WHO ARE THE PEOPLE?

The quotations cited in the first essay are evidence that no one has been quite sure what he was referring to when he spoke of the People. They also show that some men thought well of the proverb and others ill, which would be true of any idea. But it is also obvious that writers conceived of society as divided into at least two groups, one of which was the People and the other variously named. The distinction might be fundamentally that between the governed and the governors. But this in turn would be based on the sort of government of which one approved; or—and this is not improbable—the sort of government of which one approved would depend on what one thought of those who were to be governed. In an absolute monarchy the People might be everyone except the monarch, and if one approved of absolute monarchy it would be because one had no very high opinion of the governed. Here the theme of the fickle mob, or the uneducated masses, or the lower classes, or something similar enters the picture. In a limited or constitutional monarchy the People would be a smaller group but still large enough to include everyone but the king and those individuals capable of limiting his power, the barons under Edward II, the Congress of the United States in relation to the Executive and the Supreme Court. At the other extreme one might have a government like that of the Athenian polis or the New England township, as those communities are described in the textbooks, and here almost everyone would be “The People” and would be thought of as at least intelligent enough to vote. Hence the distinction ought not to arise in such a context. But the structure of no society is merely political, and
if Athens had its hoi polloi, the New England towns had their people who lived on the wrong side of the tracks.¹

Surely there is no need to insist that economic distinctions also play a major part in differentiating members of all communities but the simplest. No proof is needed that in all historical societies there has been a distinction between the rich and the poor, though this may not have been true in primitive communistic societies. The poor then become the People and the rich the anti-People. In many places the poor had no say in political decisions, for even when there was a semblance of democracy, voting was based on a property qualification. Tenney Frank has shown how this worked out in Republican Rome.

[In the Scrvian army] the wealthiest men, who could afford to provide both armor and horses, were chosen for the cavalry. Of these there were chosen eighty centuries (8000) of men who were wealthy enough to provide heavy armor for service in the first line. They were called men of the first class. The second, third, and fourth classes provided twenty centuries each, the fifth class thirty, and from among the numerous poor who had no property only five centuries were taken. . . . [This organization] introduced the principle of classifying the citizen-body according to wealth, a classification later used by the founders of the republic in creating their primary assembly for voting and law-making purposes. That assembly, based upon wealth, then gradually displaced the old-time assembly of brotherhoods. The conservative character of the republican government is in large measure due to this early adoption of the timocratic principle.²

There have been communities where all voting was limited to the propertied class and others where voting for certain offices was so limited. The poll tax has sometimes been justified on the ground that a man who could not afford to pay the usually small

¹. For the survival and increase of social distinctions in an old New England community, see W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community*, where the stratification of classes is laid out in detail.

². Tenney Frank, *A History of Rome*, p. 29. The brotherhoods of which he speaks were the ancient *curiae*. 
sum imposed was not fit to vote. Whatever the argument, the connection between wealth and political power, or potential power, has been intimate. No one to speak of has ever wanted to be poor, the exceptions being saintly characters like Francis of Assisi, or the Greek Cynics who thought that property was a burden, or austere souls like Thoreau, who thought that money was the root of all evil. But in opposition to them there have been also some men who maintained that economic prosperity was a reward of virtue, the virtues of hard work, self-discipline, self-denial, all rolled up in one. In the last half-century this has been attributed to the rise of Protestantism, but intellectually it could be traced back to the Parable of the Talents. It is the philosophy of Poor Richard, and it cannot be denied, should anyone care to deny it, that the accumulation of capital has been considered an ideal by most Americans and, I suspect, by a good many Europeans and Asiatics as well. For capital gives one power accompanied by prestige, and most of us are sensitive to the charms of both.

There have always been more poor people than rich, surely a vérité de la Palice. And there have always been more powerless people than powerful. Power can in fact be most effectively exercised if concentrated in a few hands. As Odysseus said, “The rule of many is not a good thing; let there be one king, one ruler to whom Zeus has given the sceptre.” We may be as democratic in ideal as we wish, but we always have to grant the claims of efficiency in time of crisis. As the Romans appointed a dictator when in great danger, so the Americans concentrate power in the hands of the President during a war. The legend first told, I believe, by Livy and put into verse by Shakespeare in Coriolanus, of the belly and the other organs, is an example of how government by the Many was conceived. There seems indeed to have been an unpleasant connotation associated with the very words, “the Many,” “multitudo,” “the Crowd,” all of which are antitheses not merely to the Few, but also to the Better Sort, the Elite, the
Upper Classes, the people who are what would now be called by the sociologists, “the In-Group.” To men who spoke in such words the People were simply the Majority.

Finally, there has been a conception of the People that had mystical overtones and was especially influential in and after the eighteenth century. As we shall see in the fourth essay, an idea of something called “The Folk,” usually in German, “Das Volk,” became popular. The Folk were the aboriginal men from whom either all of us or a nation or a society or a race descended. The Folk contained the residual primitive soul of the group in question. Just as the individual who can claim descent from the paladins of Charlemagne or the Norman conquerors of England has greater prestige than one who knows only the names of his grandparents, so the Folk, having existed in spirit if not in flesh since the beginning, has seemed to be nobler than the individuals who composed it. Purity of race in societies of mixed blood became an asset, just as pure blood in dogs or cows is an asset. And though the Volksseele might and often did manifest itself in the poor and even in the ignorant, it never lost its claim to nobility. If the word “noble,” as seems likely, is derived from the Greek, meaning “to know,” either the noble himself or his ancestors were knowledgeable or known, and people may feel that it is better to have ancestors who are known than ancestors who are unknown. In view of the indisputable fact that human beings cannot be spontaneously generated, we must all have the same ancestors, for there are not enough for each man to have his own. But ancestor worship has never depended on anything other than just knowing the names of those whom one is worshiping. Hence, if there is such a thing as a German Seele inherent in the German Volk, its traits when known are to be reverenced. But in all modern societies in the Occident blood is mixed. In France alone there is ancient Greek and Phoenician blood, Latin blood, Celtic, Frankish, and German blood, to say nothing of the vestiges of the
English who fought for a hundred years in that country and cannot be expected to have practiced continence while there. I am not writing a treatise in demography and need give no further examples, but the knowledge that a people is of mixed descent does influence its self-appraisal. If it is true that the Helots of Sparta were descendants of a primitive conquered people, as the lower castes in India are said to be, or perhaps the Saxons in Norman England, there would be an analogy to the prestige of the Volksseele in historical fact. The Spartan soul would not be found in a helot nor an Aryan soul in a Dravidian nor an American soul in an Italian or Jewish immigrant. The case of the Saxons is different, for their language prevailed over Norman-French, and it was not very long before the upper classes in England became English, whereas on the Continent it was the conqueror's language that prevailed. Perhaps the collective soul inhabits the dominant language. In the United States, though the number of citizens of non-seventeenth-century forebears is much greater than the number of those who trace their lineage back to the men of the Mayflower, the Ark and Dove, or the God Speed, yet the latter are the People in the sense of being in their own opinion The Americans. It has not been unusual for a man whose ancestry is not Anglo-Saxon to be asked what sort of surname he bears. He is thus made aware by the less tactful or the more patriotic that he is not of the representative group, though he may nevertheless be of the majority. He is one of the People in the political sense; he can be of them in the economic sense; but he is not of them in the social sense.

