Chapter 1
Models of Action

William James broke with the liberal tradition in which political action has held a secondary place. In Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* individuals turn their power over to the sovereign, even if they retain the right to revolution, to be used only in extraordinary circumstances. Neither Hobbes nor Locke had much good to say about ordinary citizen action.¹ The Federalists pejoratively linked nongovernmental initiatives with selfish and frenzied factions. The Constitution sanctions peaceable assembly and petition of the government for redress of grievances but does not institutionalize participation other than voting. In the late nineteenth century, the English theorist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) developed a social Darwinism that disavowed the need for government in favor of individualism and “voluntary social cooperation.” The only legitimate purposes for cooperation, Spencer avowed, were war and the protection of persons and property. He made virtually no mention of direct action or public decision making in communities, organizations, or the nation.² In the United States, conservative sociologist and social Darwinist William Graham Sumner rejected the idea that classes have obligations toward one another and derided political reform as “the absurd attempt to make the world over.”³

Before elaborating James's alternative assessment of action, I offer this summary of his theory: he celebrated action, including political action; his advocacy of popular action is a democratic element of his thought that undermines its elitist elements; and he envisioned several models of action, some more democratic than others. Despite his professed individualism, James believed that people are connected to their communities and have obligations both to their fellow citizens and to past and future generations. The historical context for James's writings included the intensely bitter public clashes of the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and racial and class struggles, so that for James to commend conflict took no small amount of courage.
In his most democratic thinking, James identified action with personal and political health; it suggested freedom and vitality. For James, action implied more than mere voting behavior, the expression of preferences, and the pursuit of self-interest. Action is the development of one's potential in the service of a cause greater than oneself; it is thus simultaneously self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice. Respect for action makes James an ally of democracy, which is defined by citizen action rather than constitutions and institutions.

In designing the United States Constitution, the Federalists tried to rein in popular participation and separate it from public power. They understood passion to have a dynamic character that, if stirred, makes citizens difficult to control. In Federalist 6, Hamilton put the rhetorical question, "Are not popular assemblies frequently subject to the impulses of rage, resentment, jealousy, avarice, and of other irregular and violent propensities?" and Madison disparagingly connected democracy and passion in Federalist 10:

A pure Democracy, by which I mean, a Society, consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the Government in person, can admit of no cure for the mischiefs of faction. A common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole. . . . Hence it is that such Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; 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.

 Whereas the Federalists thought that participation was dangerous because it resulted in passion and partisanship, James encouraged participation precisely because it elicited passion from the citizens. James averred, in oddly archaic language, that there will be change even in this shrunken and enfeebled generation. . . . Battles and defeats will occur, the victors will be glorified and the vanquished dishonored just as in the brave days of yore, the human heart still with-
drawing itself from the much it has in safe possession, and concentrating all its passion upon those evanescent possibilities of fact which still quiver in fate's scale.\(^8\)

For James, moral action required personal commitment. "We find such persons in every age, passionately flinging themselves upon their sense of the goodness of life, in spite of the hardships of their own condition."\(^9\) In his *Talks to Teachers*, James endorsed the "popular belief" that "estimate[s] the worth of a man's mental processes by their effects upon his practical life." In this view,

the man of contemplation would be treated as only half a human being, passion and practical resource would become once more glories of our race, a concrete victory over this earth's outward powers of darkness would appear an equivalent for any amount of passive spiritual culture, and conduct would remain as the test of every education worthy of the name.\(^10\)

In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James called for the peaceful use of "civic passion" for which people would "lay down their persons and their wealth" to create a community of which citizens could be proud rather than one in which many are subject to unrelieved "toil and pain and hardness and inferiority" while others lead lives of ease.\(^11\) This civic passion would include heroism, endurance, and discipline, not, as it might have for Teddy Roosevelt, military conquest or domination.

James recognized the problematic dimension of passion: people have an instinct for war that demagogic politicians and the press can manipulate for destructive ends.\(^12\) When the public supported war with Spain, James blamed Congress and the press—James hated Hearst's yellow journalism—for stirring up popular emotions, and he perceived the esteeming of fervor for its own sake to be an upper-class characteristic.\(^13\) Unlike the Federalists, James did not see passion as the peculiar problem of the masses.

