

Constant and the Problem of Modern Political Liberty

Caleb Miller, University of California Santa Barbara  
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Under post-democratic conditions, those in which ostensibly democratic procedures fail to realize or even approximate the barest of democratic values, ought those of us sympathetic to democratic values still participate politically?<sup>1</sup> In many ways, this is a version of the perennial question of political withdrawal, but with a nuance not quite captured by the topic's most well-known contributors. Though Seneca and Machiavelli explore a number of reasons why citizens may want to avoid politics, they highlight risks we would primarily associate with unabashedly despotic or tyrannical regimes; namely, arbitrary coercion and cruelty.<sup>2</sup> Thoreau, especially in light of Shannon Mariotti and Stanley Cavell's works, offers a model for withdrawal in a democratic context, but one in which the act is instrumentally in the service of a projected democratic future.<sup>3</sup> Though conditions are considered bad, they are not considered so bad as to rule out democratic progress. Finally, Adorno does advocate for political withdrawal under pseudo-democratic conditions, but his conception of modernity as essentially totalitarian requires that we exile ourselves, not just from politics, but from society at large as well.<sup>4</sup>

In each of the aforementioned accounts of political withdrawal, the act assumed a kind of urgency because political participation presented a danger to the citizen, whether to the body, in the cases of Seneca and Machiavelli, or the integrity of the individual, in the cases of Thoreau and Adorno. What if, however, the danger wasn't our physical or moral corruption, but something less dramatic, but nevertheless valuable: squandered resources, persistent feelings of failure, or missed opportunities; more generally, the obligations, interests, and experiences we understand as constituting a citizen's *private* life? Put another way, if earnest attempts at exercising political influence are so costly as to require the sacrifice of other life goals, those now pursued in private contexts (i.e. spending time with one's family, making a living, learning a

new practice, reading tracts of political philosophy, etc.), for radically uncertain, if any, gains, should we still maintain the sense that we are politically responsible for our polity? Additionally, if we consider the relative influence of ordinary citizens vis-a-vis wealthy elites, those who can exercise significant political influence without comparable costs in terms of time and resources, should we still expect ordinary citizens to understand themselves as having a *democratic* obligation to participate politically?

This is not comparable to the threats faced by activists in communities, even in the United States, where political violence is a brute fact; we are not asking if political participation is worth bodily sacrifice. In instances where state or social violence is the norm, often political participation, non-violent or otherwise, itself becomes an existential tactic, making it difficult to disassociate political motivations from private ones. Admittedly, the post-democratic perspective taken here speaks to less dire circumstances than those best described as tyrannical or totalitarian; we are more concerned with political life under authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup> Yet to casually dismiss our efforts as expendable is to ignore, for many of us, those things that make our lives worth living. In other words, though we cannot compare the costs of political participation under post-democracy to those under oppressive conditions, there are unique post-democratic costs that should be brought to light and critically theorized, the Sisyphean, demanding, and negligible character of political participation by ordinary citizens being one of them.

Further we're not suggesting that, categorically, citizens ought to favor their private commitments over public concerns; nor that political achievements of the past aren't worth the sacrifices made by those who realized them. Despite the value of collective political action, we must raise the question of whether we can assume a *prima facie* obligation to political participation when one's efforts will be obstructed by a hostile, dysfunctional, and/or exclusive political climate, so much so that any success requires a near monastic commitment, one that may result in the necessary exclusion of other of life's worthwhile endeavors. Since at least

Pericles, democratic logics of citizenship have stipulated varying degrees of obligatory political participation; typically not to a coercive degree, but certainly as social norms. Cornell West, in describing the roots of his prophetic pragmatism, one such democratic iteration, writes that "the mark of the prophet is to speak the truth in love with courage-- *come what may*."<sup>6</sup> Broadly speaking, this chapter seeks to describe the post-democratic threat to political participants not in terms of reprisal, but of insignificance, not out of fear of *what may come*, but of *what may be missed*.

In doing so, we turn to a text not traditionally affiliated with the question of political withdrawal, but rather that of citizenship reimagined on the cusp of the modern era: Benjamin Constant's 1819 address to the Athénée Royal, more commonly known as "The liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns". Traditionally, this work is considered canonical for its lucidity in describing the differences between the active, total participatory state of antiquity and the passive, mass state of today, while still noting the relationship between their respective conceptions of liberty: that the enjoyment of modern liberty depends upon a minimal commitment to political participation. Following suit, most committed liberals still stipulate some baseline of political participation, if only just to specify that the opportunity for it must exist.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of our sympathy towards Constant's contention, that one's private liberty cannot be guaranteed unless one is involved politically, Marcel Gauchet correctly notes that the concluding 'just-so' story offered by Constant raises more anxieties than it alleviates.<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that there is some esoteric reading of Constant to unearth, that he intentionally disguised his contentions out of fear of persecution, but it is to point out that we can read this work in such a way as to illuminate the very real costs of contemporary political action, as well as who can afford them. By taking the problems Constant poses more seriously than Constant does himself, we can simultaneously challenge his optimism while revealing subtle aspects of his position that pre-figure contemporary post-democratic conditions: namely, a public

incentivized to embrace powerlessness and the domination of politics by wealthy elites. In this way, an immanent critique of Constant's work becomes revelatory for our own political experience.

However, in order to challenge the normative claim that we have a *prima facie* obligation to political participation under post-democratic conditions, two other contributions are necessary to supplement Constant's. Sidney Hook, in "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life," gives us a non-idyllic look at political commitments in a greater context of missed opportunities and frustration, one which does not advocate withdrawal, but reiterates the costs we find in Constant more palpably. In light of this re-description, the story of activist Peter Kingsnorth, an environmentalist who has come to embrace his own futility, then offers an exemplary portrait of the contemporary costs of political participation. Read in the context of these accounts, Constant can be said to distill the costly futility of political participation by ordinary citizens under post-democratic conditions and give us reason to reject the claim that we have any obligation toward political participation. And though this may contribute to a vicious cycle in which increased political disengagement begets even further degrees of powerlessness, it is also the case that, in this political context, levying such an obligation may only yield feelings of guilt, ineffectualness, and even shame, while doing nothing to slow the wane (assuming it was ever present to begin with) of popular political power.

