

Searching for Democracy: The Political and Intellectual Origins of Bernard Manin's *Principles of Representative Government*¹

Arthur Ghins

Université Libre de Bruxelles

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Where is democracy headed? As concerns about its future have intensified, political theorists and historians of political thought have explored the transformations of democratic politics and the reforms they may require. In this context, Bernard Manin's *Principles of Representative Government* has become a reference point. First published in French in 1995 and translated into English in 1997, the book is now regarded as a foundational text for understanding the history and theory of modern democracy.² Following Manin's death on November 1, 2024, it was hailed as a classic.³

Two core contributions explain the enduring relevance of *Principles of Representative Government*. The first is its contrast between elections and sortition—the selection of public officials by lottery. According to Manin, representative government emerged in France, Britain, and the United States in

¹ I wish to thank Alain Bergounioux for sharing his memories of Bernard Manin with me and for his enthusiasm for this project. I am also grateful to the librarians at the Bibliothèque de Sciences Po and the Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center at the Institute for Advanced Study for their support.

² Manin's (1951-2024) academic career at high-profile institutions in both France and the United States no doubt contributed to the book's circulation and aura. Manin became professor in political science at Sciences Po Paris in 1996 and *directeur d'études* at the EHESS in 2005. Meanwhile, he had been appointed at the University of Chicago in 1990, and joined New York University in 1996, where he taught for several decades. He received honorary doctorates from the universities of Lausanne, Liège, and Urbino, as well as the CNRS Silver Medal in 2015.

³ See, amongst others, Alain Bergounioux, Élie Cohen, Gérard Grunberg, and Jean-Louis Missika, "Bernard Manin, notre ami." *Telos*, November 9, 2024. <https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/bernard-manin-notre-ami.html> and Charles Girard and Philippe Urfalino, "Bernard Manin, figure majeure de la théorie politique," *Jus Politicum Blog*, November 27, 2024. <https://blog.juspoliticum.com/2024/11/27/bernard-manin-figure-majeure-de-la-theorie-politique-par-charles-girard-philippe-urfalino>. The book's lasting influence is further reflected in the workshop *Bernard Manin's Principles of Representative Government: Thirty Years Later*, held at Leiden University on February 21–22, 2026, whose papers will appear in a special issue of *Representation*. Several of Manin's articles, along with previously unpublished manuscripts, have also been issued posthumously by the French publisher Hermann. These include *Montesquieu* (2024), *La délibération politique* (2025), « *Un voile sur la liberté*. » *La Révolution française, du libéralisme à la Terreur* (2025), and *La règle et la balance. Essais sur le libéralisme* (2025). A bibliography of Manin's principal publications appears at the end of the latter volume.

the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as an alternative to the direct democracies of the ancient city-states, where sortition played a central role. Amid growing dissatisfaction with elected politicians, democratic theorists have recently drawn on this contrast to defend “lottocracy,” in which randomly selected citizens’ assemblies replace elected representatives.⁴ The second is Manin’s account of the historical transformations of representative government. He identified four enduring principles—regular elections, the relative independence of rulers, freedom of public opinion, and discussion—and argued that they took different forms as representative government evolved from parliamentarism to party democracy and, from the 1970s onward, to *la démocratie du public*. Manin’s striking concept of “audience democracy,” a regime in which politicians communicate directly with citizens through new media while bypassing party organizations, has become central to accounts of populism and is now used to characterize the current stage of Western democracy.⁵

While the impact of *Principles of Representative Government* is well recognized, its political and intellectual background remains underexplored. This article reconstructs those origins by tracing the development of Manin’s political thought from the late 1970s to the publication of his magnum opus. It highlights how the concept of audience democracy emerged from late-1980s French debates on populism, representation, and liberalism, and examines when and why Manin introduced the contrast between elections and sortition. Manin articulated the latter relatively late, during his time at Chicago

⁴ Hélène Landemore, *Open Democracy. Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, 2020), ix ; Alex Guerrero, “A Lottocratic Political System Would Empower Ordinary People,” *Jacobin*, October 12, 2025. Guerrero is the author of *Lottocracy. Democracy Without Elections* (Oxford, 2024). See also David van Reybrouck’s influential *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*, trans. Liz Waters (London, 2016), in which the author refers to Manin’s *Principles* as “the most important book I read for this essay” (p. 172). Manin’s central role in the historiography and political theory of sortition is emphasized in Yves Sintomer, *The Government of Chance. Sortition and Democracy from Athens to the Present* (Oxford, 2023).

⁵ Benjamin Ardit, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (Edinburgh, 2007), 67–74; Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia, 2016), 43–44; Nadia Urbinati, *Me, the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), 24–26, 172–174. Urbinati acknowledges Manin’s *Principles* as “invaluable theoretical help” in “How to Write About Populism,” *History of European Ideas* 48/8 (2022), 1107. A Google Ngram of “audience democracy” in works published in English between 1990 and 2022 shows a steady rise in its usage since the mid-1990s (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>, accessed February 25, 2026). While it cannot be certain that Manin coined the term, *Principles of Representative Government* clearly helped popularize it. According to Cambridge University Press’s metrics, consulted on March 10, 2026, the English translation has recorded 26,619 PDF views and 63,490 Book Summary page views between its online publication in September 2016 and November 2025.

in the early 1990s. Prior to that, he had been working on material that would later inform his theorization of the principles of representative government and their historical transformations, elements of which were sharpened through his engagement with John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas.