Whatever happens, in any event, will happen not as the result of any particular reason, but as the result of passion, and of certain watchwords that nations have learned habitually to obey. We have some pretty good ones of the latter sort, which will make for reason. But the
great passion undeniably now is the passion for adventure. . . . And, after all, has n't the spirit of the life of all the great generals and rulers and aristocracies always been the spirit of sport carried to its supreme expression? Civilization, properly so-called, might well be termed the organization of all those functions that resist the mere excitement of sport. 14

Especially in the face of enthusiasm for war and imperialism, James endorsed the representative institutions of the Constitution, the principle of checks and balances, and the cooler thinking of intellectuals as restraints on popular rages. Passion is, however, an inexorable force in politics, according to James, and therefore he did not seek to eliminate it but to channel it into public-spirited activity of the type described in “The Moral Equivalent of War.” 15 For James, political conflict, ideally legal and nonviolent, connotes not anarchy but moral courage, resistance to large, centralized institutions, and the necessary, if painful, path to progress. 16 Conflict expresses vitality, catharsis, and concern for the common good. 17

For James, action is good in itself, not only as a means to an end; psychological, moral, and even material benefits come as much from striving to realize an ideal as from attaining it. 18 Open struggle is better for a body politic than resignation or suppression of discontent, which, if stifled, can lead to violent eruptions. James put a positive spin on the fierce presidential election of 1896: “Our political crisis is over, but the hard times still endure. . . . I doubt, notwithstanding certain appearances, whether the country was ever morally in as sound a state as it is now, after all this discussion.” 19 He had expressed the same sentiment ten years earlier in a letter to his brother Henry: the confrontation between capital and labor in the United States (not including the Haymarket riot “which has nothing to do with knights of labor”) was “a most healthy phase of evolution, a little costly, but normal, and sure to do lots of good to all hands in the end.” 20 His praise for contention even pertained to the academic world. When he and Hugo Munsterberg were attacked in a scholarly paper, Munsterberg urged that they write a letter of protest. James disagreed, saying: “Since those temperamental antipathies exist—why isn't it healthy that they should express themselves? For my part, I feel rather glad than otherwise that psychology is so live a subject that the psychologists should 'go for' each other in this way. . . . We ought to cultivate tough hides.” 21
To further elucidate what James valued in political action, it might be useful to contrast briefly his conception with those of Hannah Arendt and Max Weber. All three respected, even celebrated, action; each thought of it at least partly in heroic terms. Arendt described the Greek polis as a community of citizens publicly engaged in deliberation, speech, and deeds. For Arendt, action reveals the nature of the self and its potentials, which is one reason why speech is crucial to it. James did not invoke the polis or even the New England town meeting, but he shared with Arendt the belief that individuals develop their potentialities through self-sacrifice for the common good. Action, in other words, is a way to combine the development and expression of the highest human capacities with the welfare of the community.

Like Arendt (and Tocqueville), James did not trust power located in large institutions, including the nation-state, and concluded that the way to resist oppressive institutional power was for individuals and groups to act. In an oft-cited passage, James announced:

I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms. . . . The bigger the unit you deal with, the hollower, the more brutal, the more mendacious is the life displayed. So I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost; against all big successes and big results; and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual . . . under-dogs always, till history comes, after they are long dead, and puts them on the top.

He declared that the political deterioration of America in the second half of the nineteenth century was “the direct outcome of the added power of government, the corruptions and inflations of the war. . . . Every war leaves such miserable legacies, fatal seeds of future war and revolution, unless the civic virtues of the people save the State in time.” This condition of political degradation, brought on by a bloated post-Civil War state and by the war itself, could be cured only by “the civic virtues of the people.” He continued:

Democracy is still upon its trial. The civic genius of our people is its only bulwark, and neither laws nor monuments, neither battleships nor public libraries, nor great newspapers nor booming stocks; neither me-
chanical invention nor political adroitness, nor churches nor universi-
ties nor civil-service examinations can save us from degeneration if the
inner mystery be lost.  

The greatest threat to the democratic spirit is overwhelming institutions.
James criticized "civilization, with its herding and branding, licensing and
degree-giving, authorizing and appointing, and in general regulating and
administering by system the lives of human beings."  

Like James, in "Politics as a Vocation" Max Weber tried to establish
the place of creative action in a world in which bureaucracies are the char-
acteristic political form. According to Weber, instead of thinking imagina-
tively, each person in a bureaucratic organization must carry out the or-
ders of the person or committee above. Expertly trained administrators set
the limits on action, and creative thought becomes a threat to established
procedures. Because political knowledge comes to be identified as rules,
regulations, procedures, and budgets, the archetypal political leader be-
comes the lawyer, i.e., the one who can master the rules of law, while po-
litical knowledge based on experience and custom is denigrated. James
could have endorsed Weber's description of the ideal politician who serves
as an alternative to the bureaucrat. Weber defined politics as "independent
leadership in action," saying that the politician must have three qualities:
a feeling of responsibility; passion, i.e., devotion to a cause rather than
excessive feeling or romanticism; and a sense of proportion, distance from
things and men that allows control of the passions.  
The desire to pre-
serve passion, responsibility, and proportion—three characteristics of an
effective and a humane political actor—was shared by Weber and James.
James's fear of such institutions, and his desire to increase the space for
public action, was shared by Tocqueville, Weber, and Arendt.

II

R. B. Perry claimed that James's contribution to social and political
thought is the "exaltation of direct action, and hence of both revolution
and of dictatorship."  