The distinction between the People and the anti-People appeared early in Roman history in the famous SPQR. Whatever the origin of the emblem—for an emblem is what these initials became—there can be no question that sharp distinction was made in it between the Populus and the Senate or Elders. The Senate was originally composed, according to legend, of one hundred men
who were followers of Romulus and chosen by him, the Ramnes. These men were in theory counselors, but became in practice a legislative and indeed governing body. The inclusion of the People in the emblem does not prove that they had any governmental functions whatsoever in the earliest days of the Republic. But by 494 the plebeians rebelled and it was at that time that two officers were elected by the Plebeian Council (concilium Plebis), which did not cease making trouble until imperial times. Finally in 287, two centuries after First Secession, the Lex Hortensia was passed which gave equal rights before the law to plebeians and patricians. But the social, as distinguished from the political, status of the plebs remained low. In time, the consuls were chosen from the plebeians as well as from the patricians, but it never became customary. It is worth noting that in Livy’s words (Book II, xxxii) which are presumably justified, the tribunes were chosen as a help adversus consules and no patrician could be given the office. Just what evils had been committed by the patricians has to be investigated incident by incident, but one can use one’s imagination, which is aided by the contempt that not only patricians but others poured upon men who rose from the plebs. A man like Cicero’s brother Quintus is represented in De legibus as having called the Tribunate pestifera “born in sedition and making for sedition.” His objection is that “it stole all honors from the Fathers, made all low things equal to the high, stirred up trouble and confusion.” Cicero’s weak reply is that the tribunes kept the plebs in check and put an end to the rebellion. Quintus, it is to be observed, does not agree and even objects to the secret ballot. But Cicero points out that the secret ballot safeguards the people’s liberty. And, he adds, the ballots before they are cast, should be first shown to “our best and most eminent citizens” in order to obtain their advice. “Do you not see, that if corruption

should be silent, that they would ask when voting for the opinion of the aristocrats? Thus our law grants the appearance of freedom, retains the authority of the aristocrats, and eliminates the causes of strife.” 4 The law in question was not one already in existence. It was one imagined by Cicero himself. No comment is needed about the equivocation.

The Tribunate actually did succeed in widening the gap between the plebs and the patriciate. It was as if in the United States the Negro population had been legally organized with two or more officials elected by them to see that their civil rights were respected. They would obviously be a group of second-class citizens not only in practice, as they are now, but also in law. So the plebeians were organized, and the fact that they were plebeians rather than patricians was constantly rubbed into them, though the tendency towards absolutism, which came to a head in Augustus, put all Romans on the same footing as far as their freedom went. To return to the emblem SPQR, senator was the name of an office; populus was not. The former were the governors, the latter the governed, whatever may have been intended by the phrase. An analogous distinction is made in the Constitution of the United States, which names “the people of the United States” as the ordainer and establisher of the document, and, after describing the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, speaks of the “rights of the people” in Amendments IV, IX, and X, as if their authors knew that the People were different from their government. The distinction is clearly one made by common sense. Yet in spite of the fact that women were as much among the governed as men are, an amendment was required to give them the right to vote. This then introduced a new differentia into the definition of The People—the suffrage.

4. Ibid., Book III, xvii, 39. “Non vides, si quando ambitus sileat, quaeri in suffragiis quid optimi viri sentiant? Quam ob rem lege nostra libertatis species datur, auctoritas bonorum retinetur, contentionis causa tollitur.”
Populus in Latin

Now all this may seem like pedantic quibbling. But the question of who belonged to the populus was not always clear to the Romans themselves. Cicero, for instance, is firm in maintaining that the term is not equivalent to "all men." In De republica he says, "The Commonwealth is the people's wealth; but the people are not every assemblage of men associated in any way whatsoever, but an assemblage of many men associated by common acceptance of the law and the sharing of a useful service." Evidently men might be living in the same locality and yet not belong to the People if they did not accept the same laws and co-operate in the same service, probably military. The definition obviously allows for the existence of a minority group within a population, a group with its own laws and services. The cohesive matter within a People turns out to be morality. On the other hand, in his oration Pro L. Murena, we find Cicero making a further distinction between the populus and the plebs, in his phrase, "so that this matter might work out to the advantage of the people and the plebeians of Rome." Similarly Livy, speaking of the Tribunate, says, "This office is not of the people but of the plebeians." And in the next century Martial (VIII, 15) makes a threefold distinction of the people, the knights, and the senate (Dat populus, dat gratus eques, dat tura senatus). Even a Roman, if asked to identify the voice of the People, would have been puzzled.

The puzzle continued to tease some men as late as the second century A.D. For in Aulus Gellius (Book X, xx, 5 ff.), where the definitions of rogatio, lex, plebiscitum, and privilegium are re-

5. Book I, xxv, 39. "Res publica res populi: populus autem non omnis hominum coetus quoque modo congregatus, sed coetus multitudinis juris consensu et utilitatis communione sociatus." The pun which opens this quotation is inevitable. Res is one of the most multivalent words in Latin.
6. "Ut ea res populo plebique Romanae bene eveniret."
quested, the authority of Atcius Capito is cited. By this time one might imagine such distinctions to be obsolete, but for reasons of conversation, if for none more practical, they apparently continued to be interesting. "Capito," he says, "in the same definition sharply distinguished the *plebs* from the *populus*, since in the *populus* are contained all the parts of the state and all its ranks, whereas that part should be called the *plebs* in which the patrician families of citizens are not included. A plebiscite therefore according to Capito is a law which the plebeians, not the people, approve."  

This, I need not point out, is significantly different from Cicero’s definition.

