Journal of Libertarian Studies
Volume 23 (2019): 5–21

The Libertarian Legacy of the Old Right: Democracy and Representative Government

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ABSTRACT: Libertarianism tries to face the difficulties and inconsistencies of democracy. The paper aims to provide a better understanding of the relationship between libertarianism and democracy going back to the early seeds of libertarianism and highlighting the critical contributions by some of the major Old Right protagonists. Inquiring into the role of intellectuals like Albert J. Nock, Henry L. Mencken, Frank Chodorov, Rose Wilder Lane and Isabel Paterson, the article will unveil a well consolidated tradition of criticism of democracy within the libertarian political philosophy.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the twentieth century, it seemed to many people that the democratic revolution envisioned by Alexis de Tocqueville had been definitely achieved, and in the Western world there was no visible challenge to the superiority of the democratic model. Francis Fukuyama in his famous essay *The End of History?* (Fukuyama 1992) proclaimed that in the field of political institutions nothing new remained to be discovered and that liberal democracy was the final step of a long historical process of constitutional evolution.[1] As theorized by neo-conservatives,

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[1] Fukuyama first published, in the summer of 1989, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, an essay entitled "The End of History?" in *The National Interest*.

all of humanity should apply this victorious model and spread it to the peripheral non-democratic areas of the world, even by means of war. Although Fukuyama's theory—that is to say, that contemporary democratic regimes are the highest level reached by politics and that every other political system is old fashioned—has been criticized for being deterministic, it represents a widespread opinion among both political and cultural élites and the public.

But in the Western world, democracy is living a crisis of representation and confidence. In part, this crisis stems from a lack of conceptual clarity, and the relationship between classical liberalism and democracy, in particular, has proved complex and difficult to untangle. We are used to talking about liberal democracy when referring to the Western liberal democratic state, still taking for granted an overlapping between liberalism and democracy. But, is it true that, as the leading Italian political philosopher Norberto Bobbio states, "democracy is the natural development of the liberal state"? (Bobbio 1985, 46) Bobbio suggests that the best remedy against abuse of power is the democratic process and citizens' participation in law making. In this view, political rights are a natural complement of liberty rights and civil rights. Bobbio writes: "There are good reasons to think that today democracy is necessary to safeguard the fundamental rights of people at the basis of the liberal state." (Bobbio 1986, 47) The main problematic areas of democracy are the relationships between public choices and individual liberty, and between liberty and equality. How much room do collective choices leave to individual freedom? How much and which kind of equality is compatible with individual freedom and property rights? Does living in a democracy and having the rights to vote mean being free? Libertarianism tries to face the difficulties and inconsistencies of democracy. In fact, there is a well consolidated tradition of criticism and analysis of democracy in libertarian political philosophy. In order to provide a better understanding of the relationship between libertarianism and democracy, this article intends to go back to the early seeds of libertarianism and highlights the critical contributions by some of the major Old Right protagonists, Albert J. Nock, Henry L. Mencken, Franck Chodorov, Rose Wilder Lane and Isabel Paterson. In doing so, I will assume the idea of Justin Raimondo that the protagonists of the Old Right (Nash 1976; Rothbard 2007; Raimondo 2014) were also consistent libertarians. The article aims to consider democracy as a long-debated topic and a shared crucial question inside libertarianism.

2. ALBERT JAY NOCK AND HENRY L. MENCKEN.

Albert Jay Nock (1870–1945) and Henry L. Mencken (1880–1956) were the two leading libertarian intellectuals of the Old Right, during the thirties of the Twentieth century. Both defended *laissez faire* but opposed the New Deal, any connections between big government and big business, the First World War and the American policy of imperialism. They were also very polemical against various movements for cultural and moral elevation of the people, such as Prohibition and the battle for public education.