James believed that in order to have "depth," people
"must multiply their [ideals'] sentimental surface by the dimension of the
active will.” In other words, people should not just hold ideals but act upon them. One phrase he used for healthy existence is “the strenuous life,” which Browning asserted is James’s “normative vision of the human.” The strenuous mood leads people to confront life’s difficulties whereas the easygoing mood seeks to escape them and accept present conditions.

The use of the term “strenuous life” reveals a powerful tension in James between a democratic appreciation for the quotidian efforts of ordinary citizens and an elitist appeal for heroes, geniuses, and saints to embody the strenuous life, allowing the rest of us, who are less vigorous, to follow. Sometimes his call for acting upon ideals is addressed to all citizens and at other times to the few. I will present the evidence for this tension in James by continuing to compare his views on action with those of Arendt and then with the views of social Darwinists Herbert Spencer and Grant Allen. Before addressing the theme of individualism, I will try to make some sense of the tension by suggesting that James embodies the conflict between liberalism and democracy on the issue of political action.

James’s own life exemplified both the heroic and the ordinary models of action that he advocated. In his efforts to provide leadership, he joined committees for public causes; wrote open letters about education, imperialism, and lynching; and directly participated in protests against U.S. involvement in the Philippines. He endorsed Jane Addams’s settlement house projects, and she cited him in her autobiography as an inspiration for Hull-House. As a philosopher, he endeavored to instruct and lead the nation. Not only did he teach at a prominent university, but he attempted to reach broader audiences through public lectures that formed the basis for most of his books. In these lectures, James did not exclusively address the elite. His appeal to posit and fulfill their ideals went out to everyone: working people and the wealthy, educated and uneducated.

In addition to broadly defining his audience, James expressed his democratic intention in his immediate, vivacious writing to reach that audience, writing that was in marked contrast to the prose of most textbooks and philosophical treatises. He maintained that academics needed to change their style of communication with the public if they were going to shape the democratic temperament, and he made this point explicit in a lecture directed specifically at college students and faculty. Whereas many people see in the university “a kind of sterilized conceit and incapacity for being pleased,” colleges need to become more engaging because “if a college,
through the inferior human influences that have grown regnant there, fails to catch the robuster tone, its failure is colossal, for its social function stops: democracy gives it a wide berth, turns toward it a deaf ear."\(^{34}\) James did not think that intellectuals should rule the nation, but he did believe they have a specific contribution to make to a democracy (a point I elaborate upon in Chapter 5). If they do not connect with their audience, they cannot make that contribution.

James championed two types of action as a way to express creative energy, to reduce the possibility of violence, to preserve and improve America's representative system of government, and to contribute to the common good. The first type of action might today be called "public service" in politics, medicine, education, the arts, technological invention and manual labor that serve public needs, and social work; in fact, James praised any activity that helps others. He even thought that most people are heroic in the sense of meeting the challenges of everyday life. The second type of action is more heroic, unusual, or unique. He recognized that the values and institutions of societies are periodically transformed and posited that these transformations are led by visionaries or geniuses who are able to envision alternative social arrangements and draw people to support them in making change. This type of action is close to what Arendt meant by beginning something new.\(^{35}\)

In defining a public contribution, James was highly democratic. He did not sharply distinguish the public from the private sphere, as Arendt was to do.\(^{36}\) Whereas Arendt located action in the public realm, James saw the achievement of a personal goal, such as giving up drinking, as a form of action. James said, "To keep out of the gutter is for us here no part of consciousness at all, yet for many of our brethren it is the most legitimately engrossing of ideals."\(^{37}\) Historian George Fredrickson says that James defined action as belief and "internal effort," but that formulation is correct only if one remembers how important it was to James that people strive to realize their visions.\(^{38}\) It is not enough, he said, merely to hold an ideal; one must act on it. "Mere ideals are the cheapest things in life. . . . The more ideals a man has, the more contemptible, on the whole, do you continue to deem him, if the matter ends there for him, and if none of the laboring man's virtues are called into action on his part—no courage shown, no privations undergone, no dirt or scars contracted in the attempt to get them realized."\(^{39}\) In general, a good, worthwhile, or, to use James's
word, "significant" life means striving to fulfill an ideal that will contribute to the public good. His formula seemed to be, "from each according to his ability."

Individuals can add to the welfare of the race in a variety of ways. You may delight its senses or "taste" by some production of luxury or art, comfort it by discovering some moral truth, relieve its pain by concocting a new patent medicine, save its labor by a bit of machinery, or by some application of a natural product. You may open a road, help start some social or business institution, contribute your mite in any way to the mass of the work which each generation subtracts from the task of the next; and you will come into real relations with your brothers—with some of them at least.

The democratic character of James's description of action is plain. These actions have to do with everyday life; they are demanding, but not heroic in the sense that either Arendt or James himself sometimes demanded.