Ultimately, this chapter will advance the claim that we do not have an obligation to participate politically under post-democratic conditions. Even if we may agree that, under hypothetically democratic conditions we have a responsibility to and for the *res publica*, that when the *res publica* becomes a *de facto res patricia*, our relative powerlessness coupled with the real costs of participation absolves our responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

In order to defend this contention, we will proceed in the following fashion. First, we will construct a brief exegesis of Constant's conditions of modern liberty, with special emphasis on

contemporary obstacles to meaningful political participation. Second, we will explore Constant's conception of private wealth as the foundation for modern political participation, troubling the political role of the ordinary citizen under democratic assumptions. Third, we will turn to Gauchet's seminal essay and outline his reading of Constant's solution, as well as his argument that this has contributed to a more invasive state apparatus. Fourth, through reference to Hook and Kingsnorth, we will make the argument, contra Gauchet, that real lesson of Constant's text is not to fear the totalitarian state, but to come to terms with our own political powerlessness and try to become comfortable with the fragility it inculcates. As such, it is not a dystopian story, but a fundamentally ambiguous and uncertain one that we, nevertheless, must recognize our place in, despite a primarily passive and superfluous role. Finally, this chapter will address the challenges posed to democratic and liberal political logics alike by relieving ourselves of the obligation to participate politically. Through adopting a post-democratic insight, we can see that though we lose purposive and material incentives for political action, we gain the relief and possibility that come with an absolved responsibility to a practice that, depending on one's level of commitment, is either merely perfunctory and symbolic or costly, precarious, and fleeting.

### *The Conditions of Modern Political Liberty*

While many scholars choose to read Constant out of a historical appreciation for his contribution to liberal thought, others have neglected the potential "insights into *his* thought and *his* world" in favor of pursuing "a rather sad reflection of their own."<sup>10</sup> Following a tradition best exemplified by Machiavelli's conversations with "the great men of antiquity," this chapter intends to pursue the latter path and ask 'What can Constant illuminate about our contemporary political conditions?'.<sup>11</sup> The conventional answer has been two-fold: not only does Constant describe a shift in how we ought to conceptualize freedom, advocating for greater value placed in our private pursuits and less in our ability to exercise political influence over the polis, he also stresses that the successful exercise of private liberty is nevertheless indebted to the minimal,

yet regular, exercise of political liberty. Over the course of this chapter, we will develop the following argument: that in addition to the points noted above, Constant's failure to provide a satisfactory answer as to *how* ordinary citizens can protect their private liberty via a modern, 'watered-down' political liberty simultaneously depletes political participation of its presumed functionality and ease, in turn transforming its value and relieving our obligations to it, as well as makes us acutely aware of the precariousness of our private liberty. In order to pursue this point, we'll begin with a brief survey of the lecture in question.

Titularly, the address first distinguishes between two forms of liberty: ancient and modern. As most readers are familiar, ancient liberty pertains primarily to the exercise of political influence, the ability to contribute to and express an institutionalized social power. Ancient liberty is described as consisting "in exercising collectively, but directly, several parts of the complete sovereignty;" including those parts pertaining to war and peace, alliances, procedural laws, judicial matters, and holding officials accountable.<sup>12</sup> Modern liberty, for reasons we'll enumerate below, relegates political participation from liberty's fullest expression to its failsafe and instead prioritizes the private pursuits of the individual. Whereas ancient liberty is understood as an active exercise, modern liberty is conceived of as a set of rights. In particular, he names the rule of law, free speech, property rights, free association, and religious freedom as paradigmatic examples of a liberty based, not on the collective wielding of governing power, but on the fundamental right to be left alone or, as he would write in *Principles of Politics*, one's guarantee of obscurity.<sup>13</sup> Even in the modern conception, Constant still includes an attenuated form of political participation, stipulating that everyone has a "right to exercise some influence" in order to offer "demands to which the authorities are more or less compelled to pay heed."<sup>14</sup>

The turn from ancient to modern liberty did not arise through choice or in a vacuum, but came about as a consequence of other societal shifts. Constant argues that the transition from ancient to modern liberty paralleled three interrelated historical movements: the transition from a

focus on war to a focus on commerce, from slavery to an economy based on free labor, and from the city-state to the modern nation-state. For the ostensible democracies of the West, we are very much still living in the wake of these transitions, which in turn have cultivated four major transformations that altered the ability for individuals to exercise liberty in the ancient sense.<sup>15</sup>

First, by enlarging one's political community from the city-state to the nation-state, it became difficult for an individual to recognize her impact on the collective, making the limited processes for collective governance less appealing. As Constant points out, "[l]ost 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."<sup>16</sup> Over the last century, Walter Lippmann, Joseph Schumpeter, and even Hannah Arendt have all made similar points: under conditions of mass democracy, ordinary citizens become politically alienated and, consequently, become dis-incentivized to act politically.<sup>17</sup> This shouldn't be considered a variant of a collective action problem, in which citizens are choosing to receive material benefits without contributing, but an existential one; we no longer see ourselves in the decisions of our polity and, thus, see no purposive value in our participation. Some of us may have the radical Kierkegaardian faith or Kantian sense of duty to embrace politics without any confirmation of the value of our efforts, but Constant wagers that the vast majority of us will not.

The next two factors dramatically constrain the time available for political participation, both in terms of raw hours and the intervals necessary for the successful exercise of political rights; in turn, raising its temporal cost. The abolition of slavery, which relieved the slaveowner of labor time and allowed him to make the public business his own, made it difficult for individuals to have the large amounts of free time necessary to engage in these activities.<sup>18</sup> Further, the transition in focus from war to commerce altered the intervals of free time necessary for meaningful political action. While war involved long periods of inactivity punctuated by instances of mobilization and battle, the wheels of commerce rarely stop, in turn giving

individuals little time to focus on anything else. Furthermore, whereas war united the community, commerce fragments it, pitting citizens against one another for economic gain. Quantitative and cyclical changes in our experience of time made it difficult to embrace the role of the total citizen.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Constant argues that the individual freedom enjoyed in commerce makes the prospect of state intervention odious.<sup>20</sup> We can consider this a consequence of Constant's first point; when we are pushed to enjoy modern liberty because ancient liberty escapes us, we resent being directed by the social power of ancient liberty, both because its exercise eludes our grasp and interferes with the only liberty available to us. Constant seems to push this fourth reason toward the empirical point that government intervention is always less efficient than a private sector solution, but the more relevant point for our assessment seems to be that, regardless of who is more efficient, the practice of commerce has made the prospect of government intervention a categorical affront to personal dignity. Our loss of participatory efficacy has distanced the state's actions from our own, creating a preference for individual choice over force of the polity, now conceived of as external.