With *Myth of a Guilty Nation*, published in 1922, Nock influenced an entire generation of classical liberals, opposing Wilsonian internationalism and arguing for anti-militarism. (Nock 1922)[2] From 1920 to 1924 he was editor of the weekly journal *The Freeman*. His writings are mostly elitist, based as they are on the fundamental role of the individual capable of elevating himself over the mass of the people. His thought is anchored in a strong individualism, explicitly critical of any forms of statism. Nock has a disenchanted approach to democracy, mainly based on the idea that the lowering of the level of culture and education is related to the democratic ideology. Enlarging the suffrage would not do any better and its only result would be the destruction of the highest ranks of culture. The policy, decided on by the government, of universal education is based on the theory that everyone is equally educable and that education has to be extended to the largest possible group. But, for Nock, this does not make sense, since we are not all equals in attitudes and capacities. The only true kind of equality is the equality of liberty and before the law. But the education system is based on a perversion of the idea of equality and on democracy. First of all, Nock clarifies, the Founding Fathers chose the republican system as the best way to secure the free expression of the individual in politics. A republic where everybody votes is considered *ipso facto* a democracy, but considering *republican* and *democratic* as synonymous is simply a confusion of terms. Actually, strictly speaking, democracy is simply a matter of counting the ballots, but it became an ideology. "Republicanism"—Nock writes—"does not […] of itself even imply democracy. [...] Democracy is not a matter of an extension of the suffrage […]. It is a matter of the diffusion of ownership; a true doctrine of democracy is a doctrine of public

[2] Among Nock's major works are Nock (1926, 1928, 1932, 1935, 1943).

property." And this because we are "aware that is not, never was and never will be, those who vote that rule, but those who own." (Nock 1932, 35) So democracy, being an economic status, is animated by a strong resentment toward the élite, the socially, economically and intellectually superior persons. The democratic ideology rejects the simple reality that some achievements and experiences are open only to some people and not to all. Democracy postulates that everybody has to enjoy the same things.

> The whole institutional life organized under the popular idea of democracy, then, must reflect this resentment. It must aim at no ideals above those of the average man, that is to say, it must regulate itself by the lowest common denominator of intelligence, taste and character in the society which it represents. (Nock 1932, 39)

In a democratic system, therefore, education would be "common property" and so what is not manageable by everybody must be disregarded. This leads to a low and poor level of education and to the destruction of the higher ranks of culture, art, taste and life itself. Moreover, Nock's theory of the state, as an enemy institution, founded on exploitation and robbery, sheds further light on his ideas about democracy. The doctrine of popular sovereignty was a structural alteration to the state, necessary to make people believe that the state was literally the expression of the popular will. Democratic representation has been an expedient in order to submit the subjects to a state they believed was legitimate. The most important expedient

> was that of bringing in the so called representative or parliamentary system, which Puritanism introduced into the modern world, and which has received a great deal of praise as an advance towards democracy. This praise, however, is exaggerated. The change was one of form only, and its bearing on democracy has been inconsiderable. (Nock 1994, 36)

Henry Louis Mencken (Goldberg 1925; Evans 2008; Hart 2016) was a leading protagonist of the American Old Right. In the weekly journal *American Mercury*, he and his colleagues bitterly criticized moral crusaders and the entire Wilsonian politics that considered the United States as the guardian of the world. (Gottfried 1990, 117–26) Although he was a literary figure and did not elaborate a systematic system of political thought, he can rightly be considered a libertarian. Both Murray N. Rothbard and Raimondo are convinced that there are many good reasons to place Mencken in the libertarian tradition. Rothbard defined him as "the

joyous libertarian" for his witty and satirical prose. (Rothbard 1962, 15–27) Mencken was, in Rothbard's words, "a serene and confident individualist, dedicated to competence and excellence and deeply devoted to liberty, but convinced that the bulk of his fellows were beyond repair." (Rothbard 1962, 16) Mencken had a great influence on the Old Right during the twenties, rejecting the idea of a world war for peace and democracy; and defending *laissez faire* in economics and in private life. His liberating force and his writings were not for the masses, but for the intelligent few who could understand and appreciate his message. Mencken believed that

> government, in its essence, is a conspiracy against the superior man; its one permanent object is to oppress him and cripple him. […] One of its primary functions is to regiment men by force, to make them as much alike as possible, to search out and combat originality among them. The most dangerous man, to any government, is the man who is able to think things out for himself, without regards to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. (Mencken 1949)

The government "is a separate, independent and often hostile power." Mencken perceived "the deep sense of antagonism between the government and the people it governs. It is […] a separate and autonomous corporation mainly devoted to exploiting the population for the benefits of their own members […], oppressing the taxpayers to their own gain." The best kind of government, he writes, "is one which lets the individual alone, one which barely escapes being no government at all." (Mencken 1949)