The Roman appraisal of the *plebs*, we see, was similar to that entertained by the Greeks of *hoi polloi*. And we find passages in Latin authors deploping the taste and judgments of the Many, as we do in our own times. Livy, for instance (Book XXXI, 34), is firm in saying that *nihil tam inaestimabile est quam animi multitudinis* ("nothing is so valueless as the minds of the multitude"). Cicero is in full agreement. In his *De finibus* (Book II, xv, 49) he criticizes Epicurus in his usual manner for maintaining that the right (*honestum*) is pleasure. This opinion, he says, might be held by the Multitude, but as for himself,

I think that this is usually shameful, and, if occasionally it be not shameful, then it is not shameful because that which is right and proper in itself has been praised by the Multitude. We do not believe that something is said to be right because it is praised by the Many, but because it would be such that even if men were ignorant of it or if they said nothing about it, it would still be of a praise-worthy and beautiful kind.

8. "'Plebem' autem Capito in eadem definitione seorsum a populo divitum, quoniam in populo civitatis omnesque eius ordines continentur, 'plebes' vero ea dicitur, in quo gentes civium patriciae non insunt. 'Plebiscitum' igitur est secundum Capitonem lex, quam plebs, non populus accipit."

9. "Ego autem hoc etiam turpe esse sacpe iudico et, si quando turpe non sit, tum esse non turpe cum id a multitudine laudetur quod sit ipsum per se rectum atque laudabile; tamen non ob eam causam illud dici esse honestum quia laudetur a multis, sed quia tale sit ut, vel si ignorant id homines vel si obmutuissent, qua tamen pulchritudine esset specieque laudabile."
And in the Tusculans (Book V, xxxvi, 103–4), he returns to the theme, saying that popular approval is not to be sought:

It must be understood that popular glory is not to be sought for its own sake nor is obscurity to be feared. . . . For what is more stupid than to think that those whom you despise individually as mechanics and barbarians are something [estimable] as a group? 10

And Cicero continues with the observation that the honores populi are to be rejected even when unsought. The voice of the People as the voice of the majority is clearly not the voice of any god in the opinion of the Romans I have cited. But there must have been many other Romans who disagreed; otherwise their criticism would have had no target.11

Claudian

One might expect that as time went on the meanings of the terms that interest us would have become fixed. But if we may take Claudian as a good example of fourth and early fifth century

10. "Intellegendum est igitur nec gloriam popularem ipsam per sese expetendam nec ignobilitatem extimescendam . . . quidquid stultius quam, quos singulos sicut operarios barbarosque contemnas, eos aliquid putare esse universos?" Cicero refers in this passage to a fragment of Heraclitus on the stupidity of the Ephesians, who exiled Hermadorus. Fragment 114 (Bywater). But Heraclitus was a famous misanthrope and his remains are peppered with anti-popular comments. Roman contempt for the mobile vulgus is perhaps too well known to require much in the way of documentation. Everyone knows Horace’s Odes III, 1 and 2, the latter with its nec . . . ponit secures arbitrio populares aurae.

11. One is tempted to continue this discussion, but the temptation must be resisted, for to yield would be to overload these pages with quotations. As social history moved on more ranks were added to those existing in the ancient world. In the fifth century A.D. we find Sidonius Apollinaris listing as the various ranks, the plebs, the curia, the army, and the college. Gibbon, from whom I take this quotation, adds, ‘‘This language is ancient and constitutional; and we may observe that the clergy were not yet considered as a distinct order of the state.’’ Decline and Fall, chap. 36 (Everyman ed., Vol. iii, p. 422, n. 2).
Latin, we shall see that he was no more certain of what populus denoted than his predecessors had been. Though the poet was limited in his choice of words by the exigencies of meter, yet his indifferent use of populus, plebs, and vulgus suggests, if it does not prove, that the finer shades of meaning had been lost. He uses vulgus in In Rufinum (Book II, l. 399) to mean simply the public in the amphitheatre; in the same poem (l. 427) he uses plebs for the people who came to acclaim the death of Rufinus; in In Eutropium (Book I, l. 210) he speaks of selling populos for profit, and in Book II he writes of men whose origin is humili de plebe (l. 342), as if the plebs had several strata; in his panegyric on the fourth consulate of Honorius (l. 298) it is the populus which is obedient to a magistrate who obeys his own laws; and in De consularu Stilichonis (Book III, l. 183) it is again the populus which is not ungrateful to its benefactor; in his panegyric on the sixth consulate of Honorius, the Senate and the People become cum plebe patres (l. 332); and in the same poem later on (l. 611) the imperial genius rules the populus again. One cannot, to be sure, know whether the diversities of meaning were intended or whether a fourth century reader would be sensitive to them. But in several of the passages cited sense would be hardly changed—though meter would be—if one word were substituted for another.

Saint Augustine and Isidore of Seville

Augustine, whose special interest in history is known to everyone, felt it necessary to give his own definition of People. He had no great admiration for the human race as it had developed after the Fall. In the City of God (Book XIX, 23–41) he defines populus in essentially moral, not political, terms. The People are a group of persons bound together by a love of justice. In the second book of the same work (chap. 21) he uses the definition which we have quoted from Cicero. But since he had already made his fundamental distinction between the City of Man, founded by
Cain, and the City of God, founded by Abel (Book XV, 1), it was obvious that the City of Man was based on fratricide. Hence, when he spoke of the populus he was thinking of those who belonged to the City of God, for there was little hope that the City of Man would ever improve. The citizens of the City of God are, to be sure, governed by the vox divina, which is God's Wisdom (Sapientia) speaking through seers and prophets (Book V, 19). But he never, as far as I have been able to discover, says anything of the vox populi. In view of his low opinion of human constitutions it was hardly to be expected that he would have found much good to say about any human pronouncement. The history of the City of Man is an almost uninterrupted series of sins followed by disaster.

Augustine also flatly declares that when men are not bound together by “the love by which man loves God as God should be loved, and one’s neighbor as oneself . . . there is neither that society of men bound together by a common acceptance of law and a community of interests . . . [nor] a people [populus]. . . . Hence there is no state [respublica] for where there is no res populi, there is no populus” (Book XIX, 23). The echo of Cicero is sharp, and the notion that a People had to be constituted on the basis of religious beliefs, with consequent moral agreements, was carried into the accepted dogmas of the Middle Ages. The inference was that Society as a unity was not to be taken for granted; it had to be achieved. And later, when the quarrel about the Two Swords arose, the ground for it was prepared by the idea of the two Cities which had always existed side by side and in discord. If the City of Man was founded by Cain, no one who believed this could possibly think that its citizens were anything better than the members of the vulgus. It would be a simple matter for such a person to conclude that Caesar’s heir was Cain’s heir and the pope the heir of Abel. But other men existed too and they were not to draw that conclusion. The thirteenth century, for
instance, was no more ready to grant that the emperor was sub-
ordinate to the pope than Dante was.