Principles of Representative Government is typically interpreted either as an objective analysis or as a radical democratic critique of the “aristocratic” dimension of representation.⁶ This article shows that it is neither. It reveals that his magnum opus was the product of a more than two-decade-long defense of representative government against alternative conceptions of democracy.

Understanding why Manin mounted this defense requires situating his work within the intellectual politics of late twentieth-century France. The book is a belated masterpiece of the French antitotalitarian moment that peaked in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ Some twenty years ago, Samuel Moyn and Andrew Jainchill explored in this journal how Pierre Rosanvallon’s work on democracy emerged from a sustained dialogue with the historian of the French Revolution François Furet and the political theorist Claude Lefort.⁸ I show that Manin drew on the same sources, but with different results, and I emphasize his political involvement, alongside Rosanvallon, in the French Second Left, a movement united by its identification of communism with totalitarianism.⁹ In doing so, the article provides both a genealogy of an influential work in contemporary political thought and a history of an important group of French left-wing intellectuals from the 1970s to the early 1990s.

Locating Manin in the French antitotalitarian milieu helps explain his shift from defending social democracy in the late 1970s to embracing economic and political liberalism in the 1980s. That

⁶ For invocations of Manin’s book, contrary to his own intentions, in support of arguments for sortition, see Samuel Hayat, “La carrière militante de la référence à Bernard Manin dans les mouvements français pour le tirage au sort,” *Participations*, hors-série (2019), 437–451.

⁷ See, for starters, Stephen Sawyer and Iain Stewart, eds. *In Search of the Liberal Moment: Democracy, Anti-totalitarianism and Intellectual Politics in France since 1950* (New York, 2016).

⁸ Andrew Jainchill and Samuel Moyn, “French Democracy Between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography,” *The Journal of Modern History* 76 (2004), 107–154.

⁹ On that movement, see Michael S. Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York, 2004).

framework shaped his approach to democracy, especially the four principles of representative government highlighted in *Principles* and his theorization of popular power. Furet's argument that the Jacobins' advocacy of direct democracy led to the Terror reinforced Manin's view that *popular sovereignty* was a dangerous concept and strengthened his commitment to representation. Meanwhile, by the early 1980s, Manin, like Lefort, had come to see *public opinion* as a more promising category for understanding popular agency, insofar as it mediated the relationship between citizens and representatives. This helps explain why, in the book, popular sovereignty is marginal, whereas freedom of public opinion is presented as a core principle of representative government.

In the conclusion, I argue that Manin's suspicion of popular sovereignty, and his inversely proportional enthusiasm for public opinion, place him firmly within a French liberal tradition stretching back to Benjamin Constant, who was among the first to theorize representative government as rule by public opinion following the French Revolution. I also call attention to the obscuring effects that Manin's approach has had on our understanding of the history and theory of modern democracy.

Representative Democracy versus Direct Democracy

In 1977, François Furet gathered at the EHESS in Paris a group of researchers interested in challenging communist doxa by exploring the totalitarian potential of democracy. Members of Furet's seminar, including Marcel Gauchet, Lefort, and Rosanvallon, traced the ideological origins of the Terror to the Jacobins' conception of popular sovereignty.¹⁰ But they were equally fascinated by the concept of public opinion, whose emergence they situated in the decades preceding the French Revolution.¹¹ Both concepts were central to Furet's *Penser la Révolution française*, published in 1978.

¹⁰ Kevin Duong, "Does Democracy End in Terror? Transformations of Antitotalitarianism in Postwar France," *Modern Intellectual History* 14/2 (2017), 537-563.

¹¹ Jeremy Popkin, "The Concept of Public Opinion in the Historiography of the French Revolution," *Storia della storiografia* 20 (1991), 77-92; Harold Mah, "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians," *Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000), 169-179.

Furet was indebted to Lefort's argument about the advent of democracy, which, he argued, introduced a radical change in the social imaginary.¹² Lefort's late 1970s theory of totalitarianism, which infused Furet's masterpiece, is now well known. In modern monarchic states, power was incorporated in the person of the prince. The prince represented society as an organic whole, notwithstanding the multiple divisions within the actual social structure. In democracies, this external pole of identity vanishes, and the locus of power becomes an empty place. In institutional terms, periodical elections and changing majorities indicate that power does not belong to anyone. For Lefort, democracy, marked by "social division," was vulnerable to totalitarianism, tormented as it was by the desire to reactivate the foregone myth of Unity. It did so, as witnessed in the USSR, by imposing upon its de facto diverse social life a unified image, incarnated in a single party, which also obliterated the distance that ought to exist between society and the state.¹³ In the early 1970s, neither popular sovereignty nor public opinion was at the center of Lefort's argument. One of Furet's innovations was to use both notions to demonstrate how the French Revolution signaled the simultaneous birth of democracy and its descent into totalitarianism. Another of his innovation was to introduce a contrast between two types of democracy, each linked to different conceptions of public opinion and popular sovereignty. According to Furet, in 1789, revolutionaries had opted for *representative democracy*. But this moderate course was soon derailed by the Jacobins' practice of *direct democracy* in the clubs.