Mencken's individualist perspective gives great consistency to his views on many topics, among the most important of which is democracy. *Notes on Democracy*, published in 1926, contains one of the most scathing critiques of the idea that the great masses of the people have an inalienable right to govern themselves and that they are competent to do it. A government is considered a good one if it can satisfy quickly the desires and ideas of the masses, that is to say of the inferior men. A good and democratic government is based on the idea of the omnipotence and omniscience of the masses. But, Mencken states, "that there is actually no more evidence for the wisdom of the inferior man, nor for his virtue, than there is for the notion that Friday is an unlucky day." (Mencken 1926, 15) Mencken begins his analysis of democracy examining the psychology of the democratic man and clarifying that "in an aristocratic society

government is a function of those who have got relatively far up the poles […]. In a democratic society it is the function of all, and hence mainly of those who have got only a few spans from the ground." (Mencken 1926, 22–23) The democratic man contemplates with bitterness and admiration those who are above him. Bitterness and admiration form a complex of prejudices that, in a democracy, is called public opinion, which, under democracy, is regarded as something sacred. But, asks Mencken:

> What does the mob think? It thinks, obviously, what its individual members think. And what is that? It is, in brief, what somewhat sharp-nosed and unpleasant children think. The mob, being composed, in the overwhelming main, of men and women who have not got beyond the ideas and emotions of childhood, hovers, in mental age, around the time of puberty, and chiefly below it. If we would get at its thoughts and feelings we must look for light to the thoughts and feelings of adolescents. (Mencken 1926, 23–24)

The main sentiment of humanity is fear and the main sentiment of the democratic man is envy. The "democratic man hates the fellow who is having a better time in this world" (Mencken 1926, 45), this is why, according to Mencken, envy is the origin of democracy. Politicians are well aware of the psychology of the masses and those who know how to use the fears of the mob are the most successful. "Politics under democracy consists almost wholly of the discovery, chase and scotching of bugaboos. The statesman becomes, in the last analysis, a mere witch-hunter," in fact "the plain people, under democracy, never vote *for* anything, but always *against* something." (Mencken 1926, 29–30) Actually politics are not determined by the will of the people, but by small groups with special interests able to use the fears and to excite the envy of the masses. "Public policies are determined and laws are made by small minorities playing upon the fears and imbecilities of the mob." (Mencken 1926, 63) Those who succeed in the realm of politics are not the best and most intelligent men, but are the ablest and cunning demagogues. Anticipating Hans-Hermann Hoppe, Mencken states that except for a miracle it would be very difficult for a man of value to be elected to office in a democratic state. The problem is that people believe that "the cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy" (Mencken 1926, 10), or something closer to direct democracy. The great masses of men, though free in theory, submit to oppression and exploitation. In fact, according to Mencken, the popular will remains purely theoretical in every

form of democracy. Moreover, there is no reason for believing that its realization would change the main outlines of the democratic process, considering the low level of intelligence and knowledge of the mob.

Mencken examines the relationship between democracy and liberty and notes that the democratic man does not fight to gain more liberty but for more security and protection. "The fact," he writes, is that liberty, in any true sense, is a concept that lies quite beyond the reach of the inferior man's mind. […] Liberty means self-reliance, it means resolution, it means enterprise, it means the capacity for doing without." (Mencken 1926, 52) But these are not the characteristics of the democratic masses. Actually, the masses' longing for material goods can only be satisfied at the expense of liberty and property rights. It cannot be denied that freedom is an indispensable condition for the development of the personality of the individual, but if we look at the propensities of the masses we discover that frequently they prefer to sacrifice freedom in order to enjoy material or psychological advantages. The average man wants to feel protected even from himself. Writes Mencken:

> The truth is that the common's man love of liberty […]is almost wholly imaginary. […] He is not actually happy when free; he is uncomfortable, a bit alarmed. […]. He longs for the warm, reassuring smell of the herd, and is willing to take the herdsman with it. Liberty is not a thing for such as he. […] The average man doesn't want to be free. He simply wants to be safe. […] What the common man longs for […] is the simplest and most ignominious sort of peace—the peace of a trusty in a well-managed penitentiary. He is willing to sacrifice everything else to it. He puts it above his dignity and he puts it above his pride. Above all, he puts it above his liberty. (Mencken 1926, 157–58)