One of the most influential sources of definitions in the Mid-
dle Ages is the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville. He is firm in
distinguishing the People, who are “associated in agreement about
the law and in peaceful communion,” from the Plebs, who are the
mob. “The people,” he says, “make up the whole state [civitas],
the mob [vulgus] is the Plebs.” And since there are always fewer
elders than juniors, the Plebs are always the majority.12 Whether
Isidore in using the word civitas was differentiating the population
into those individuals who were associated by their acceptance of
law and peaceful communion from those who were not so associ-
ated, I cannot pretend to say. He clearly uses the words “the
People” for the total population which includes the Patricians,
that is, the Elders. How he distinguishes the vulgus, except by
their numbers, from the rest of the population is obscure, unless
he means that everyone except the Patricians is part of the vulgus.
He would not in any event have accepted our proverb as true, if
he was consistent, for he could not have believed that the voice
of the total population was divine.

We have referred in passing to the dispute about the relation
between temporal and spiritual power. At times the dispute
turned upon the question of the origin of the powers under con-

12. Since I may have been too free in expanding Isidore’s sense, I shall
quote the Latin: “Populus enim humanae multitudinis iuris consensu et
concordi communione sociatus. Populus autem eo distat a plebibus, quod
populus universi cives sunt, connumeratis senioribus civitatis. Plebs autem
reliquum vulgus sine senioribus. 6. Populus ergo tota civitas est, vulgus vero
plebs est. Plebs autem dicta a pluralitate. Maior est enim numerus minorum,
quam seniorum . . . Vulgus est passim inhabitans multitudo, quasi quisque
quo vult.” *Etymologiae*, Book IX, iv, 5–6. The most sensible definition of
plebs and populus is that given by Lily Ross Taylor (*Roman Voting Assem-
blies*, pp. 60 ff): “The voters in the tribes under the presidency of a tribune
were known as plebs. . . . Under the presidency of a consul or praetor the
voters were the populus.”
sideration. No one doubted that the Holy See had a beginning in time; its history could be traced backward to Saint Peter, from him to the High Priests of Israel, to the first High Priest, Aaron, and possibly even to Abraham or Melchizedek. This glorious history was hard to rival. But, as we have already pointed out, kingship was instituted by God Himself in the divine command to Samuel. On the other hand, when God said, “Audi vocem populi,” He did not specify the constitution of the populus. In II Kings (II Samuel) 5:1–5, a pact (foedus) is established between the Elders (senioribus) of Israel and David. The Elders were not the whole people of Israel, it is obvious. Hence this passage could be cited as scriptural evidence for the popular origin of monarchy, for the Elders, though only a part of the population, could be identified with the populus if one meant by that word what Cicero and Saint Augustine meant by it. The social compact, then, was not made by the total population, and I doubt that anyone who believed in it ever thought it was so made. Gierke points out how the notion of a social compact is connected with the limitations of the plenitudo potestatis of both pope and emperor. That absolute power could be limited, an apparent paradox, could be demonstrated both dialectically and empirically. Dialectically all power could be shown to come from God and even His Vicar on earth was subject to His will. But experience, too, showed that neither pope nor emperor had ever been omnicompetent. Even the famous bull Unam Sanctam had to recognize that the two areas of dominion were different. Such arguments arose fairly late in the Middle Ages, though Charlemagne too had some doubts about his rights to the imperial crown. Between the sixth and the tenth centuries, however, the conditions for debate were hardly favorable. Action took the place of argument. Moreover, such events as the sack of Rome by the Goths and the establishment of Gothic power in Italy were effective barriers to anyone who wanted to maintain either the superiority of the traditional

13. Political Theories of the Middle Ages, p. 37.
secular or religious power or the origin of either. It was not until the eleventh century that a Gregory VII could vigorously assert the supremacy of papal authority and its source in popular acclaim. The vigor of his words was not and could not be paralleled by that of his deeds; yet they could keep his ideas in circulation and alive and, after all, for our purposes that is sufficient. If there had not been some strong belief in popular sovereignty it would not have been possible for a man like Rienzi to revivify and realize for a short time the idea of a popular state. Whether the Romans who shouted "Popolo, popolo!" as a cry of victory had much of an idea what they were shouting, I doubt, but the force of a slogan is not to be measured by its meaning. It should also be noted that in Rienzi's case his plan was carried out through the cooperation of a pope.

On the level of common sense the matter boils down to the fundamental distinction between those who are governed and those who do the governing. As Aristotle pointed out clearly, constitutions can be differentiated on the basis of how many individuals belong to each group. But whether one is living in a monarchy, an oligarchy, or a democracy, people form the group which is being governed. These men and women are identified in ordinary speech as the People. In fact, until recent times there have always been three groups of people in all states, not two, for slaves have never been part of the populus. Nor is it true that the Church put an end to slavery, as has been claimed. In the

14. Though as the number of functionaries grows, the number of the governors grows. And if one thinks of the power of lobbyists, the secret government, it becomes even more difficult to find anyone who does not have some share in government. Hence the People, like the King, has two bodies, one of which is active and the other acted upon.

15. See G. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama, p. 322. "Narbonne," he says, "had a slave-market at a regular tariff: two slaves there cost as much as a mule, two mules as much as a horse. Two prelates in England, Lanfranc of Canterbury and Wulfsten of Worcester, share the credit of having put a stop to the selling of native slaves to the Irish. But in Southern France and Italy the slave-trade continued all through the Middle Ages, and the milder servi-
United States, where slavery is no longer an issue, there are still three classes of citizen: those who govern, those who are governed, and those who disfranchise themselves through negligence, poverty, or fear. In the 1960 presidential election only 63.5 per cent of persons presumably eligible to vote voted; in 1964, only 62 per cent. But the percentage varied from region to region: in Alabama only 36 per cent voted in 1964, in Mississippi only 32.9, whereas in Idaho 75.8 per cent voted, and in Massachusetts 71.3. It seems absurd to talk about popular government when voting is restricted either voluntarily or by compulsion to 35 per cent of those ostensibly eligible to vote.