James deconstructed elitism in his essay "What Makes a Life Significant," beginning with the proposition that "morally exceptional individuals . . . worked and endured in obedience to some inner ideal, whilst their comrades were not actuated by anything worthy of that name." The narrowness and elitism of this formulation are then decimated. His definition of ideals expands to include self-challenge, the effort "to enlarge . . . sympathetic insight into fellow-lives," learning to love and forgive others through religion, voluntary labor, voluntary poverty, and "class-loyalty." Although at first appearing blind to the ideals of others, James then made the possibility of blindness an explicit theme, identifying as an important ideal the overcoming of blindness to the struggles, achievements, and inner meaning of others' lives.

The barrenness and ignobleness of the more usual laborer's life consist in the fact that it is moved by no such inner springs. The backache, the long hours, the danger, are patiently endured—for what? To gain a quid of tobacco, a glass of beer, a cup of coffee, a meal, a bed, and to begin again the next day and shirk as much as one can. [This is why soldiers are honored, not laborers. But] the plot now thickens . . . . We have seen the blindness and deadness to each other which are our
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natural inheritance; and in spite of them, we have been led to acknowledge an inner meaning which passeth show, and which may be present in the lives of others where we least descry it.  

Significant action has been redefined as the struggle to fulfill an ideal, to overcome the difficulties put in one's way, and to appreciate the ideals and struggles of others.

III

James not only espoused action but portrayed to his readers a world in which action is meaningful. Individuals can collectively alter the currents of history, at least to some degree, according to their plans and ideals. "What are the causes that make communities change from generation to generation?" he asked in *Will to Believe*, answering that citizens and their leaders make change; history is not determined by God, evolution, technology, or the economy.

The scientific theories of Charles Darwin powerfully influenced American thought after the Civil War and were taken to have a variety of political implications. James indicted the social Darwinism of Spencer and Allen as a philosophical buttress of resignation because it implied, in the authoritative language of science, that individuals cannot deliberately shape history. Most details of the debate between James and these social Darwinists are not worth recounting because that specific version of social Darwinism is no longer current. Today, determinism takes different forms as many people continue to believe that change cannot be made thoughtfully and creatively. Therefore, I describe only enough of the social Darwinist position, as described by one of its critics, to get a flavor of it in order to elucidate James's models of political action.

According to intellectual historian Richard Hofstadter, James endeavored "to redeem spontaneity and indeterminacy from the oppressive causal network of Spencerian social evolution." In several essays, James indicted Spencer and Allen for believing that social change was not created by human beings. "Mr. Spencer . . . and his disciple, Mr. Grant Allen . . . hold that no individual initiative has any effect in determining the course
Allen said that great leaders are produced by their countries, not by accident; the masses of citizens are more important than the great individual; it is the common characteristics of a particular people that are crucial, not the exceptional personalities; history creates important figures while leaders do not create history and barely affect it; leaders are available when needed and are replaceable, i.e., history occurs without the conscious choice of individuals. Finally, Allen and Spencer saw the mind as passive, merely reflecting the environment.

The Spencerian school [believed that historical] changes are irrespective of persons and independent of individual control. They are due to the environment, to the circumstances . . . the increasing experience of outer relations; to everything, in fact, except the Grants and the Bismarcks, the Joneses and the Smiths . . . . [Determinism] professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be.

Even though at the end of nineteenth century the Knights of Labor, the Populists, anarchists, suffragettes, and African-American activists tried to overcome determinism in practice, James refuted it at the level of theory by emphasizing the importance of individual initiatives.

James’s conception of science as applied to politics was different from that of the social Darwinists. Underlying the conflict over science was a dispute over the possibilities of political action. Believing that change resulted from large social forces, the Darwinists sought to develop a social science to map the direction of mass behavior whereas James’s model of science and social change was more experimental: visionaries proffered new paths for society, and with the people’s support, those paths might be successfully walked. Obviously, far more paths were advocated than taken.

James called his outlook “meliorism” in contrast to pessimism and optimism. He described the pessimist as one who believes that the salvation of the world is impossible whereas the optimist thinks it inevitable. Since readers today might not call social change “salvation,” one could substitute such terms as “justice,” “equality,” or “democracy.” Between pessimism and optimism, James posited, stands “meliorism,” which means that sal-
vation is possible but not guaranteed. What is the meliorist model of change?

Take, for example, any one of us in this room with the ideals which he cherishes, and is willing to live and work for. Every such ideal realized will be one moment in the world's salvation. But these particular ideals are not bare abstract possibilities. They are grounded, they are live possibilities, for we are their live champions and pledges, and if the complementary conditions come and add themselves, our ideals will become actual things. . . . [The conditions are something not predetermined but] a chance, a gap that we can spring into, and, finally, our act.

Does our act then create the world's salvation so far as it makes room for itself, so far as it leaps into the gap? Does it create, not the whole world's salvation of course, but just so much of this as itself covers of the world's extent? 