The average man tends to consider liberty as a weapon used against him in the hands of superior men but, recalling Edmund Burke, Mencken writes that

> the heritage of freedom belongs to a small minority of men. […]It is my contention that such a heritage is necessary in order that the concept of liberty […] may be so much as grasped—that such ideas cannot be implanted in the mind of man at will, but must be bred in as all other ideas are bred in. […] It takes quite as long to breed a libertarian as it takes to breed a racehorse. (Mencken 1926, 56–60)

If one of the main purposes of civilized governments is to preserve and augment liberty of the individual, then surely democracy

accomplishes it less efficiently than any other form of government, since "the aim of democracy is to break all free spirits." Mencken describes the tyrannical consequences of the cultural levelling tendencies of democracy. Like Alexis de Tocqueville he realizes that the pressure of a mass society of men all alike and equal leads to ostracism of those superior individuals "merely thinking unpopular thoughts." "Once" a man "is accused of such heresy, the subsequent proceedings take on the character of a lynching." (Mencken 1926, 178) The democratic, egalitarian society is pledged to common cultural values resulting in a rigorous homogeneity of way of thinking and of life. So "a man who stands in contempt of the prevailing ideology has no rights under the law." (Mencken 1926, 180)

By the mid-thirties the influence of Nock and Mencken had begun to decline. The Old Right, after playing an important role opposing the New Deal and in the crucible of the First World War, almost disappeared. During the years of World War II, government banned any opposition to war, Roosevelt and the New Deal. "The Old Right went underground for the duration" of the war and when America emerged from the war a new generation of old style libertarians appeared. They believed in *laissez faire* and non-intervention in foreign policy. (Raimondo 2014, 134)

3. THE OLD RIGHT REBORN: FRANK CHODOROV

The Old Right was reborn in the shadow of the emergent welfare-warfare state, remaining faithful to the ideas of its founders. Among the second generation of activists was the writer and teacher Frank Chodorov (1887–1966).

Chodorov (Rothbard 2007; Raimondo 2014)[3] was the son of Russian immigrants. After graduating at Columbia University in 1907 he taught in high school and then ran a clothing factory, but during the Great Depression his career as an entrepreneur was ruined. In 1937 he became director of the Henry George School of Social Science in New York. Here he edited the School's magazine, *The Freeman*, expressing his libertarian ideas, pro-capitalism, anti-taxation and anti-communism. Beside this, Chodorov was staunchly anti-war. He too was not writing for the masses but

[3] Among Chodorov's major works are Chodorov (1946, 1952).

for those Nock called "the Remnant,"[4] that is to say the few who were eager to carry on the prewar culture, the culture of the Old Right. After the entry of the United States into the Second World War, Chodorov's antiwar ideas were no longer tolerated and he was fired from the School. In 1944 Chodorov began to publish the monthly magazine *Analysis*, which lasted for six years. In this time the magazine kept Old Right libertarianism alive. Despite the small circulation of the publication, it had a great influence on the Remnant. Chodorov covered topics such as the income tax, public schools, protectionism and the various statist icons. On taxation he writes:

> [It] is highwaymanry made respectable by custom, thievery made moral by law; there isn't a decent thing to be said for it, as to origin, principle, or its effects on the social order. Man's adjustment to this iniquity has permitted its force to gain momentum like an unopposed crime wave; and the resulting social devastation is what the socialists have long predicted and prayed for. (Chodorov 1980, 267–68)

The opposition to business subsidies and to the Cold War became central in the intellectual discussion, acquiring a huge relevance in the emerging libertarian movement. When Chodorov founded the student organization Intercollegiate Society of Individualists he exerted a great influence on conservative and libertarians, among whom Murray N. Rothbard stood foremost. As the Cold War and the related propaganda heated up, Chodorov's critical attitude became more and more unpopular among the American right.