But while state intrusion, and thus our active role in the state, is now seen not as liberty manifest but as its prime hindrance, Constant still wants to retain some measure of political participation, if only to make sure that our civil liberties cannot arbitrarily be dismissed by some tyrant. After all, despite his emphasis on the pleasures of modern liberty, "To renounce [political liberty]," Constant warns, "would be a folly like that of a man who, because he only lives on the first floor, does not care if the house itself is built on sand."<sup>21</sup> Without some form of political participation, some active influence on the state, Constant believes that we will not be able to enjoy our modern liberty without a deep-seated anxiety over its precariousness or, worse, under conditions of oppression or Terror. Despite our preference for private life, its continued existence obliges us, from time to time, to publicly defend it.



*The Character of Modern Political Liberty*

What is important, for our purposes, revolves around how Constant describes this defense as fundamentally and tactically indebted to private powers generated by commerce. Constant will eventually emphasize the need for a representative system. However, what is peculiar to Constant's description is that he doesn't begin to justify the turn to representation based on a normative appeal to democratic principles of equal participation or autonomy, but from a descriptive account of the relative power of private individuals with wealth.

Though admitting that private individuals are much "less concerned with political liberty than they could be, and in ordinary circumstances less passionate about it," Constant believes that "we have the means to defend it [private liberty] which the ancients did not."<sup>22</sup> These means, it quickly becomes apparent, are derived from the privileged position of commerce in the modern world. While multiplying the areas over which state authorities can exercise jurisdiction, it simultaneously makes any exercise of power over property more difficult because, with increased private commerce, circulable property proliferates. "Without circulation, property is merely a usufruct; political authority can affect usufruct, because it can prevent its enjoyment; but circulation creates an invisible and invincible obstacle to the actions of social power."<sup>23</sup> When an individual is able to protect her property from state intrusion by being able to move it about, Constant argues that the polity loses a fundamental sort of control over the individual, making the individual less vulnerable and more mobile.

Beyond the liberatory effects of circulable property, Constant also emphasizes new financial limitations brought upon the state through the establishment of credit. In ancient circumstances, state operations were limited only by the collective will of the political community; because the state is dependent on currency to accomplish its ends, the state now faces the further limitation of its budget and the will of its creditors. "Credit did not have the same influence amongst the ancients; their governments were stronger than individuals, while in

our time individuals are stronger than political powers."<sup>24</sup> According to Constant's framework, the state's need for wealth, held by private individuals, has created a state beholden to these private individuals, one which cannot afford to upset their interests. While collective, social power was influential in the ancient period, wealth becomes the medium of power in the modern age, as, even more than the social power of the state, it is "more real and better obeyed."<sup>25</sup>

After extolling the dual, emancipating effects of commerce for the individual, Constant asserts the inevitability of reduced government intervention in our daily lives. "Let power therefore resign itself: we must have liberty and we shall have it."<sup>26</sup> The state's practical inability to regulate circuable property and subordinated relationship to credit makes the primacy of the private sphere inevitable, as the power of individuals outweighs that of a public fragmented by private concerns and time constraints. However, as must be noted, this power ought not be conceived of as equally distributed across ordinary individuals. While many of us have some circuable property, this is our private property and not the source of our wealth, but its expression. The fact that we can transport this property might make it easier to escape the state during harrowing times, making our condition better than serfs, but it will not make it easy to start again and support ourselves in a new polity. Those of us with wealth satisfactory for such purposes are able to not only move circuable property, but also translate that property into ever more fungible forms, like other currencies or universally-valued property (i.e., gold, diamonds, etc.), making them able to remain wealthy despite changing political contexts. Further, whether operating as campaign donors or exercising influence among mega-investors, elites are able to wield the regulative power of credit, a power unavailable to most ordinary individuals. In short, we should not imagine the power of commerce to be universal, but as available only to those who have significantly benefitted from commerce itself.<sup>27</sup>

We should not then be surprised when Constant proceeds directly from the discussion of the power of commerce to a description of how representative institutions ought to behave. Now

well-versed on the commercial bedrock of modern liberty, the exercise of political liberty becomes less ambiguous, stressed as a form of stewardship or "an organization by means of which a nation charges a few select individuals to do what it cannot or does not wish to do herself."<sup>28</sup> Understood in this light, the representative system is described not through a republican glorification of the community's autonomy or a Burkean emphasis on deliberative powers, but as a matter of convenience; political liberty, for Constant, is presented here as a practical means of protecting our ability to focus solely on our private interests and enjoyments. From the perspective of the enjoyer of modern liberty, any exercise of political liberty is a nuisance, necessary only because some state official has displayed signs of tyrannical intent. Thus, while "[p]oor men look after their own business; rich men hire stewards."<sup>29</sup> Why see to your liberty's protection when you can employ someone (a consultant, lobbyist, or public official) to do it for you?

However, simply employing the steward is not enough. "[U]nless they are idiots, rich men who employ stewards keep a close watch on whether these stewards are doing their duty, lest they should prove negligent, corruptible, or incapable," to which Constant further stresses that these rich men should "keep themselves well-informed about affairs".<sup>30</sup> This involves "exercis[ing] an active and constant surveillance over their representatives, and reserve for themselves... the right to discard them if they betray their trust, and to revoke the powers which they might have abused."<sup>31</sup> It is at this point that Constant names the inherent danger of a representative polity; not the 'overpoliticization' reflective of a participatory state, but the 'overprivatization' that may resort from citizens being left to their private concerns.<sup>32</sup> He even points out that the state will be all too willing to encourage the private turn, even in assuring that they'll pursue our collective happiness; "[t]hey are ready to spare us all sort of troubles, except those of obeying and paying!"<sup>33</sup>

One may object that this reading of Constant paints him as some kind of oligarch, one superficially invested in democratic practices, and that such a reading is unfair. It would be dishonest to describe Constant as interested in a polity governed by the super-wealthy, but he was far from a universal democrat either; in *Principle of Politics*, written four years earlier, he defends the property-owner qualification for suffrage in arguing that

Those who are kept by poverty in eternal dependence, and who are condemned by it to daily labour, are neither more knowledgeable than children about public affairs, nor more interested than foreigners in national prosperity, of whose elements they are unaware, and in whose advantages they share only indirectly.<sup>34</sup>

Sadly, even many of us lucky enough to enjoy some financial security do so out of daily labor, theoretically disqualifying all but those who do not need to work for a living.<sup>35</sup> He further cites Aristotle in stressing that there are only three outcomes to allowing the propertyless masses to participate: they either destroy society, become instruments of tyranny, or become instruments of factionalism.<sup>36</sup> As such, Constant comes to the conclusion that "you need property qualifications and you need them both for the electors and for those who are eligible for election."<sup>37</sup> While in a society with less wealth disparity, the exercise of political influence under Constant's model may be more widespread, under stratified wealth conditions, Constant's model of stewarded representation becomes consistent with oligarchy, if not in form, certainly in political output.