By the last sentence, James implied that change will not be universal, interconnected. He imagined that a critic will respond, “Irrational! . . . How can new being come in local spots and patches which add themselves or stay away at random, independently of the rest?” James replied: “The only real reason I can think of why anything should ever come is that someone wishes it to be here. It is demanded, demanded, it may be, to give relief to no matter how small a fraction of the world’s mass. This is the living reason, and compared with it material causes and logical necessities are spectral things.” Creating change requires that “each several agent does its own ‘level best.’ ” The implication of this model of change is that the world becomes open to possibilities both of greatness and of horror. The world is a “real adventure, with real danger . . . a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done.”

As an alternative to the social Darwinists, who minimized agency in shaping history, James’s two models of change are both based on combining ideals and action. Sometimes James stressed the leadership of an elite that would, with the support of the people, reshape politics, society, and culture according to new ideals. A variant model of change adhered to the boundaries on action set by the Constitution; accepting national institu-
tions, James called on ordinary people to preserve popular government by their active, informed participation in a government whose principles they understand and embrace.

James is at his most elitist in his essay “Great Men and Their Environment,” in which he advanced an alternative interpretation to that of Spencer and Allen of the implications of Darwin’s evolutionary theory for political change. Darwin identified two central factors in the process of evolution: free variation, i.e., the new capacities of a species brought about by mutation, and natural selection, which maintains or destroys the variations. James compared natural selection with the historical factors that affect the success or failure of individual initiatives. Without discounting the importance of historical context for political action, James took free variation to be the more important factor in social change. The mind of the “genius” or “great man” is like Darwin’s spontaneous variation. Such minds do not reproduce existing ideas, customs, and institutions; they develop new visions, values, and laws—not unlike Nietzsche’s supermen.52 Not all geniuses are successful; many are so out of sync with their times and the popular mood that they are ignored. And most people living in stable conditions accept the ideas and institutions under which they live and are not open to revolutionary leadership.53 But other leaders do gain the support of the people, and these are the founders of new parties and nations, religions and institutions, movements and organizations. History evolves, said James, by the popular support of great leaders’ initiatives.

In Will to Believe, James wrote in a Nietzschean vein, saying that existing conditions, unbearably soft and dull, must be overcome by great leaders. In other moods, James’s notion of change is more modest and respectful of what exists. Both strains of thought can be seen clearly in “What Makes a Life Significant.” He there relates a visit to an assembly, something like a summer school for the wealthy intelligentsia, at Chautauqua in upstate New York:

Sobriety and industry, intelligence and goodness, orderliness and ideality, prosperity and cheerfulness, pervade the air. . . . You have the best of company, and yet no effort. You have no zymotic diseases, no poverty, no drunkenness, no crime, no police. . . . You have, in short,
a foretaste of what human society might be, were it all in the light, with no suffering and no dark corners. . . . And yet what was my own astonishment, on emerging into the dark and wicked world again, to catch myself quite unexpectedly and involuntarily saying: “Ouf! what a relief! Now for something primordial and savage, even though it were as bad as an Armenian massacre, to set the balance straight again. This order is too tame, this culture too second-rate, this goodness too uninspiring.”

I quote this passage as an accurate description of a certain Jamesian mood, but his final judgment on Chautauqua is different: “Grant that at Chautauqua there was little moral effort, little sweat or muscular strain in view. Still, deep down in the souls of the participants we may be sure that something of the sort was hid, some inner stress, some vital virtue not found wanting when required.” In this democratic humor, James realized that when we tend to think any group is worth writing off we are probably wrong.

James recognized and criticized his aristocratic moments as “ancestral blindness,” but he did have them. With uncharacteristic harshness, James spoke of “human intelligences of a simple order” that are literal, governed by habit, and take things for granted. Their “faithfulness and honesty” is “the single gift by which they are sometimes able to warm us into admiration. . . . [But this simple intelligence is really more like] a piece of inanimate matter than . . . the steadfastness of a human will capable of alternative choice.” James also referred to “the herd of nullities whose votes count for zero in the march of events,” and he contrasted this “herd” with “examples and leaders of opinion or potentates, and in general those to whose actions, position or genius gives a far-reaching human import” and with a third group, “the rest of us.” James may have harshly criticized the masses, not only because of ancestral class prejudice, but as an overreaction to the social Darwinist dismissal of individual effort and their claim that aggregates of human beings are the sole historical force. Or he could have been influenced by Emerson’s essay “Representative Men,” by Thomas Carlyle’s On Heroes and Hero-Worship, or by Nietzsche himself.

Even while acknowledging the aristocratic cruelty of his words, one might hope to rescue James as a democrat by saying that his views represent
an early position. Both Coon and Cotkin write of James’s radicalization in the 1890s, but in James’s essay “The Social Value of the College-Bred,” written in 1907 just three years before his death, a similar elitist model of change appears, albeit with less vituperation.58

The notion that a people can run itself and its affairs anonymously is now well known to be the silliest of absurdities. Mankind does nothing save through initiatives on the part of inventors, great or small, and imitation by the rest of us—these are the sole factors active in human progress. Individuals of genius show the way, and set the patterns, which common people then adopt and follow. . . . In our democracy, where everything else is so shifting, we alumni and alumnae of the colleges are the only permanent presence that corresponds to the aristocracy in older countries.