No such doubts troubled the medieval writers so far as political problems were concerned. In Gierke’s words:

An ancient and generally entertained opinion regarded the Will of the People as the Source of Temporal Power. A friendly meeting took place between this traditional opinion and that Patristic Doctrine of the State of Nature which the Church was propagating. That doctrine taught that at one time under the Law of God and the Law of Nature community of goods, liberty and equality prevailed among mankind. It followed that Lordship made its first appearance as a consequence of the Fall of Man. It followed also that the authority of Rulers was grounded on human ordinance.¹⁶

How “generally accepted” this opinion was may be disputed, but that it had abundant support need not be argued. The lex naturae was accepted long before its supposed implications for political philosophy were drawn out of it. It was often used in primitivistic debates in Antiquity and was part and parcel of popular opinion, if only in the identification of the Golden Age or the Saturnia regna

¹⁶. Political Theories of the Middle Ages, p. 38.
with life in the Garden of Eden. But the state of nature as a con-
cept was not confined to political conditions. It was sometimes
supposed to be technological, sometimes juristic, sometimes ethical,
and sometimes even dietetic and marital.\textsuperscript{17} It was, as far as the
extant evidence goes, always defined as lacking something that was
thought of as undesirable and yet characteristic of modern society:
an established constitution, various artifices, marital conventions,
luxury, and so on. If the mythographer was primitivistic, he would
praise the state of nature; if anti-primitivistic, he would use it to
measure our progress.

Since no one really knew what primitive man was like or
what life in the Garden of Eden was like, the imagination was
given a free rein. The arguments both pro and con had to be
dialectical, if argument was used. Such items of modern society
as were unfortunate must have come into being through some
fault of primitive man, for whatever the goddess Nature produced
must have been good and, if one were a Christian, one had the
Bible as proof that “God saw everything that he had made, and,
behold, it was very good.” In the second place, it was understood
that qualitative changes are always from a given condition toward
its polar opposite. Hence the state of nature must have been
diametrically opposed to the state of things-as-they-are. Thus if a
critic of his society attributed its ills to luxury, to the prevalence
of the arts and sciences, to codified laws, he saw in the state of
nature the complete absence of these things. And since the state
of nature in Christian times would have to be the state of pre-
lapsarian man, it could be described with a little imagination in
accordance with the first two chapters of Genesis. Though there
are certain discrepancies between these texts, nevertheless both
expressed the decrees of God.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} I have discussed this in \textit{Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages}. See especially the essays on “The Original Condition of Man.”
According to scripture, the establishment of monarchy was on the whole an evil. The People's Voice may be said to have made a great mistake when it requested a king. The basic error, as given in I Samuel 8 is that the People had rejected God as their ruler: "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." So in Judges 21:25, the last verse runs, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." This would seem to imply in connection with I Samuel 8 that the election of a king was an abdication of personal autonomy, which in turn was identical with theocracy. There is, however, little if any recollection that the people of Israel erred in electing a king. One might have thought that the Thirteen Colonies, at least those in the North, might not have forgotten the warning, but in the early days of the Revolution some thought it possible to be free and also under the Crown. Perhaps the experience of the citizens of Massachusetts was enough to disillusion men with theocracy. In any event, faith in the popular will increased rather than diminished. And when errors were suspected it was usual, and still is, to look for some palliation of them, some excuse, such as lack of correct information, pressure from influential economic groups, bad leadership, as if to show that had the People been free to choose they would have chosen wisely. Yet the one authority for the first popular decision points out how wrong the People were even then. Recorded history could easily corroborate the conclusion that the People can be as wrong as a king or senate.

It goes without saying that in actual practice the ideological arguments were rarely used. When one referred to the vox populi as an appellate court one simply said that all the conditions of modern society that were regrettable were the result of the Fall. They were the result of one man's primordial sin. Since before that unhappy event man's will was free, it would not have been possible to predict what choice it would make. According to Saint Augustine, we were doomed now to choose the worse, even if, like
Ovid's Medea, we saw and approved of the better. Adam, moreover, was mankind as an integral whole: when he fell, we all fell. And though Saint Ambrose might call our collective sin a felix culpa in that it entailed the Incarnation and Redemption, neither would have been necessary if we had not yielded to temptation. This in all its ramifications might have been expected to weaken any idea that the People, that is, anyone living after the Fall, could speak with the voice of God when not directly quoting His words.19 If, on the other hand, there are any traces of free will left in us, we might make an effort to remodel society in the likeness of Eden.

**Natural Man**

It was hence reasonable for later Utopians to imagine or actually to found new Earthly Paradises, in which, unfortunately, Adam's story was usually repeated. The regeneration of prelapsarian man sometimes seemed feasible even without the creation of new states in the wilderness. To men persuaded of this possibility, the problem was first to define "natural man" according to a technique mentioned above, that is, by stripping off man as he is now the characteristics that seem evil. But one had also to assume that natural man was living within each of us, as if in a prison waiting for his release—a metaphor which opened Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Release would come when he—or some liberator—would destroy the unnatural man who was his jailer. To illustrate this I shall quote but one passage, for the story is well enough known not to require a series of examples. I have chosen an appeal to Nature in the twelfth-century work of Alain of Lille as he preached against riches.

19. Cf. Alexander Pope, *Epistles and Satires of Horace Imitated*, Epist. I, to Augustus, ll. 89–90: "The people's voice is very odd. It is and it is not, the voice of God."
Listen to what Nature has to say against you: Man, I have borne you without honors, without honors may you depart; without riches have I given you birth, may you come back to me without riches; without worldly glory have you come, may you leave without it. Man, do you ask to make yours that which does not belong to you? Surely those things are not yours which were not born with you. Those things cannot be yours, they cannot belong to you for long, or be yours forever. Consider that word of the philosopher, “It is a goodly possession, joyful poverty.” But there is not poverty if it is joyful. For he who finds poverty befitting to him is a rich man. Not he who has too little, but he who thirsts for more is poor. If you live in accordance with Nature, never will you be poor. If you follow common opinion, never will you be rich. Nature desires but a trifle, opinion an immensity. Natural needs are limited, those born of false opinion have no end.20

According to Alain it seems to be possible for an individual to reform by his own means, by self-discipline, through an act of will. But as the state or the community was divided into the People and the Nobles, the Powerful, the Senate, the Court, the Magnates, so the individual was internally divided between the natural man made in the image and likeness of God and the unnatural man made in the image and likeness of Mammon. Alain, deriving from cynicism or, more accurately, from Roman stoicism, is basically attached to the ideal of self-sufficiency, autarky.