However, returning to the 1819 address, Constant seems to offer a role for ordinary citizens as well, if we read him generously. Modern liberty necessitates our consistent vigilance; in order to supplement the practical need for this effort, Constant explains that, through promoting regular participation, legislators can facilitate an appreciation for the task of participation among ordinary citizens, despite the obstacles enumerated earlier. "Institutions must achieve the moral education of the citizens... by forming them through practice for these elevated functions [of citizenship], give them both the desire and the right to discharge these."<sup>38</sup>

Once fostered, this moral education can contribute to something of a virtuous circle of participation, one that ensures the persistent defense of our modern liberty by habitualizing citizens to and invigorating them for regular elections. However, this should not be confused with a celebration of unbridled democracy, the return of ancient liberty; the function of their participation is merely to limit encroachments on modern liberty. As such, their role becomes negative, reactive, and over-determined. Constant ends his address by extolling this active citizenry and contending that, in conjunction with a representative system, this model of political liberty can simultaneously protect modern liberty from both an over-enthused public too involved in the private lives of others and an apathetic public all-too-willing to cede the reigns of power to an external apparatus.

*Gauchet and the Trouble with Modern Political Liberty*

One of Constant's most brilliant commentators, Marcel Gauchet, notes that Constant's work is primarily puzzled by the problem of *how* a population can exercise its sovereignty, highlighting that "A sovereign people is a people more in danger of alienating its sovereignty than any other."<sup>39</sup> In fact, Gauchet's Constant, pre-figuring Schmitt's reduction of democracy to a string of identity relations, argues that the origin of "the ills of democracy...was always the same...namely, ambiguity in the relation between the governing and the governed, which the terms of the elective principle left completely undefined."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, "the first priority was to dispel the obscurity surrounding the exercise of power, which encouraged misrepresentation or failure, and to shed as bright and revealing light as possible on the nature of the relationship between power and society... to prevent power from substituting itself for society, and... to prevent society from appropriating all power to itself."<sup>41</sup>

Commentating on Constant's philosophy of power and society, Gauchet names two points Constant correctly asserts and one major blindspot of his position. First, Constant is right in pointing out that modern Western regimes are distinguished by the citizens's ability to

simultaneously withdraw from public life and still assume it exists; "or, to put it another way, the acquisition of the right to live in society without consciousness of the fact that we are living in society, with the implicit assumption that society nevertheless remains perfectly intact even though its individual members have ceased to be conscious participants in its institutions..."<sup>42</sup> In this sense, the primacy of the individual over the collective makes society, not artificial, which in a Rousseauian vein it always was, but an object of faith, something we must assume without any first-hand experience; society is no longer the means and ends of our actions, but their assumed, yet ignored, conditions of possibility. Second, as the context for the enjoyment of modern liberty, "the civil sphere would increasingly be forced to take care of itself and assert its autonomous creative power," lest it be dominated by the state.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the distinction between public and private or civil life, generated by our reverence for the individual, requires that the civil sphere be active in its own right in order to guarantee its continued existence.

However, despite being right that we are living with the brute fact of individualism and, consequently, civil society must take charge of its own destiny, Gauchet stresses that Constant was unable to foresee that "[t]he undeniable secession and self-constitution of the civil sphere... has in fact gone hand in hand with a strengthening of the influence and extension of the competence of the political apparatus."<sup>44</sup> In other words, hiving off civil society did not secure some popular power which could be used against the state, but instead freed the state to its own devices; "[T]he existence of society still depended on the operation of the state, but it no longer insisted on knowing how this came to be, and the formal will of the state ceased to be necessary."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the separation of civil society and the state did not create two counterbalancing forces, each invested in the protection of society against the other's excesses, but rather created two spheres with separate foci: private life, turned inward towards the exercise of modern liberty and resting on the assumption that society at large will continue on without its effort or attention and the state, turned towards and actively shaping society. Distinguishing civil

society from political life didn't work to protect the private life, but only make it oblivious to the forces that constitute it.

Implicit in Gauchet's account is the realization that the minimal political participation Constant expects from ordinary citizens, being attentive and exercising their suffrage, is far from sufficient to allow them to influence the conditions of their private lives. Rather, the previously enumerated conditions that facilitated the turn to modern liberty, coupled with the state's willingness to absolve our civic responsibilities, provided we 'pay and obey,' have in fact created a society so woefully unfamiliar with itself and its trajectory as to make it incapable of collective action, provided it even recognizes the need for action in the first place. As John Dewey previously noted, suffrage is hardly productive outside of an active and engaged community that can set and challenge political agendas; in isolation, even the adequately informed citizen is impotent without a community that she can coordinate action with.<sup>46</sup> As such, under post-democratic conditions, participation is either formal and procedural (suffrage, writing one's congress person, etc.), making it perfunctory, symbolic, and insignificant or committed (education, organization, mass action, etc.), making it more significant, but costly and contingent as well. While the wealthy might be less in need of their geographic community and able to have meaningful access to representatives, ordinary citizens are without such luxuries and much rely on each other.<sup>47</sup> However, when conditions are such that being politically available to one another is too costly, perhaps because the time isn't available or one's efforts are consistently experienced as failures, then, despite the formal (and informal) opportunity to exercise political influence, ordinary citizens may contribute very little to how they are governed or not at all.<sup>48</sup>

Gauchet reads this point as liberalism's persistent blindspot, reiterating that the liberal hope of constituting the state as a neutral power, balanced by civil society, consistently creates the conditions under which the state can "break the organic bonds that had linked it to the human community, and to devote all its energy not merely to maintaining society but to

developing it from a position of radical exteriority."<sup>49</sup> Much like in Michel Foucault's work, the imperative to defend society yields prescriptions divorced from the expressed interests of ordinary citizens but substantiated by narrow, self-replicating institutional logics, all the while legitimated by the ostensible claim of popular sovereignty.<sup>50</sup> Gauchet unites these observations with fears of a nascent totalitarianism, one already operating in subtle ways and shaping our private lives without our knowledge, consent, or control.