James contended that colleges should teach “the sense for human superiority.” Confusingly, James claimed that the purpose of accepting “superiority” is to save democracy from those who would reject it on the grounds that the people inevitably choose inferior leaders and spurn “higher” human qualities. Without good leaders, democracy “may undergo self-poisoning.” This line of thought did not induce James to echo Henry and Brooks Adams in their rejection of democracy; James called democracy “a kind of religion, and we are bound not to admit its failure.”59

In summary, James’s emphasis on great men and his moments of contempt for the many are certainly elitist, but his second model of political action, in which average citizens are active, is consonant with democracy. James seems torn between democratic and elitist sentiments. At his most snobbish he saw geniuses and leaders as the only people who matter in history. Educated leaders and great individuals guide the “ordinary” people, who need only recognize, respect, and follow these qualified leaders. At other times he implied that the average person can make a more active contribution to public life. He indicated that representative government requires vigilance and participation on the part of the people, and he discerned in everyone, no matter what their social position, the capacity for free action and the possession of ideas and positions that must be recognized in making political decisions.
IV

James's democratic side was revealed in an 1897 speech at the unveiling of a statue of Robert Gould Shaw when James urged Americans to learn patriotic self-sacrifice from Shaw: "In such an emergency Americans of all complexions and conditions can go forth like brothers, and meet death cheerfully if need be, in order that this religion of our native land shall not become a failure on the earth." In seeming contradiction to some of his comments in "The Social Value of the College-Bred," James again called democracy America's religion and defined it as self-rule by the citizens. "Our nation had been founded in what we may call our American religion, baptized and reared in the faith that a man requires no master to take care of him, and that common people can work out their salvation well enough together if left free to try." Here a condition of political health is depicted as citizens' attending to politics, choosing their leaders wisely, and acting generously toward one another. Not only leaders but citizens must act. Because people possess an instinct for war, Shaw's extraordinary bravery in battle need not be emulated as much as his "lonely courage (civic courage as we call it in peace-times)." Civic courage enabled Shaw to lead an African-American regiment in the face of calumny by many fellow soldiers and citizens. This form of courage is admirable, but not epic; to put it another way, heroic impulses must be channeled into seemingly modest activities.

The nation blest above all nations is she in whom the civic genius of the people does the saving day by day, by acts without external picturesqueness; by speaking, writing, voting reasonably; by smiting corruption swiftly; by good temper between parties; by the people knowing true men when they see them, and preferring them as leaders to rabid partisans or empty quacks.

It is difficult to know how to assess James's politics here. Does he ask for anything more than loyalty to the state? A generous reading of James's image of popular activity may concede that he did not envision the Paris Commune but called for something closer to radical democracy than our present condition of widespread disillusioned withdrawal from public life.
His vision of civic courage may seem inadequate, but it is not negligible if one thinks of the alternative: popular support for extremists such as George Wallace, Ross Perot, David Duke, and Russian nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky. Not demanding that most people accomplish extraordinary deeds may even be a form of political respect. Although everyone has civic duties to perform, which are necessary for the health of the country and community, we should not hate ourselves if we are not activists. There is heroism, James declared, in just getting on with our lives: fulfilling our obligations while confronting the setbacks, losses, and pain inherent in existence. James's Darwinian model of politics is democratic in that it calls on everyone to participate and recognizes that the few geniuses cannot alter history solely by their own wills and activities. The tension between James's political models might be further illuminated if they are compared to the civil rights and feminist movements, two of the most important radical democratic mass campaigns of recent times.

V

James's theory of leadership seems to be one of his most undemocratic stances, but the matter is more complicated than it at first appears. In comparing his theory of leadership to ideas articulated by the theorists of recent democratic movements, I am not suggesting that James is in a one-to-one relationship with, or a direct antecedent of, these theorists; instead, I suggest that some of the positions they articulate concerning leadership resonate with propositions of James while others go beyond him. For example, James said that one leader is insufficient to initiate change: "Sporadic great men come everywhere. But for a community to get vibrating through and through with intensely active life, many geniuses coming together and in rapid succession are required. This is why great epochs are so rare." This image seems to fit the civil rights movement in which numerous leaders have emerged, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., James Bevel, Andrew Young, Stokely Carmichael, Diane Nash, Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Robert Moses, Ella Baker, Jesse Jackson, and James Farmer. To suggest that such leaders, whom I see as examples of James's "geniuses,"
have played essential roles in the movement is not an inherently elitist proposition.