Others correlated naturalness with other traits. In Diogenes

20. “Audi quid contra te dicat Natura! O homo, sine honoribus te genui, sine honoribus redeas; sine divitis te peperi, sine divitis ad me venias; sine mundana gloria intrasti, sine illa exesas. O homo, quaeris facere tua quae sunt aliena? certe a te aliena sunt, quac tecum nata non sunt; tua esse nequeunt, tecum diu vel semper esse non possunt. Considera illud philosophi: “Honesta res est, laeta paupertas.” Illa vero non est paupertas si laeta est. Cui cum paupertate bene convenit, dives est; non qui parum habet, sed qui plus cupit, pauper est. Si ad naturam vivas, nunquam pauper eris; si ad opinionem, nunquam dives. Exiguum natura desiderat, opinio immensum. Naturalia desideria sunt finita, ex falsa opinione, nascentia ubi desinant non habent.” Summa de arte praedicatoria, chap. VI; in PL, CCX, col. 123. The tradition of Greek cynicism with its program of living in accordance with Nature rather than in accordance with opinion, physis vs. nomos, or in this case doxa, was probably transmitted through Seneca.
the natural was to be found in the animal; in the early Stoics it was in the reason when liberated from the passions. Fundamentally one was seeking freedom from something supposed to enchain the soul, whether it was the love of possessions, the amor habendi, or the love of knowledge, the amor sciendi. Behind the program may have been the counsel, “Sell all and follow me,” where the person and teaching of Christ becomes an analogue of the Law of Nature or of the Truth that liberates (John 8:32). When the People were thought of as a paradigm of the good life, the life of freedom, it was the ruler who was to be resisted. And paradoxically enough, though our Fall came from disobedience to our Heavenly King, we were told to be disobedient to our earthly king. The anti-intellectualist was to urge men to listen to their emotions, their common sense, their instincts, their hearts, and to divorce old barren reason from their beds. The dictum populus maior principe was applied at first only to political mythography, but before a few centuries had passed it would be modified in phraseology and applied to philosophy, religion, and art.

Pity for the People

Meanwhile a sentiment of pity for the People was being generated. Pity was aroused by the poverty of the masses, and their poverty was apparently a kind of cement that would solidify certain common interests which their fellows of higher rank did not share. The solidarity of the People comes out clearly in such proverbs as this: “A roaring lion and a hungry bear is an impious prince to his poor people” (Leo rugiens et ursus esuriens est princeps impius super populum pauperem). But it is not only a prince who is criticized. For we come upon another proverb which says, “The ruination of a people is evil priests” (Ruina populi sacerdotes mali). It is only fair to add that it also seems that a bad superior may be appointed by God as a punishment: “Because of the peo-
When an idea becomes proverbial one can conclude that the sentiments contained in it have gained wide acceptance. The ideas contained in these commonplaces are of no significance to us except as evidence that some individuals believed it possible for the People as a group to be harshly treated. This belief—by no means self-evident—that a group of individuals can suffer as a whole, collectively, that a class of persons may be selected because it has a certain solidarity, was inherent in such concepts as that of the plebs patriciatus, which would have been impossible in classical Latin, but which as plebs tua Israel was as early as the fifth century. No one seems to have asked himself just what was involved in a collection's becoming a unity. Such problems did not arise until the nineteenth century, when the supposed implications of collectivities were drawn out by men like Hegel and his school. It is also true that familiarity with the idea of collective guilt and atonement may have made acceptance of collective injustice less questionable than it would have been if unfamiliar.

Another truism should be ventured and that is that we have only recorded opinion to go on. Of all the opinions that may have been recorded before the invention of printing, only a small fraction are now available. That fraction cannot be said to represent more than the thoughts of a literary elite. We have no way of knowing how widespread any opinion may have been in a semi-literate society. The best we can do is to guess that when an idea agreed with what a man thought to be to his own interest, it would be espoused by him. But even that is dubious. To have asked a tenth- or even a fifteenth-century Frenchman whether he believed in the principle populus maior princeipe would have been to elicit a vacant stare of incomprehension. We have, moreover, seen too frequently in the last two hundred years people fighting

for causes which they neither understood nor were equipped to understand. How then equate their actions with their beliefs? It was the philosophers who wrote about the consensus gentium, inherited guilt, vicarious atonement, and the sovereignty of the emperor or pope.

Just as there were people who identified the consensus with the truth, so there were others who identified it with nonsense. It has been emphasized that no one seemed very sure who the People were. Yet until one knew who they were one could not tell whether one admired their ideas or not. The *populus-plebs* might be despised, whereas the *populus-pauper* might be eulogized. The *populus principans* could be esteemed as the voice of God, whereas the *populus subditus* might be ordered to remain silent and obey. In Christian circles it was apparently no more trouble to believe that the People as a whole could sin, or be sinned against, than it was to believe that they could be, in fact had been, redeemed. But if such beliefs presented no obstacles, in spite of their logical intricacies and paradoxes, then it would be easy to attribute to the People as a whole a host of other properties. Indeed, ever since Hesiod had described his various “races,” golden, silver, heroic, bronze, and iron, since Hellenes and barbarians had been differentiated, it had become a pastime of writers to compose generalized accounts of various peoples whom they might either laud or look down upon.

**National Traits**

It has always been easy to say that there are exceptions to every rule, and even before statistical investigations were known, deviants from the norm could be brushed aside. This practice has continued to our own times and bids fair not to die out. One can still characterize nations, social classes, economic groups, as sober, brave, chaste, friendly, hostile, drunken, lubricious, or thieving, to choose only a few of the more familiar adjectives. Usually
the application of such epithets is a literary, not a scientific, device. There was a time when John Bull, Uncle Sam, and Marianne were used by caricaturists as the Dottore, Arlechino, and Pantaleone were used in the *commedia dell’arte*, to symbolize nations, cities, or groups within nations. Such stereotypes have seldom been used by ethnologists or social psychologists, though Hitler employed them in propaganda with tragic results, and the practice is not unlike that used by Marxists who lump together all the bourgeois and all the capitalists and give their members collective traits. I imagine that the segregationists in the United States actually believe that there exists a Negro soul or mind or collective unconscious which is transmitted by generation even into people who have more white blood than black.

It is probably true that when a group of human beings lives in relative isolation its traditions will solidify and may become characteristic of it alone. We see this in speech, costume, art, religion, and social etiquette. But that it is to be laid to the public expression of a group-soul is doubtful, for none is needed to explain it.