Chodorov's views on democracy are directly related to its consequences for education and for the lowering and leveling of culture. He argues that in a democracy, where everyone is a voter, everyone has to be educated. Democracy did away with the concept of the educable élite. Education became a governmental enterprise, regardless of different individual capacities. In the past education was intended to bring the best to the top, but this is inconsistent with democratic egalitarianism. So the educators altered the role of education and this became a process designed to bring about intellectual uniformity. "The notion of the infinite

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[4] Nock, in his classic essay "Isaiah's Job," defines as *the Remnant* the chosen few to whom the prophet Isaiah spoke. The prophet was sent by God to show a decadent city how to change its destiny and build a new society. His words were not for the masses of the people but for *the Remnant*. The essay first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1936.

perfectibility of man through education kept gnawing at the heart of democracy," Chodorov writes,

> and this, fermented by the idea that all men are of equal capacities, gave rise to a demand for wider educational opportunities. If everybody were equally educated, so ran the litany, everybody would be able to reach the heights, economically, socially and, perhaps, culturally. […] If the purpose of education is social adjustment, then individual excellence must be minimized or discouraged, and the ideal of democracy—the egalitarian society—will be achieved. (Chodorov 1962, 32–33)

The consequence is that the contents of education will be lowered to the intellectual level of the masses. "That is because the mob cannot tolerate excellence and, having political power in their hands, [and] will use it to reduce the educable to their own level." With the democratic ideology in ascendancy, the state will provide education for all, even at the college level and this means that the state will "dictate what to be taught and how" (Chodorov 1962, 34), with state intervention raising more and more. Chodorov unmasked the phrase *we are the government*, in its use as an explanation of how collectivism penetrated the popular mind. Democracy means being ruled by the social attitude of the majority of the people. But what is a social attitude? "It turns out to be in practice," Chodorov explains,

> [to be] good old majoritarianism; what 51 per cent of the people deem right is right, and the minority is perforce wrong. It is the General Will fiction under a new name. There is no place in this concept for the doctrine of inherent rights; the only right left to the minority, particularly the minority of one, is conformity with the dominant social attitude. (Chodorov 1959, XXII)

Democracy gives to the voter a minuscule piece of sovereignty that does not give him any power. Democracy does not give power to the individual, but it gives power to the groups. That explains the emergence of pressure groups whose interests are served by the democratic government that needs to buy the support of the most powerful groups, granting them privileges. Chodorov writes:

> It is the business of the candidate to weigh the relative voting strength of the various groups and, finding it impossible to please all, to try to buy the strongest with promises. It is a deal. Any moral evaluation of the deal is silly, unless we condemn politics as a whole, for there is no way for the politician to attain power unless he engages in such deals. In a democracy sovereignty lies in the hands of the voters, and it is they who propose the trading. The vast majority of the voters are outside these pressure

> groups; there are too many of them, too diversified in their interests to permit of organization. I am one of them. (Chodorov 1959, 39)

This trade of privileges for power is a characteristic of the democratic state. "Every subsidy to the 'poor' (in a democracy) was thought up by a bureaucrat or a candidate for office, the candidate to achieve political preferment, the bureaucrat to improve his prerogatives and his perquisites." (Chodorov 1959, 212) The result will be a disproportionate augmentation of the power of the state and its bureaucracy. Strictly speaking, for Chodorov, "the more democracy the more governmental intervention." (Chodorov 1959, 34) Also, the American missionary zeal of *making the world safe for democracy*, actually hides the international interests of various groups. "The duty of imposing our brand of democracy on other peoples and an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy are the result of particular interests succeeding in being considered American interests." (Chodorov 1959, 114)

4. THE FOUNDING MOTHERS OF LIBERTARIANISM: ROSE WILDER LANE AND ISABEL PATERSON

After World War II, Senator Robert Taft served as a political reference point for the Old Right. Taft, who opposed the New Deal and the intervention of the United States in the Second World War, was an important figure in the Senate, challenging the doctrine of the Cold War and faith in the welfare state. In 1951 the Republican Senator John W. Bricker proposed the Bricker amendment, an attempt to preserve the political discretion of the American Congress to decide upon the incorporation of international law into the national law of the United States. After a long and difficult battle the Eisenhower administration defeated the amendment. After the death of Taft and Robert R. McCormick,[5] and the defeat of the Bricker amendment, the Old Right seemed finished. But a new cultural environment was developing. The publication of *Human Action*, *Bureaucracy* and *Omnipotent Government* by Ludwig von Mises, and of *The Road to Serfdom* by Friedrich von Hayek created an intellectual context more favorable to free market and individualism that paved the way to the resurgence of the Old Right.