Even the most egalitarian theorists of change acknowledge a role for authorities within a movement, if only as teachers. Democratic activists Ella Baker, Robert Moses, and Starhawk might accept James's assertion that change is sparked by individuals who possess creative vision and conceive of strategies for achieving their visions, but they would not see, as James sometimes did, a large gulf in talent between the leaders and the many. Civil rights organizer Baker conceded the need for visionaries when she said:

> From a practical standpoint, anyone who looked at the Harlem area knew that the potential for integration per se was basically impossible unless there were some radically innovative things done. And those innovative things would not be acceptable to those who ran the school system, nor to communities, nor even to the people who call themselves supporters of integration.65

In this situation, leadership is necessary to see the possibility of change, to create a plan to achieve it, and to move in an unfamiliar direction. Baker differed from James in seeing the group as the innovators, not individuals. Furthermore, she rejected the tendency within the civil rights movement to identify leaders as the primary agents of change. "I have always thought," she said, "what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people."66 Feminist theorist Starhawk is closer to James when she acknowledges the need for leadership in asserting: "A group . . . needs a brain. It needs some people who are willing to look ahead, anticipate problems, suggest new directions, try out new solutions, keep track of information and decisions, who lead in the sense of stepping out in front and going first. Such leadership is a service to the group."67 The danger, she says, comes from hidden leaders, unaccountable to the others who use power for self-interest.

To claim that there are no leaders, as radical democrats have at times claimed, does not eliminate them or their legitimate function. The leader is in essence a teacher, and James had faith that leaders will bring out the
creative potential of average citizens. He proclaimed, "In picking out from history our heroes, and communing with their kindred spirits . . . each one of us may best fortify and inspire what creative energy may be in his own soul." He thought that heroes, geniuses, and saints inspire creativity on the part of the many rather than squelch it. To the same end, civil rights organizer Robert Moses wanted to identify and develop local leadership and create mass participation. Although he "recognized how easily the creative potential of people can be crushed by leaders and institutions," Moses did not dismiss their necessity. He insisted that once a movement is started, if people are allowed to develop they will become leaders. Like Moses, James feared the stultifying effect of institutions on the citizenry, and both James and Moses believed that leaders would develop spontaneously. James called the process "free variation" while Moses said: "Leadership is there in the people. . . . You don't have to worry about that. You don't have to worry about where your leaders are, how are we going to get some leaders. The leadership is there. If you go out and work with your people, then the leadership will emerge. . . . We don't know who they are now; we don't need to know. But the leadership will emerge from the movement that emerges." Inspiration is precisely the effect that James, Baker, Starhawk, and Moses want leaders to have, although the contemporary activists see more clearly than did James the danger that leaders might substitute their initiatives for those of the people and thereby foster either passivity or blind obedience.

VI

The tension between James's elitist and democratic tendencies has gone largely unremarked by commentators, but he has frequently been called an "individualist," a word that covers a multitude of sins, including political impotence, lack of interest in politics, naive idealism, relativism, and an underestimation of the importance of institutions. According to political theorist Richard Flathman, James, despite his intentions, "promoted an individuality so radical that it threatened solipsism and even denial of the desirability of mutual intelligibility." Cornel West describes James as "a libertarian, with circumscribed democratic sentiments, an international
outlook, and deep moral sensitivity. This perspective is one of political impotence, yet it buttresses moral integrity and promotes the exercise of individual conscience.\textsuperscript{74}

"Unlike Dewey, his successor in the pragmatic tradition," wrote historian Richard Hofstadter, "James was guilty of only the remotest interest in systematic or collective social reform. One expression of his fundamental individualism is the fact that ... he had no sustained interest in social theory as such. He always dealt with philosophical problems in individual terms."\textsuperscript{75} Santayana criticized his former teacher for believing that people could shape events according to their ideals.\textsuperscript{76} According to Santayana, James

held a false moralistic view of history, attributing events to the conscious motives and free will of individuals; whereas individuals, especially in governments, are creatures of circumstance and slaves to vested interests. These interests may be more or less noble, romantic, or sordid, but they inevitably entangle and subjugate men of action.\textsuperscript{77}

Political scientist Gary Jacobsohn writes that pragmatism promotes individualism by encouraging each person to make up his or her own mind about the truth, and George Fredrickson argues that James's anti-institutionalism opposed the spirit of his time which called for larger, more active government.\textsuperscript{78} Even James called himself an individualist: "We 'intellectuals' in America must all work to keep our precious birthright of individualism, and freedom from these institutions. Every great institution is perforce a means of corruption—whatever good it may also do. Only in the free personal relation is full ideality to be found."\textsuperscript{79} Elsewhere he said, "The practical consequence of [pluralism] is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality."\textsuperscript{80}