Ages

The legend of the Ages, according to which all human beings living between certain dates would have the same general character, intellectual and moral, gave support to the idea that individuals behaved as they did as a function of their “times.” Indeed, as we shall see in a later essay, some of the German philosophers maintained that the times themselves had a spirit or character, not the statistical mode of measured ways of behaving, but rather as an over-individual something which determined the behavior of the individuals. The Voice of the People now turned into the Voice of the Age, Period, or Time.\footnote{The following from James Thomson, author of the *City of Dreadful Night*, is the most extreme version of the influence of a “time” or “age” on}
that it utilized individuals as its mouthpiece. In short, a man acted as he did because the Age made him do so. Thus individuals could be said to express their times, reflect their times, speak for their times, and apparently their times were cut off from them as a cause is cut off from its effects. The question of what would happen to a time or age if its human components were removed from it seems not to have puzzled writers who believed in ages. Hence when expressions like "the Mediaeval Mind," "the Renaissance Man," "the Victorian mentality," were used one might have expected some discussion of how one knew who embodied these fictions. But aside from Hegel’s—and Emerson’s—universal man, little was done in this field of inquiry. And such phrases as "the childhood of the race," "America comes of age," "the search for national identity," fused into one basic metaphor, that humanity as a whole has a mind or soul or spirit or character, and the logically independent metaphor that it has a history that parallels that of an individual.

In Saint Augustine's story of the ages, one of the earliest Christian versions and certainly the most influential, this parallelism was detailed. The seven days of Creation symbolized, he thought, the seven ages of man. The first age, from Adam to the people living in it. It is from "The Poems of William Blake" of 1865. (First printed in the National Reformer in 1866. Reprinted in The Speedy Extinction of Evil and Misery, p. 216.)

"[Like the mountain peaks which are first illuminated by the rising sun] so the Spirit of the Ages, the Zeitgeist, is developed universally and independently by its own mysterious laws through mankind; and the eminent men from whom it radiates the expression of what we call a new aspect (the continuous imperceptible increments of change having accumulated to an amount of change which we can clearly perceive, and which our gross standards are fine enough to measure), the illustrious prototypes of an age, really cast but a faint reflex upon those beneath them; and while pre-eminently interesting in biography, are of small account in history except as prominent indices of growth and progress and decay, as early effects not efficient causes. They help us to read clearly the advance of time; but this advance they do not cause any more than the gnomon of a sundial causes the procession of the hours which it indicates."

Noah, is the age of infancy; the second, from Noah to Abraham, that of childhood; the third, from Abraham to David, that of adolescence; the fourth, from David to the Babylonian captivity, that of youth, “the certain adornment of all ages”; the fifth, from the Captivity to the Advent, that of maturity (presbytes); the sixth, the present, is that of senescence, when “a man is born who now lives spiritually”; and the seventh will be that of the cosmic Sabbath “which has no evening.” This outline of history was repeated throughout the Middle Ages from the time of Eugippius to that of Hugh of Saint Victor. But none of these accounts perceived the problem of collective minds, and all, for that matter, tacitly admitted differences among the individuals belonging to any single age. Consequently, the same question arises of who represents or speaks for his age and how he is selected. Were such a question answered, then the People could be said to be metaphorically present in their representative. Whether his voice could be identified with the voice of God is more dubious. The one man who might be said to speak with God’s voice is the pope and even he only within the limitations which were defined in 1870.

Diversity within an age was not formally recognized until the time of Auguste Comte. His predecessors, Vico and Herder, were more given to emphasizing the homogeneity of ages. The men of Vico’s heroic age not only thought alike but framed laws, wrote poetry, and worshiped their gods in a uniform manner. But Comte saw that in his metaphysical and positivistic ages there would be survivals from earlier periods. Since his basic metaphor was the mental life of an individual, he could grant that just as some adults behave like children and others like adolescents, so in the positivistic period there would be theologically and metaphysically oriented individuals. For him the People would be those men most in tune with the prevailing and characteristic key, or else their antitheses, the hangovers from the past. Since he admitted this possible diversity, he put a small group of scientific experts
in charge of society. Like Comte, I suspect, the Marxist of today would grant that even under the dictatorship of the proletariat there would be vestigial traces of primitive communism and capitalism, though such traces would tend to disappear. But the proletariat as a class becomes the People and whatever is achieved in a communistic state is presumably planned for the satisfaction of their interests.

Le Peuple

The attempt to identify the People in France was especially strong after the downfall of Charles X. Before the Restoration and during the Revolution the People were apparently the sans-culottes. As Hannah Arendt puts it:

The words *le peuple* are the key words for every understanding of the French Revolution, and their connotations were determined by those who were exposed to the spectacle of their sufferings, which they themselves did not share. For the first time, the word covered more than those who did not participate in government, not the citizens but the low people. The very definition of the word was born out of compassion and the term became the equivalent for unfortunate and unhappiness—*le peuple*, *les malheureux m’applaudissent*, as Robespierre was wont to say; *le peuple toujours malheureux*, as even Sieyès, one of the least sentimental and most sober figures of the Revolution, would put it.

In a note later in her book, Dr. Arendt adds, "*Le peuple* was identical with *menu* or *petit peuple*," and it consisted of "small businessmen, grocers, artisans, workers, employees, salesmen, servants, day laborers, lumpenproletarien, but also of poor artists, play actors, penniless writers." 24

The one man who was clear about his identification of the People was Michelet. In a short book entitled *Le Peuple*, pub-

lished in 1846, two years before the final ousting of monarchy, he flatly maintained that *le peuple* was the peasantry. To Michelet the outstanding virtue of the peasant is his wedding to the land (p. 33), and that marriage is a tie which springs from a deeply seated love between men and the earth. He is distinguished from other men by a *don de travailler, de combattre, au besoin, sans manger, de vivre d’espérance, de gaité courageuse* (p. 35). But this is not all: he is also a child and therefore a genius, relying more on instinct than on reason. To Michelet reason is anathema. It is perverse and has dissociated men from one another. The greatest need of humanity is fellowship cemented by love (p. 141). It is the absence of the critical faculty that distinguishes the peasant. He has been corrupted, it is true, by the bourgeois who live, of course, in cities, but when he can be found in his rural state he will be seen to be motivated by friendliness (*l’amitié*), which in Michelet seems to be the equivalent of Christian charity, and which has no need of reflective thought. “Instinctive thinking,” he says, “is close to action, is almost action; it is almost at once an idea and an act” (p. 148). Where now is one to find this man of instinctive action? Only in the outstanding popular leader, the man of genius: “in him is placed the great soul. We are all astonished to see the inert masses vibrate in tune with the least word he says, to hear the roar of the Ocean be silent at the sound of this voice, the waves of the people swell about his feet. . . . Why then be astonished? This voice is that of the people; dumb in itself, it speaks in this man, and God speaks with him. Here is where one can truly say, Vox populi, vox Dei.”