Direct democracy had two main features. First, it did not admit representation. Inspired by Rousseau's conception of sovereignty, clubs operated "without any delegation of authority or power, constantly subject to the direct control of the citizens." They established, Furet insisted, "a model of pure democracy, not representative democracy: it is the will of the collective that, at every moment, makes the law."¹⁴ Second, the clubs did not admit deliberation amidst contradictory interests. For the

¹² Samuel Moyn, "On the Intellectual Origins of François Furet's Masterpiece," *The Tocqueville Review* 29/2 (2008), 59-78.

¹³ Claude Lefort, *Un homme en trop. Réflexions sur "L'Archipel du Goulag"* (Paris, 1976), 190-204.

¹⁴ François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978), 53, 275; 277.

Jacobins, “public opinion” should be shaped from the top: leaders imposed “ideology” through “a few simple figures of speech, intended to unify and mobilize minds.”¹⁵ Ideological unanimity was facilitated by the invocation of enemies, such as aristocrats accused of plotting against the sovereign people.¹⁶ In a direct democracy, popular sovereignty was practiced directly, and opinion formation amounted to ideology-inculcation—an “alchemy,” Furet wrote, that “excludes both the legitimacy of disagreement and that of representation.”¹⁷

In Furet’s argument, direct democracy precipitated the descent into the Terror. Following Lefort, he argued that the Revolution effected a symbolic transfer of power from the king to the people. In a context marked by a “vacancy of power,” the Jacobins clubs claimed that they were the sovereign people in action.¹⁸ By the summer of 1793, they had become masters of the actual seat of power—the National Convention. The Convention, in turn, was portrayed as the incarnation of the sovereign people, which thus had a mandate to establish the reign of Terror. Popular sovereignty was thus the key concept through which a mythical unity could be reactivated, the heterogeneity of society ignored, and the distance between the people and the state erased.¹⁹

The alternative to this direct democracy-Terror sequence, Furet added, could have been “representative democracy,” where the exercise of sovereignty is limited to elections, and public opinion is shaped by debate among competing interests. In this model, “popular sovereignty is delegated, according to rules set by the constitution, and at periodic intervals; it is mediated by independent men, which creates the conditions for genuine debate.”²⁰ Representation was key, as was a free, reflexive public opinion, though Furet believed that even with competing parties and freedom

¹⁵ Ibid., 272; 278.

¹⁶ Ibid., 90-94.

¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

¹⁹ Ibid., 67-70; 88-89; 271-272.

²⁰ Ibid., 275.

of expression, it was still shaped by elites: “Even when these powers are those of a representative regime, thus elected through public competition, with various choices offered to citizens, it remains the case that the prior organization of the competition is in the hands of political specialists, who make a career out of manipulating ‘opinion.’”²¹

Lefort and Furet’s reflections influenced the early work of Manin, who was among the small group of close associates that, from 1977 to 1985, met monthly at Furet’s EHESS seminar.²² Manin’s first two academic articles appeared two years after he joined the seminar, in *Libre*, a journal launched in 1977, with Lefort on the editorial committee, to develop a twofold reflection on totalitarianism and democracy.²³ The article introducing the first issue, authored by Lefort, set the tone. It criticized Marxism for scorning democracy as a mere ideological product and for constructing a pseudo-scientific system centered on modes of production—what Lefort interpreted as a proto-totalitarian attempt to foreclose the indeterminacy of the social constitutive of democracy.²⁴

Manin’s first contribution to *Libre*, published in 1979 and co-authored with Alain Bergounioux—another participant in Furet’s seminar, to whom I return shortly—was, symptomatically, an enthusiastic review of Furet’s *Penser la Révolution française*. His second contribution that year, this time single-authored, bore the programmatic title: “Saint-Just, la logique de la Terreur.” It was a reworked version of a *diplôme d’études approfondies* (DEA) on Saint-Just that Manin had written in 1973-74 for his master’s degree in political science at the Sorbonne, under the supervision of the Marxist historian of the Revolution and Communist party member Albert Soboul. The version

²¹ Ibid., 277. This vision of representative democracy as a regime in which elites compete to shape public opinion echoes the conception of democracy that Raymond Aron was defending in the 1960s. See Arthur Ghins, *The People’s Two Powers: Public Opinion and Popular Sovereignty from Rousseau to Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge, 2026), 253. Aron acted as Lefort’s doctoral supervisor between 1952 and 1976. On Aron’s influence on the Liberal Moment of the 1970s and 1980s, see Émile Chabal, *A Divided Republic: Nation, State and Citizenship in Contemporary France* (Cambridge, 2015), 135-172.

²² