Augustus, it was a consensus which disappeared with surprising speed between 1776 and 1850 in Europe itself.

Again we may take a single example. A young French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, a deep admirer of Montesquieu, was visiting England for the first time in 1833, a year or so after his return from a trip to America which he was to immortalize a few years later, in 1835 and 1840, by

¹⁸ Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*, Cambridge 1971, caps. 1–3. There is an interesting, but in the end somewhat equivocal, defence of the view that Montesquieu conceived democracy as a still viable state form in Nannerl O. Keohane, 'Virtuous Republics and Glorious Monarchies: Two Models in Montesquieu's Political Thought', *Political Studies*, XX, 4, December 1972, pp. 383–96. Keohane establishes Montesquieu's indubitable esteem for democratic republicanism but passes a little lightly over the issue of his judgement of its viability within the state system of eighteenth century Europe. Compare Judith Shklar, 'Montesquieu and the New Republicanism', in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner & Maurizio Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 265–79.

¹⁹ Montesquieu, *L'Esprit des Loix*, ed. J. Brethe de la Gressaye, Paris 1950, Vol. 1, p. 57. (Bk III, cap. 3; and see the *Pensée* on the same subject quoted by the editor, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 250.)

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publishing the most impressive single interpretative study of the United States and what is still probably the most important study of democratic values ever written, *Democracy in America*. On leaving London early in 1833 de Tocqueville was trying to sum up his impressions and to assess the probability of England's succumbing shortly to revolution. On the whole, he thought not. But he was confident that the English aristocracy were bound to go under, for a number of reasons.

'The first,' he said, 'results from the general movement common to humanity the world over in our time. The century is primarily democratic. Democracy is like a rising tide; it only recoils to come back with greater force, and soon one sees that for all its fluctuations it is always gaining ground. The immediate future of European society is completely democratic; this can in no way be doubted. Thus the common people in England are beginning to get the idea that they, too, can take a part in government. The class placed immediately above it, but which has not yet played a notable part in the course of events, especially shows this ill-defined urge for growth and for power, and is becoming more numerous and more restless day by day. Furthermore the discomforts and real poverty suffered in England in our time, give birth to ideas and excite passions which would perhaps have long continued to sleep if the State had been prosperous.

'So a gradual development of the democratic principle must follow from the irresistible march of events. Daily some further privilege of the aristocracy comes under attack; it is a slow war waged about details, but infallibly in time it will bring the whole edifice down.'²⁰

It is striking that de Tocqueville, an aristocrat and a man living in the European society with the deepest experience of political revolution, still, even after his American tour, saw the political meaning of democracy as essentially the repudiation of the feudal past, the triumph of the non-privileged over the aristocrats, the victory of the Third Estate.

In 1833 'democracy' was a European word and a rather parochial and chronologically distant European experience precariously transposed onto the European transition from the Ancien Regime to the post-revolutionary modern state, or, if you will but in terms which de Tocqueville would not have used, the political component of the European transition from feudalism to capitalism. But 'democracy' was not to remain a privately European word or conception for very much longer. By

²⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. J. P. Mayer, tr. G. Lawrence & K. Mayer, London 1958 (last impressions of England, 7 Sept. 1833), pp. 67–8.

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1900 the consolidation of the world market which Marx saw as the historical task of the bourgeoisie, and the invasive thrust of western imperialism, had brought democracy – as a term and an idea, if hardly as a concrete experience – to the most unlikely places. Democracy was a Greek political invention which for the Greeks never really breached the barriers of the Greek cultural world: a form of government which even its adherents supposed to be fit by and large only for Greeks – and by no means a form which they would have thought of proffering wholesale to the barbarians. On the whole the Greeks were tolerably convinced cultural bigots.²¹ But they were, of course, both militarily and politically, in the long run remarkably unsuccessful cultural bigots,²² falling an easy victim to the expanding power of Rome. By 1900 the Greek concept ‘democracy’ had penetrated even to the Central Kingdom, the Celestial Empire of China. The Chinese, by contrast, were the most successful cultural bigots whom world history has yet seen, defining the world which they knew and the political and cultural transactions between themselves and the rest of it resolutely in their own terms and with themselves at its centre for almost two thousand years.²³ Chinese culture *was* culture. The culture of everywhere else was savage custom, fit material for anthropologists, if the Chinese had supposed savages to be intrinsically interesting enough even to merit study. On the whole European words proved exceptionally difficult to translate into Chinese. But the one word which travelled perfectly from fifth century Athens to nineteenth century China and provided transparent understanding on its arrival was the word ‘barbarian’. For the Chinese, Europeans were paradigm barbarians; and the thorny problems of learning to handle them were approached by courses in barbarian studies. On 6 October 1897, Liang Ch’i Ch’ao, a leading mandarin striving for political influence at court and a deep and diligent student of the barbarians,²⁴ published an article in a Shanghai periodical,

²¹ For a synoptic survey of the limits of this conviction throughout Greek intellectual history see H. C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought*, Cambridge 1965.

²² For a witty and penetrating discussion of the relations between the practical failure and the cultural obtuseness see Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*, Cambridge 1975 (particularly severe on the Greeks’ performance as linguists).

²³ See Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, 3 vols., London 1958–65; Joseph R. Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China*, pb. ed. Berkeley, Calif. 1959; John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order*, Cambridge, Mass. 1968.

²⁴ See Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao*; Hao Chang, *Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao and Intellectual Transition in China 1890–1907*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971; Philip C. Huang, *Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao and Modern Chinese Liberalism*, Seattle 1972.