25. I use the edition brought out in Paris in 1946 by Lucien Refort, which is an exact reprint of the original with notes and commentary. All quotations are from this edition.

26. The French of these sentences runs: (1) “la pensée instinctive touche à l’acte, est presque l’acte; elle est presque en même temps une idée et une action.” (2) En lui [le génie] réside la grande âme. Tout le monde s’étonne de voir les masses inertes, vibrer au moindre mot qu’il dit, les bruits de l’Océan se taire devant cette voix, le vague populaire trainer à ses pieds. . . . Pourquoi
physics of this last test is again that of Hegel, the metaphysics of a collective soul in an “eternal” man. But if there is anything rational in this soul, it is the reason of Hegel's concrete universal.

Michelet pointed out in this little book that the French were frightened of what they called Communism and Terrorism (p. 113). But, as he also pointed out, the Terror was not made by the peasants (the People), but by the bourgeois and nobles, “minds cultivated, subtle, bizarre, sophists and scholastics.” As for communism, he laughed it out of court on the ground that every Frenchman was a proprietor and would not give up his property as long as he could hold on to it. How long this would be under communism as it exists in reality rather than in books, he did not foresee. But Michelet was more of an orator than a critical historian. As Lucien Refort says, Michelet’s “ideas emerge from his love or his antipathy much more than from the modalities of reasoning.” That goes far to explain both the popularity and the lack of precision in his work.

The Constitutional Convention

We have, I hope, seen that this lack of precision is not peculiar to Michelet. Consider for a moment the opening of the preamble to the Constitution of the United States: “We the People....” The authors of that document were neither representative of the colonial population nor did they mirror its ideas. There were plenty of loyalists in that population, including Franklin’s son William. Moreover, the final draft of the Constitution was the result of a compromise, and one colony, Rhode Island, was absent, and deliberately, at all of the debates. The compromise was a happy one; but it was a compromise nevertheless. The heart of its

donc s'en étonner? Cette voix, c'est celle du peuple; muet en elle même, elle parle en cet homme, et Dieu avec lui. C'est là vraiment qu'on peut dire, 'Vox populi, vox Dei.'” This might be contrasted with the opinion of Heinrich Heine, Michelet’s contemporary, in his Geständnisse, in Werke und Briefe, Vol. 7, pp. 121-22.
philosophy, the separation of powers, was a point on which some of the most stalwart revolutionists were divided. The lack of consensus on most points had always characterized the colonies. It took from 1777 to 1781 for the Articles of Confederation to be ratified by the thirteen states and from 1787 to 1790 for the Constitution to be accepted by them all, though it went into effect in 1789. The conflict of interests in the Continental Congress was manifest in the earliest days of its deliberations, some delegates insisting on remaining loyal to the King, others declaring for independence; some wanting to open all the ports to all shipping, others to supervise what was later to become international commerce; some wanting financial and military aid from foreign nations, others shrinking from so “treasonous” a gesture. But what else was to be expected when delegates from twelve different colonies, of various social and economic institutions, of different national origins, met together to deliberate? The formation of our Constitution, not to mention its ratification, illustrates the power of disagreement and debate in producing a final consensus, as it also illustrates resignation to what one is convinced is inevitable. Franklin’s famous saying, “We must all hang together, gentlemen, or we shall all hang separately,” assuming it to be authentic, dates from 1776, but it may well contain the nuclear thought that was decisive. Yet his words were scarcely a program. Hamilton’s well-known opinion of the voice of the People, expressed in 1787, is evidence enough that he shared some of the traditional estimates of “the Multitude” usually held by aristocrats. He certainly did not think of himself as one of the Multitude. John Adams, who did not sit as a delegate to the Convention, showed plainly enough that he realized the difficulty of defining the word “the People.” “It is certain, in theory,” he wrote to James Sullivan, “that the only moral foundation of government is the consent of the people. . . . To what extent shall we carry this principle? Shall we say that every individual of the community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent,
expressly to every act of legislation?” Their decision was that of Harrington, that “power follows property.” The People then became the owners of property. And presumably the Voice of the People was the voice of the propertied class. They alone had something at stake when legislation was being debated.

This was in fact the opinion of several of the most influential delegates. Elbridge Gerry (Massachusetts) argued that “the Cincinnati would in fact elect the chief magistrate in every instance, if the election be referred to the people.” “The most dangerous influence,” said John Dickinson (Delaware), “of those multitudes without property and without principle with which our country, like all others, will soon abound.” Most of the state constitutions required their voters to own property, in sums ranging from twenty pounds in New York to sixty pounds in Massachusetts, though Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Hampshire had already come out for free elections. Hamilton, in the speech just referred to, flatly said, “All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well born, the other the mass of the people. . . . Can a democratic Assembly, who annually revolve in the mass of the people, be supposed to pursue the public good?” Catherine Drinker Bowen, from whose Miracle at Philadelphia I take these quotations, says, speaking of Madison, “Present day readers may be a trifle dashed to find the Father of our Constitution urging, in effect, that the American rich put up barriers against the American poor, who with power in their hands could be dangerous.” The fact is that the delegates were afraid of popular uprisings like Shay’s Rebellion. To them, to quote Mrs. Bowen’s admirable study again, “Democracy signified anarchy; demos was not the people but the mob.”


28. Miracle at Philadelphia, p. 45. It becomes clearer and clearer as one studies the journals of Madison, that the leading delegates with the exception of Franklin, looked back to Rome not only for their vocabulary but for many of their main ideas. Hamilton was far from being alone in his distrust of the poor.
It has taken over a century for our concept of the People to change in any significant manner. Phrases like “the consent of the people” or even “the consent of the governed” have never been taken literally. One can see in reading the political history of the United States how the denotation of “the People” has spread, property requirements, religious affiliations, sex, color, national origin, being gradually removed. And even when restrictions on the franchise have been annulled by law, the inhabitants of certain regions have not always been agreeable to accepting and obeying the law. The Fourteenth Amendment has been fortified by recent legislation and is still defied, not only by the people of various southern states but even by the governors and legislators of at least two of them. The executives in question have been acting as they do with full support from the white majority as tested in elections. And yet Lincoln’s words which close his Gettysburg Address will be repeated in schools and political harangues as if sacred: “Government of the people, by the people, for the people. . . .”

Daniel Webster in 1830 had already spoken of the “people’s government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people,” and he apparently saw no problem involved in telling his fellow senators whom he was referring to. As so
often in the history of ideas, one finds that the emotional effect of a term is a function of its obscurity and sometimes proportionate to it. In succeeding essays we shall see some examples of this. In a context like this, charm counts for more than clarity.