But what if the more pressing issue wasn't the Orwellian world to come, but Beckettian world of the present; if our main concern wasn't the political consequences of an externalized state apparatus, but ambiguity and uncertainty of political powerlessness we feel at present without hope of deliverance? Contra Gauchet, under post-democratic political conditions, the incapacity of ordinary citizens coexists with a relatively non-totalitarian, if not negligent, state apparatus, at least when compared with prior polities. We no longer exercise the kind of radical social power available in Athens or Rome, like ostracism or censorship, nor do most of us experience our coercive institutions in a manner akin to Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. And though we must acknowledge that the guarantee of obscurity described by Constant is not sacrosanct, especially in minority communities, we can also note its hegemonic status in our discourse, that there is a political grammar available to us to condemn such intrusions when they occur. Our problems are not totalitarian, but authoritarian. This is far from an attempt to popularly legitimate Western democracy or even to say conditions now aren't bad; but it is to say that, under conditions where ordinary citizens are politically powerless, it could be much worse.<sup>51</sup>

In this context, where totalitarian sirens may not find sympathetic ears, we ought to focus instead on the problem of political powerlessness in itself. To do so, we'll reflect back on the obstructions to ancient liberty Constant describes in the context of the work of Sidney Hook and the narrative of Peter Kingsnorth, making these hindrances more palpable than Constant's



original description. In light of these texts, we'll contend that the recognition of political powerlessness should not yield a feeling of terror, but only relieve one's responsibility to one's polity, even in a nominally democratic context.

### *Participation Costs*

To reiterate, Constant contends that we have turned away from more active commitments to political life because we feel insignificant, we do not have the time (both in an absolute and functional sense), and we've found more pleasure in making individual decisions than collective ones. In response to Gauchet's understanding of the consequences of those conditions, a ready objection would be that this is an endemic feature of liberalism, but not of a democratic life in the vein of Pericles, Dewey, or Benjamin Barber. Rather, if we were just to embrace a fully participatory democratic life, we could overcome these conditions by pure will; for example, despite feeling inefficacious, we can force ourselves to continue on. However, the strength of Constant's reading of our modern political condition lies in not just naming the obstacles to ancient liberty, but taking them as permanent features of our new political landscape. As such, to suggest that they can simply be overcome if we try hard enough is to treat these characteristics less than seriously. In order to defend the political climate Constant describes, we can first turn to Hook's essay on the costs of modern political action: "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life."

Responding to critics who chide it for being naively optimistic, Hook contends that pragmatism, as developed by Peirce, James, and Dewey, "far from embracing easy formulae of the ultimate reconciliation of conflicting interests and values... acknowledge[s] the reality of piecemeal losses even when we risk our lives to achieve the gains... It is grounded in a recognition of the tragic sense of life."<sup>52</sup> Opposed to the image of Dewey and others as utopian progressives, the pragmatists here are described as profoundly aware of life's challenges, politically and otherwise. Instead of the tragic sense inculcated by the knowledge of our death, a

la Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Hook describes it as one based in the costs of moral choices. He writes, "Every genuine experience of moral doubt and perplexity in which we ask 'What should I do?' takes place in a situation where good conflicts with good."<sup>53</sup> Of course, some choices are inconsequential; but "[w]here the choice is between goods that are complex in structure and consequential for the future, the tragic quality of the moral dilemma emerges more clearly. And when it involves basic choices of love, friendship, vocations, the quality becomes poignant."<sup>54</sup> He further goes on to describe not only the conflict of goods, but the Kantian conflict of the right and the good, as well as the Sophoclean conflict of rights.

The relevant point for our discussion here is that political choices are not made in a vacuum, one where we face a simple choice to participate or be apathetic. Rather, whether choosing between political goods/rights (environmental vs. social justice; prison reform vs. animal rights; etc.) or between political goods/rights and those of a non-political character, the choices are not simple. In this sense, Sartre's example of radical choice, that of deciding between fighting foreign occupation or caring for a relative, is instructive; not in emphasizing that our choices are without some kind of absolute justification, but that such choices cannot be made without an acute awareness of what one loses as much as of what one may possibly gain.<sup>55</sup> To assume a prima facie political obligation is to assume that either we are not in a tragic position or that such conditions do not disturb the primacy of the political. Many of us, especially those of us who spend their days studying politics, may theoretically hold fast to the primacy of the political, but we should ask ourselves if we do so practically and, if not, how we expect others to (in particular when not paid to do so).

Hook ends his essay by advocating for a meliorist position based on what he calls the creative use of intelligence. As opposed to a Hegelian position, which ignores the tragic character of the world through a historical theodicy, and the Christian emphasis on love, which he finds both "incomplete and ambiguous," Hooks position asserts that what is warranted is an

emphasis on "informed and responsible decision."<sup>56</sup> The pragmatist "imperative is to inquire, to reason together, to seek in every crisis the creative devices and inventions that will not only make life fuller and richer but tragedy bearable."<sup>57</sup> As such, "The pragmatic program is always to find moral equivalents for the expression of natural impulses which threaten the structure of our values."<sup>58</sup> In other words, pragmatic efforts should be directed towards investigating the moral conditions and consequences of solutions to our existential and metaphysical questions.

In the context of Constant's account, Hook allows us to pose our initial question more clearly: under conditions of perceived political insignificance, where time is scarce and could be used more meaningfully, ought we consider ourselves to have a prima facie obligation to political participation, despite the costs? Ought we consider it our duty to educate, organize, and act, even at the expense of time spent working, pursuing private interests, or just being with our families? And does our relative powerlessness factor into that calculation? Or should we instead do the best we can, even if our best must eschew democratic commitments toward political participation or, when participating, democratic means?