This formulation indicates that James linked democracy with individualism, and I would argue that James's conception of individualism is compatible with democracy but that he used the term "individualism" in a way that might be misleading to political theorists. James's conception of individualism is not necessarily corrosive of politics or community, and his understanding of that term was quite different from that of Tocqueville in Democracy in America, in which Tocqueville said: "Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from
the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself." \(^{81}\) James's individuals are not at all isolated: they have powerful obligations to their society, including that of becoming active and alert citizens. Our common duty is to improve the world. \(^{82}\) James insisted in "The Moral Equivalent of War," "All the qualities of a man acquire dignity when he knows that the service of the collectivity that owns him needs them." \(^{83}\) At the age of twenty-six, James pronounced:

> Our predecessors, even apart from the physical link of generation, have made us what we are. Every thought you now have and every act and intention owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers. Everything we know and are is through men... [A] sympathy with men as such, and a desire to contribute to the weal of a species, which... contains All that we acknowledge as good, may very well form an external interest sufficient to keep one's moral pot boiling in a very lively manner to a good old age. \(^{84}\)

James saw citizens as being connected by ties of friendship, tradition, and shared ideals, and judging by his comments on the philosophy of Thomas Davidson, individualism meant to James something like independence, originality, and eccentricity. \(^{85}\)

The question is not, Was James an individualist? but, rather, What did he mean by individualism and did it undermine his democratic commitments? He did not uphold private rights against the public good, although he thought the individual should be protected from a large, invasive state. If he believed that the individual is in some sense "sacred," he also assumed that each person has ties and obligations to others. This ambiguity is reflected, but not noted, in commentaries on James, even though commentators who label him an individualist also note strong communitarian elements in his thinking. "Overall he made good his claim that one who upholds an ethic of democratic individualism is obligated to take part in social or political change," stated Gerald Myers. Hofstadter conceded that James "in his later years... viewed the rise of collectivism with satisfaction and found a means of reconciling it with his characteristic emphasis on individual activity." McDermott explained that "for James, it is precisely
the ability of man to enter into the relational fabric of the world, in a participative and liberating way, which enables him to become human."\textsuperscript{86}

For James, individualism is compatible with socialism. By socialism, James surely did not mean state-owned property or means of production but something like democracy, justice, community, and equality. Although Davidson rejected the label "socialist," "no one felt more deeply than he the evils of rapacious individual competition. . . . Spontaneously and flexibly organized social settlements or communities, with individual leaders as their centers seem to have been his ideal, each with its own religious or ethical elements of discipline."\textsuperscript{87} In "The Moral Equivalent of War," James embraced a vaguely defined socialism: "I will now confess my own utopia. I devoutly believe in the ultimate reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of a socialistic equilibrium."\textsuperscript{88}

James's democratic socialist individualism seems to be another instance in which he confounds the categories employed to understand him. What type of individualist calls for socialism? How could he reconcile these seemingly opposite values? The answer might lie in what James intended by the terms. Although James used the word "individualism," he consistently separated individualism from self-interest. James's individualism was quite close to communitarian anarchism and the doctrine that each individual should make a unique contribution to the common good, and that each should be allowed to define that contribution in his or her own way. James was an individualist who did not put economic freedom or personal rights ahead of the common good. He did not see public obligations or communal hegemony as dangerous to individuals, but, in the spirit of Tocqueville's fear of "democratic despotism," James dreaded a powerful state that leaves no place for eccentricity or human initiatives on behalf of the community. His view of the potential contribution of each individual to the common good may be utopian, but his utopia is democratic.\textsuperscript{89}

I have shown that James advanced two models of action: the first challenges people to make that contribution to the public good of which they were capable; the second is revolutionary and creates a new body politic, described as founding, by Machiavelli in The Prince. Examples of such founders include Moses, George Washington, and Lenin. What is the relationship between the two models of action? James did not make it clear. The heroic is extraordinary, and he hoped that citizens will become more pub-
lic spirited in everyday life before institutions are radically transformed. He explicitly asserted in “The Moral Equivalent of War” that the impulse to do great deeds for the common good is healthy but needs to be transmuted from war to public service. He was not afraid of direct action, such as strikes, but opposed violence and the denigration of one’s opponents.

James believed that American institutions would be strengthened if the citizenry embraced as civic duties attending carefully to politics, debating issues publicly, and choosing their leaders carefully. He did not seem to realize, however, that the American institutions and liberal political values he embraced fostered the centralization, selfishness, and passivity that he deplored. He did not appear to grasp, as Rousseau did in *The Social Contract*, that representation can be taken as a substitute for direct action. James’s celebration of action may have been democratic, but his liberalism undermined that contribution. There may be a component of privatism in James’s individualism that undermined the realization of his desire for people to make a contribution to the public good and to adopt the obligations to others required by political participation. Nevertheless, James stretched the confines of liberalism; the liberal elements of his thought strive with the radical democratic elements. And even James’s liberalism is worthy of respect. One comes away from reading James reflecting that if his advice to the American body politic were heeded, citizens would be more active than they are today and less inclined to define a full human life as one devoted to the accumulation of luxuries by working and trading for profit while enjoying the pleasures of private life.