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[5] Robert Rutherford McCormick (1880–1955) was the owner and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* that, under his direction, embodied the values and tradition of the Old Right.

Rose Wilder Lane (1886–1968) and Isabel Paterson (1886–1961) contributed to the preservation of the heritage of classical liberalism and, along with Ayn Rand, can be considered the founding mothers of libertarianism.

A writer and journalist, Lane[6] became well known just before the Second World War for her staunch defense of liberty. Her book *Discovery of Freedom*, traces the origins of freedom back to the Western Jewish-Christian tradition and is a classic of libertarian literature. Her personal story is very interesting. She was sympathetic to leftist ideas and to the Communist Party organized in the United States by John Reed shortly after the First World War. Lane visited the Soviet Union four years after the Bolshevik Revolution, and this experience completely changed her views. She remembers that she was hosted by a family of peasants in a rural Russian village and this simple experience planted the seeds of doubt in her mind. Her host complained about the new government. "His complaint was government interference with village affairs. He protested against the growing bureaucracy that was taking more and more men from productive work. He predicted chaos and suffering from the centralizing of economic power in Moscow." (Lane 1945, 11) When she came back to the United States, she stated that at that point of her life she totally believed in liberty, capitalism and individualism. She did not simply reject Marxism, she got down to first principles to challenge the central premises of statism. So, along with her refutation of Marxism, she was also against Roosevelt's New Deal. Her criticism of democracy is closely related to the rejection of statism and central planning. Instead of blaming Lenin "because he did not establish a republic," in *Give Me Liberty*, she states that "representative government cannot express the will of the mass of the people; the People is a fiction like the State. You cannot get a will of the Mass […]. The only human mass with a common will is a mob, and that will is a temporary insanity." (Lane 1945, 13) *Give Me Liberty*, originally published as *Credo* in 1936, was a radical statement of libertarian principles. As Raimondo writes, "In the intellectual atmosphere of the Red Decade, this […] helped

[6] Rose Wilder Lane was the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the author of the novel for children *Little House in the Prairie*. Lane achieved world fame as a writer and she contributed regularly to the major American magazines *American Mercury, Good Housekeeping, Saturday Evening Post* and *Harper*. Her novels, including, *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1933) and *Old Home Town* (1935) were a success.

galvanize the group that eventually came to form around Leonard Read and his Foundation for Economic Education." (Raimondo 2014, 187) Raimondo characterizes Lane as a "central figure in the Old Right and the early libertarian movement." (Raimondo 2014, 198) In *Discovery of Freedom*, Lane asks herself what democracy really means. She states that, at the time she wrote, the word democracy could indicate a lot of different situations. The Soviet Union could be considered a democracy when fighting Hitler; economic security and compulsory insurance could be considered democratic; as could votes for everybody, the American sense of human equality, freedom and human rights and so on. But she stresses that democracy means rule by the people and that *demos*, the people, was a fantasy imagined by the Greeks. According to Lane, the Greeks attributed to this fantasy the meaning of being God. Unfortunately, Lane notes, "there are still people who believe that the voice of the people is the voice of God." (Lane 2012, 178) She approaches democracy and majority rule from a perspective of methodological individualism. "The people," Lane writes,

> do not exist. Individual persons compose any group of persons. So in practice any attempt to establish democracy is an attempt to make a majority of persons in a group act as the ruler of that group. […] There is no reason to suppose that majority rule would be desirable […]. There is no morality or efficiency in mere numbers." (Lane 2012, 178)

Lane quotes James Madison, when, in *The Federalist Papers*, he wrote "A pure democracy can admit no cure for the mischief of faction. A common passion or interest will be felt by a majority, and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party. Hence it is, that democracies have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have, in general, been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths." (Lane, 2012, 178) When the revolutionaries signed the *Declaration of Independence*, they desired to establish a new form of government, but they had two dangers to avoid: monarchy and democracy. Actually they were diffident toward democracy. "Democracy," writes Lane,