Before venturing an answer, we should turn to a recent account of UK activist Peter Kingsnorth. Profiled in *The New York Times Magazine* in 2014, Kingsnorth worked against environmental destruction and climate change for nearly two decades before founding the Dark Mountain Project, a group dedicated to standing witness to our impending apocalypse.

'Everything had gotten worse,' Kingsnorth said. 'You look at every trend that environmentalists like me have been trying to stop for 50 years, and every single thing had gotten worse. And I thought: I can't do this anymore. I can't sit here saying: 'Yes, comrades, we must act! We only need one more push, and we'll save the world!' I don't believe it. I don't believe it! So what do I do?'<sup>59</sup>

Instead of re-dedicating himself to environmental activism, Kingsnorth is now working to cope with the "mourning, grief, and despair" he feels concerning environmental disaster.<sup>60</sup> "We are living, he says, through the "age of ecocide," and like a long-dazed widower, we are finally

becoming sensible to the magnitude of our loss, which it is our duty to face."<sup>61</sup> Kingsnorth, not for lack of time or out of a prioritized dedication to any other private interest, decided to give up politically because of a devastating feeling of political inefficacy.

Kingsnorth's story isn't meant to suggest that all political action is hopeless, that individuals ought not become political subjects. Rather, it's meant to illustrate that there are instances of apoliticism, specifically those fermented by persistent political failure, that many of us would not be prepared to normatively condemn. Perhaps we would be willing, if given the chance, to tell Kingsnorth that he shouldn't give up, that his efforts are worthwhile and he should continue on despite the persistent feeling of failure and other missed opportunities. But many of us would not. Instead, Kingsnorth's experience seems to suggest that he has sacrificed enough, that he is entitled to his feeling of desperation and defeatism. Many of us would, in fact, say that Kingsnorth was defeated. And though we may idealize his efforts and contend that we would be better off with more like him, few of us would wish that experience on those we care about or ourselves.

It may be the case that we feel that Kingsnorth ought to be excused because he has 'put in his time,' but this position would seem to hold that our duty is unconnected with our capability. To the committed democrat who refuses to budge, the story of Kingsnorth, even in the context of Constant and Hook, may mean very little. However, to those of us sympathetic to democratic values, yet skeptical of our capacity for exercising political influence, as well as torn between the demands of political activism and the very real and meaningful commitments of our private lives, it should give us pause. To a large degree, Kingsnorth represents an ideal of democratic activism, what we should all be doing in a society which assumes that political power is legitimated popularly. However, the costs associated with his activity, the sacrifices he's had to make that many of us would not readily agree to, makes this expectation seem extreme, if not cold and unsympathetic to the demands upon us and the opportunities available to us. If we

acknowledge the tragic trade-offs involved in any of life's major decisions, then despite the value we place on political participation and achievement, its contingent and costly character under post-democratic conditions may inherently relegate it.

Thus, what Hook and Kingsnorth remind us of is the *gravitas* of Constant's enumerated conditions; they help us paint a perspective in which private life is taken as seriously as most of us take it practically. Our jobs, our passions, our private obligations, and our families cannot all simply be theorized or prescribed away; and while one may rightly object that most citizens engage in political activism precisely for those reasons, we must further recognize the audacity of expecting individuals to choose time spent *for* them over time spent *with* them, especially when the respective returns are so dramatically different. It is in this context that Constant's prescribed solution for the ordinary citizen, suffrage and attentiveness, seems so compelling: it sympathizes with the perceived comparative value between modern political liberty and the other aspects of modern liberty, endorsing our tendency to act privately rather than publicly.

Yet, it is not enough. As noted earlier, Constant's solution doesn't generate a citizenry capable of acting in its own interests, even if we limit those interests to the defense of modern liberty. It instead distances ordinary citizens from their polity, providing either a false sense of security or a profound sense of political alienation, and releases the state to its own institutional and idiosyncratic logics. Only those capable of politically using their wealth can even approximate the kind of oversight Constant warns is necessary; Constant's solution therefore not only disempowers ordinary citizens, but empowers elites. For the rest of us, our choices lie between a perfunctory and symbolic exercise of political influence through the politically neutralized procedures available in liberal representative democracies or a committed, engaged effort, a la Kingsnorth, one which tries to take the democratic promise seriously but with high costs for little, fleeting, or no gains. The former is insignificant, but the latter may be too much to ask of us.

*Political Participation and Post-Democracy*

As previously pointed out, Hook adopts a broadly meliorist position, one which attempts to make the best out of bad situations. While the post-democratic project is not inherently pragmatist, we may sympathize with this impulse to use our creative intelligence to morally come to terms with the nature of our world and our possible solutions. However, when the nature of our world is such that ordinary citizens insignificantly influence our ostensibly collective decisions, where political possibilities are foreclosed a priori by political actors better able to pursue their interests, and where earnest attempts to contribute to our collective future are overly costly and contingent, perhaps the pragmatists move is very similar to the post-democratic one presently pursued: an effort to come to terms with our present political powerlessness and to evaluate the options open to us.

In this chapter we have contended that, under post-democratic conditions, we ought not assume that citizens have an obligation to participate politically. The non-Constantian liberal may agree and even wonder why this point is significant in the first place; presuming there are opportunities to participate, what does it matter if they go unused? Further, as totalitarianism or other dreadful forms of government have failed to manifest, at least not in ways we haven't learned to cope with, we cannot concur with Gauchet that a disengaged citizenry will inherently spell disaster. If our disengagement hasn't been apocalyptic, why worry about it?

First, under a post-democratic framework, our lack of an obligation to participate is informed by an acute awareness of the political powerlessness of ordinary citizens. To the democrat, this results from the lack of active participation in the polity, but the liberal should be worried as well; without significant or meaningful opportunities for contestability, the ability to defend one's rights on a political level, the liberal can only rely on the letter of the law and the benevolent disposition of those who rule.<sup>62</sup> Broadly speaking, the liberal doesn't rely on the presence of a civil society actively engaged in politics because she assumes that one will

manifest during instances of tyranny. But such a position assumes an innate knowledge on the part of the public, that they will know how to communicate, organize, and act effectively when the time comes without any preparation or practice. The post-democratic position, rather, takes seriously the public's current inability to act politically and doesn't assume it either will appear automatically or be effective when it does.<sup>63</sup>

Second, whether one stipulates an obligation to participate politically or simply an opportunity, when both are frustrated by conditions of political powerlessness, we cannot assume the legitimacy of the polity. One may adopt a strict liberal position and argue that, as long as enumerated rights are protected (and political rights are not among those enumerated), the polity can still be considered legitimate under conditions of post-democracy. But when the only mechanisms for guaranteeing this legitimacy are tradition or the ruling temperament, one finds that liberalism becomes reliant upon the very forces it sought to institutionally check, making continued legitimacy a very precarious assumption. For those of us expecting stronger checks, either actively or formally, our polity's legitimacy becomes murkier: without the possibility of popular legitimacy, we may either employ other criteria or dismiss it as illegitimate, in either case fundamentally changing the perceived character of our polity from a democratic one. Further, as questions of legitimacy are raised, as are questions of membership in, responsibility to, and culpability for the actions of our polity.

