

The Democracy of the Reaction, 1848–2011

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What harm could possibly come of using the discourse of democracy to describe the object of our movements for liberation? We can answer this question with a fable drawn from history: the story of the uprising that took place in Paris in June 1848.

David Graeber has drawn parallels between the revolutions of 1848 and the uprisings of 2011. None of the revolutionary movements of 1848 managed to hold power for more than a couple years. Yet the basic goals that they fought for were widely achieved within a few decades: everywhere, monarchies were giving way to constitutional democracies, with universal suffrage and social safety nets on the way. The argument by analogy is that, though the uprisings that peaked in 2011 were not immediately successful, they will have a long-term impact on how we think about politics. The struggles for state democracy in the Middle East and Southeast Asia and the experiences of directly democratic movements in Europe and the US created a situation in which people around the world are bound to demand more democracy in their governments and their lives.

Perhaps. But this framework doesn't offer us any tools with which to understand how the reactionary forces that suffered setbacks in 1848 and 2011 could reconfigure themselves under democratic banners. In Egypt, after the revolution of 2011, the idea of democratic government re-legitimized the apparatus of state repression long enough for the military to return to power. In Europe and the US, the momentum of directly democratic grassroots movements was channeled into political parties like Syriza and Podemos and the doomed candidacy of Bernie Sanders.

In fact, what happened in Egypt between 2011 and 2014 is a lot like what happened in France between 1848 and 1851. A wide-ranging coalition of different groups overthrew a dictator; the most conservative elements in the coalition won the elections; the resulting popular uprisings were repressed in the name of protecting the fledgling democracy; and in the end, a new despot came to power through a combination of election and coup. The reemergence of the Deep State in France in June 1848 and in Egypt in 2013 underscores why anarchists have argued ever since 1848 that the only sure way to hold on to revolutionary gains is to delegitimize and disarticulate the state. The problem with democratic discourse is that, because the vast majority of democratic models are state-based, it offers cover to anyone who wants to re-legitimize state power. Indeed, even those who explicitly oppose the state can end up reinforcing it—whether by joining the government, as anarchists from the CNT did during the Spanish Civil War, or more obliquely, by legitimizing frameworks and objectives that ultimately enable partisans of the state to present

themselves as the ones with the most effective strategy, as anarchists like Cindy Milstein and David Graeber risk doing.

To understand how this works, let's go back to 1848.

In February 1848, an uprising in Paris toppled the king; revolt radiated throughout Europe along with the news of the French revolution, spreading faster than any wave of unrest in the digital age. The transformation of France into a Republic occasioned much rejoicing, but there was little agreement as to what a Republic was. Just as anarchists, socialists, liberals, neoconservatives, and fascists rub shoulders under the banner of democracy today, in 1848 a vast range of people identified with the ideal of the Republic, confining themselves to debates about what the true nature of the Republic might be. Even Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, already a self-professed anarchist, called himself a Republican, and his explicit opposition to authority didn't stop him from serving in the National Assembly alongside conservatives like Adolphe Thiers—the statesman who later butchered the Paris Commune in the name of the Republic.

Indeed, universal manhood suffrage, long sought by radicals, brought a predominantly reactionary government to power. Former monarchists and aristocrats reinvented themselves as Republicans and set out use their superior resources to game the system. All this illustrates why, once a goal is achieved, it's best to dispense with the old rhetoric in favor of language that clarifies the new problems that arise. Today, we can't imagine anarchists or other sincere proponents of freedom laying claim to the banner of the Republic, though many still present themselves as the champions of *real democracy*.

In June 1848, four months after the revolution, the newly elected government of the Republic rescinded the few steps it had taken to address the plight of the poor—and the workers who had risen up in February once again barricaded the streets of Paris and called for revolution. From the perspective of the good Republicans, this was unthinkable: they had finally achieved a democratic government, so anyone who revolted against it was an enemy of democracy. This time, the workers found no allies among middle-class Republicans. They were on their own.