> does not work. It can not work because every man is free. He can not transfer his inalienable life and liberty to anyone or anything outside himself. When he tries to do this, he tries to obey an Authority that does not exist. […] There is no Authority of any kind, that controls individuals. They control themselves. (Lane 2012, 179–80)

She explains why a real democracy cannot exist. "When a large number of individuals falsely believe that the majority is an Authority that has right to control individuals, they must let a majority choose one man (or few men) to act as Government. […] And because a majority supports the ruler whom a majority chooses, nothing checks his use of force against the minority. So the ruler of a democracy quickly becomes a tyrant." (Lane 2012, 180) Lane's perspective on democracy is very radical and, in some ways, anticipates Hans Hermann Hoppe's critique, in postulating an incompatibility between democracy and liberty. In fact, in a democracy, there is no protection for liberty: "democracies always destroy personal security and the rights of property." The American revolutionaries were the first to see that no man can use his natural freedom if he has no right to own private property. But in democracy no one really owns property, because in a democracy property is at the mercy of the majority's whim. "Majority rule has always been an enemy of human rights." (Lane 2012, 180–85)

During the Second World War, Lane could not overtly protest against war and government intervention, so she intensely corresponded with her fellow Old Rightists, seeing herself as a frontline fighter in a larger movement. During the fifties she followed current events and remained actively involved in the Old Right, opposing the Cold War. But Lane was not alone.

In 1943 Isabel Paterson[7] published *The God of the Machine*, a book celebrating the glories of individualism and capitalism. In her book Paterson depicts the United States as the result of the free energy of self-regulating individuals. The state can have only negative effects on the spontaneous development of this energy, interrupting its flow. Paterson was a fierce individualist: "there is no collective good," she writes; "strictly speaking there is not even any common good. There are in the natural order conditions and materials through which the individual […] is capable of experiencing good. […] Persons do not enjoy the benefit by community, but singly." (Paterson 1996, 89–90) Paterson attacked the allegiance between big business and big government, and the repressive wartime atmosphere. She saw in the militarization of society,

[7] Isabel Paterson wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune*, was the author of many novels and was well known in the Old Right circles.

conscription and sedition trials the final consequences of state intervention in the economy. Also Paterson has a critical attitude toward democracy. The only kind of equality Paterson admits is an equality of liberty, but democracy is "inadmissible because it must deny that right and lapse into despotism. […] It does so abstractly, by its own logical contradiction; and in practice. […] *It is not liberty and equality that are incompatible, but liberty and democracy*." (Paterson 1996, 120) Paterson describes the logical contradiction of democracy as follows:

> Democracy is a collective term; it describes the aggregate as a whole and it assumes that the right and authority reside in the whole. […] But if the authority resides in the collective whole, it is evident that with the disagreement of even one person, the whole is no longer existent or operative. […] The prime presumption has vanished. In practice than democracy must abandon its own pretended entity of the collective whole, and rely upon majority. But majority is only a part. […] Such is the inherent contradiction of democracy. […] Slavery of a minority, or of foreigners, is quite consistent with majority rule. (Paterson 1996, 120–21)

In fact, it is falsely assumed that the contrary of the rule by the few or by one is rule by the many and that this is fair. "But, in reason, if one man has no right to command all other men—the expedient of despotism—neither has he any right to command even one other man; not yet have ten men, or a million, the right to command even one other man." (Paterson 1996, 122)

Liberty is a natural right because life is possible for human beings only by virtue of their capacity to act independently. "Hence," Paterson states, "the natural and rational terms of human association are those of voluntary agreement, not command. Therefore the proper organization of society must be that of free individuals." (Paterson 1996, 121) The alleged choice between despotism and liberal democracy is a false binary. The true alternative to tyranny is not democracy; it is instead the decisions of individuals in a free market, engaging in exchange for their mutual benefit and settling disputes through peaceful methods of resolution.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Democracy is often considered the only alternative to authoritarian regimes and the main criterion of a government's legitimacy. But the Old Right libertarian challenged this cliché, in the name

of an expansion and not of a compression of individual liberty. The oppressive potential of majority rule was unveiled by them, showing the ethical fragility of democracy. Their incisive account of the evils of democracy retains its validity for us today. We have much to learn from these great figures of the Old Right.

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