Third, simply because our world is not burning now doesn't mean that it won't in the future. The post-democratic outlook is not categorically pessimistic towards political outcomes, but rather recognizes an inherent ambiguity and uncertainty concerning our future precisely because it is out of our collective hands. In this sense, our position stands between Gauchet and the unconcerned liberal: neither overly paranoid nor Pollyannaish, but aware of the radical lack of political influence by ordinary citizens and, subsequently, the absence of a Constantian check on a state left to its own devices. Considering the relative political power of wealthy elites,

those concerned about economic justice may expect to be disappointed, but elite disagreement over a host of other issues may still provide hope for the realization of other political goals, even if ordinary citizens are superfluous to their realization. The point is not that we are doomed as a society, just that we ought to assume we will have little to no say on how we will proceed politically.

Finally, through recognizing the political powerlessness of ordinary citizens via ostensibly democratic procedures, in turn raising serious questions concerning our polity's legitimacy and our society's future, we also open ourselves to a host of political possibilities previously foreclosed by a democratic ethos. Operating under democratic assumptions, activists, whether sincerely or not, had to ascribe to the notion that they were cultivating a public consensus, that the activist was the voice of some amorphous or yet-to-be-realized 'people'; whether in service of the great unwashed masses or the silent majority, their political action always had to be justified by some variant of the 'general will.' To some, this may be satisfiable by public opinion polling or projections of false consciousness; to others, democracy may require extensive public education campaigns, grassroots organization, and popular mobilization. In some fashion, the identity relations that Carl Schmitt argued constituted democracy must be made performed and seen as authentic. To the post-democrat, popular legitimacy is discounted; not because it wouldn't be valuable if realized, but because all of our attempts to realize it dissolve into simulacra, becoming caricatures of a democratic mandate.

Therefore, in recognizing a world in which ordinary citizens shouldn't be expected to act politically, activists are freed from democratic expectations and can pursue more creative and effective tactics. If the animal rights activist finds better success courting rich donors than educating and organizing you and me; if the climate change activist communicates more effectively via myth (Mother Nature, etc.) and scare tactics than science and clear information; or if social justice goals are better pursued by cyber vigilanteism than grassroots organization,



so be it. We could list various goals of the right as well, but many of their partisans abandoned democratic pretenses long ago. Under post-democratic conditions, despite our prior sympathies, we must ask ourselves if democratic presumptions and constraints make *political* sense or, rather, if they work to deliver us further into a world influenced more and more by those with neither democratic tendencies nor sympathies.

We should end reminding ourselves that, for ordinary citizens, political powerlessness is not absolute. Citizens can dedicate their lives to political issues and have significant impacts; this is especially possible if a citizen is employed as an activist or an elected official. However, when one must work for a living outside of politics, when the costs of participation, time, resources, and missed opportunities are too high, or when one values the liberty of a private life more than the constraints of a public one, we should not and cannot assume that a significant number of ordinary citizens will overcome this position of powerlessness. In other words, we cannot assume that we all can or should aspire to the prior efforts of Kingsnorth; and we should certainly not assume that those who do can constitute enough of a public as to garner democratic (or, in many instances, even liberal) credentials for that polity.<sup>64</sup>

So what must we do in a climate of popular powerlessness when we can't reasonably expect the dedicated political efforts of our fellows and ourselves? For the democrat, the answer may be to reinvigorate the public; for the liberal, it may be to develop better mechanisms to check the state. For the post-democrat, when both the democratic and liberal solutions seem overly optimistic, relying on a sense of popular power we now recognize as absent, the answer is to think our polity anew and ask how we ought to proceed without (maximal or minimal) democratic constraints.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For more on post-democracy, please see Colin Crouch, *Coping with Post-Democracy* (London: Fabian Society, 2000) *Post-Democracy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004) and Jurgen Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012). However, despite many similarities, the concept of post-democracy employed here differs fundamentally from Crouch's; namely, contra Crouch, in advocating a normative shift in addition to a descriptive one. A fuller description is available in my dissertation chapter "What is Post-Democracy?" (unpublished).

<sup>2</sup> See Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 165-180 and Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> See David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Norton, 2008); Stanley Cavell, *Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Shannon Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (New York: Verso Press, 2005) and with Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> I'm employing the distinction between tyranny, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism as described by Hannah Arendt in "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) . Broadly speaking, the tyrant rules against all arbitrarily, the totalitarian rules with all in varying degrees of intensity, and the authoritarian rules all, but according to some external standard that legitimates it (97-100). To the extent that popular elections constitute an external standard, political violence is uncommon, and most people are passive politically, post-democracy is best understood as a variant of authoritarianism.

<sup>6</sup> Cornell West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 233.

<sup>7</sup> For example, though a self-described republican, Philip Pettit's *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) describes a shift from the need for consent to contestability, recognizing that most citizens will not have a say in how they are governed and at best should hope for the opportunity to retroactively contest the state, a move to which liberals may be sympathetic. In relying on the rule of law, Pettit and liberals alike may not find the need to actively exercise political influence.

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Gauchet, "Liberalism's Lucid Illusion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Constant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> It is in this sense a negative contention. It is not that we ought not participate politically, but that we ought not consider it an obligation, either as a consequence of pseudo-democracy or a democracy-to-come.

<sup>10</sup> Helena Rosenblatt, "Why Constant? A Critical Overview of the Constant Revival," *Modern Intellectual History* 1 no.3 (2004): 453. Italics in original. Here Rosenblatt is taking aim at the work of John Plamenatz, Isaiah Berlin, and Marcel Gauchet, among others.