Victor Hugo, elected to the National Assembly alongside Proudhon and Thiers, considered it his civic duty as a democrat and Republican to accompany the army as it stormed the city and gunned down the rebels. The reactionaries who had not been able to vanquish the workers in the name of the monarchy now slaughtered them in the name of the Republic, preserving the social order that had caused the revolution in the first place. Thousands were butchered in a three-day hail of lead. Afterward, many shops could not reopen because all the employees had been killed.

Shortly thereafter, Napoleon's nephew was elected President of the Republic. At the end of his term, he organized a coup d'état to establish himself as Emperor, bringing the brief reign of democracy to an end. This time, Victor Hugo implored the workers of Paris to build barricades and rise against the usurper, but they turned him a deaf ear. Why should they risk their lives to preserve the authority of the Republicans who had massacred them last time they rose against their oppressors?

Now that the Reaction had no more use for the politicians who had paved the way for it, they too were herded into prison and exile. Their elections and patriotism had served to maintain the legitimacy of the government just long enough for a shrewder tyrant to take the helm. Urging the poor to break the law in the name of the Constitution, Victor Hugo and his comrades showed the contradictions inherent in their lukewarm revolutionism.

With the novels he published from exile, Hugo earned worldwide acclaim for putting words in the mouths of the same poor people whose slaughter he had overseen. He wrote about the

events of June 1848 in his memoirs, bewailing “on one side the despair of the people, on the other the despair of society,” sidestepping his role in the killings he described with such pathos. In *Les Misérables*, he struggled to make sense of how the people who had made the revolution could take up arms against its legitimately elected representatives:

“It sometimes happens that, even contrary to principles, even contrary to liberty, equality, and fraternity, even contrary to the universal vote, even contrary to the government, by all for all, from the depths of its anguish, of its discouragements and its destitutions, of its fevers, of its distresses, of its miasmas, of its ignorances, of its darkness, that great and despairing body, the rabble, protests against, and that the populace wages battle against, the people.

“It was necessary to combat it, and this was a duty, for it attacked the republic. But what was June, 1848, at bottom? A revolt of the people against itself... It attacked in the name of the revolution—what? The revolution. It—that barricade, chance, hazard, disorder, terror, misunderstanding, the unknown—faced the Constituent Assembly, the sovereignty of the people, universal suffrage, the nation, the Republic.”

In short, Victor Hugo sided with society against the people who comprise it; with sovereignty against liberty; with humanity against human beings. In the name of democracy and the republic, he hoodwinked himself into doing his part to preserve class society at the barrel of a gun. He wasn't alone in this: Proudhon and nearly all the well-known socialists chose the government's side of the barricades.

At the time, republican democracy was new enough to Europe that few could foresee how it might advance a reactionary agenda. The same is true of direct democracy today: it has occurred to very few people that a more participatory digital democracy might buttress the legitimacy of police and prisons. Graeber's prediction—that the democratic aims of the movements defeated in 2011 will nonetheless be achieved in the years ahead—might be fulfilled without achieving any significant gains towards liberation, just as the agendas of the revolutions of 1848 were implemented in a repressive way by politicians like Adolphe Thiers who slaughtered the original revolutionaries in the process. The French Republic finally triumphed in 1871, with the massacre of tens of thousands of Communards; like the workers of June 1848, the generations of anarchists and communists that came after 1871 had to fight against the republican government without the assistance of those who had opposed the monarchy and the emperor. Contrary to Graeber's optimism, the aspirations of 1848 were realized in letter but not in spirit—as too might the aspirations of 2011 be, unless we develop a critique of *the democracy of the reaction*.

How can we be sure not to repeat the tragedy of June 1848? First, we should never let a shift in the political sphere substitute for social and economic self-determination. Likewise, we should never become so enamored of a particular decision-making method—be it parliamentary democracy or consensus-run assemblies—that we can be induced to countenance injustice in its name. In every Occupy encampment in which middle-class participants used the general assembly to lord it over homeless occupants of the encampment, we can recognize an echo of June 1848. Finally, above all, we should always be thinking beyond our own victories, developing critical tools with which to tackle the problems that will arise afterwards—fighting the next war, not the last one.

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