<sup>11</sup> See Niccolo Machiavelli, "Letter to Vettori, 10 December 1513," in *The Prince*, 93-5. Note that while Machiavelli's intentions for undertaking such conversations may have just been personal enjoyment, it did give him a clearer theoretical perspective on his present, allowing him to write *The Prince*; this work may constitute a sad reflection, but perhaps a necessary one all the same.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 311

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 321 footnote b. This emphasis on the right to be forgotten by the public sphere reaches a dire seriousness when one recognizes that Constant is largely responding to the experience of the Terror during the French Revolution.

<sup>14</sup> Constant, *Political Writings*, 311

<sup>15</sup> There are, of course, some exceptions. Some autonomous regions in Europe may be more closely related to city-states than nation-states and, sadly, slave labor persists in several forms, including the exploitation of the poor and undocumented. Yet, neither is the norm and both the international system and legal statues favor the nation-state and free labor over city-states and slave labor. Finally, though the United States still engages in nearly endless war, the Military Industrial Complex describes war as subservient to the interests of commerce, either to open up foreign markets, ramp up domestic production, or occupy and reduce a labor force.

<sup>16</sup> Constant, *Political Writings*, 316

<sup>17</sup> See Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1934); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London: Ruskin House, 1943); and Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963), esp. ch. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), ch. 17.

<sup>19</sup> See Ralf Dahrendorf, "Citizenship and Beyond: The Social Dynamics of an Idea," *Social Research* 41 no. 4 (1974).

<sup>20</sup> Though Constant names only commerce, we might push his point to suggest that private life, not just work, cultivates a dislike for state intrusion.

<sup>21</sup> Constant, *Political Writings*, 326

<sup>22</sup> Constant, *Political Writings*, 324

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 324-5. Usufruct, or the practice of holding land in common or through the state for public use, allowed the state to have a tighter reign on property. When property only referred to land rights or immobile means of production (mills, harbors, etc), it's much easier for the state to exercise its authority over said property. However, when property includes trade goods or currency, that which can be circulated, though the state may try to control said circulable property, the process becomes much more costly and difficult.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 325

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 325. It may seem doubtful that the state is empirically reined in by individuals unwilling to extend funds, but we can highlight two supplementary observations that illuminate the consequences Constant notes. First, though individuals in mass may not limit the state by their credit, at least not individually, we can readily witness the influence of private individuals upon politics by offering and threatening to withhold campaign funding. This, of course, is different from the state as debtor legitimately held at bay by 'the people' as creditor, but we should ask ourselves if understanding the candidate as debtor and donor as creditor doesn't lead to similar restrictions on state power, despite the differences in restricting agents. Second, we may choose to focus, not on campaign donors, but on the credit rating institutions themselves. The influence exercised by organizations like the S&P does significantly affect state spending and budgeting practices; though hardly individuals in mass, it is still demonstrative of the power of credit upon the state (One notable exception cited might be 2010, when a looming government shutdown lowered the state's credit rating. We may choose to see this as credit not playing a role, but when we consider who funded and supported those representatives that instigated the shutdown, it may be more adequately understood as some creditors outmaneuvering others; some donors restricting the state at the expense of the state's own reputation.) In either instance, we can acknowledge a powerful, regulative role played by credit in state policy and action.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 325

<sup>27</sup> Of course, even the wage laborer or the unemployed individual is involved in commerce, insofar as they buy products or sell their labor. But except as a small part of a consumer public or labor force, they do not actively influence commerce the way, say, someone who owns means of production does.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 325

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 326

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 326

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 326

<sup>32</sup> For more on Constant's dual attention to both of these problems, see Stephen Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1984), 20.

<sup>33</sup> Constant, *Political Writings*, 326

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 214

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, esp. chs. 4 and 5. Constant even makes the stronger point that those of us who own industrial property are less qualified politically than land owners, with the former invested in individual liberty while the latter in institutional stability (Constant, *Political Writings*, 217-9).

<sup>36</sup> Constant, *Political Writings*, 215. Perhaps in seeming to have embraced the latter, Constant would have considered us lucky.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 215

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 328

<sup>39</sup> Gauchet, "Liberalism's Lucid Illusion," 25

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 28. See Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 25-9

<sup>41</sup> Gauchet, "Liberalism's Lucid Illusion," 29

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>46</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1927), esp. ch. 3, 4, and 5.

<sup>47</sup> Concerning the relation between the wealthy and their geographic communities, see Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

<sup>48</sup> To a large extent, Constant relies on the assumption that citizens will only be political to the extent the defense of the private life requires it; with such a narrow goal, he may assume that Dewey's Great Community is unnecessary and citizen's only require the motivation to stand up to oppression when it emerges. However, even this assumption is troubling; without an active discursive community able to identify moments of oppression and develop a plan to fight them, ordinary citizens may not be able to recognize oppression or orchestrate an effort to do anything about it.

<sup>49</sup> Gauchet, "Liberalism's Lucid Illusion," 37

<sup>50</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003), esp. ch. 11.

<sup>51</sup> In other words, most of us are not as oppressed as we could be, that life at present could be much worse. However, when considering the potential threats to species-life, like nuclear proliferation and environmental catastrophe, conditions may still be more apocalyptic than ever before, even if we are relatively comfortable while on that trajectory.

<sup>52</sup> Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 5

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2007), 30-1

<sup>56</sup> Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, 18-9

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 19-20

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>59</sup> Daniel Smith "It's the End of the World as We Know It... And He Feels Fine." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17th, 2014, MM28

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Colin Crouch, first to coin the term "post-democracy," makes a similar point in responding to liberal critics. He writes, "In polities with universal citizenship there are problems for all forms of serious, principled politics if vast, socially defined groups within the electorate become detached from engagement in public life and passively allow their marginal political involvement to be shaped by small elites. Neo-liberals in particular should be just as concerned as social democrats if the economic actions of government become distorted by lobbies and privileged political access entering the vacuum which this passivity leaves, corrupting the markets in which they believe" (Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, x-xi).

<sup>63</sup> For example, activists using social media can organize and even sustain large public gatherings for political purposes. However, despite increases in the speed of popular mobilization, the same flow of data that provides the conditions of possibility for quick mobilization also contributes to its ephemeral character, as more items, public and private, are able to compete for our attention. Thus, the same forces that allow us to come together more quickly also hinder the focus needed to be effective when we do gather.

<sup>64</sup> See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 268-72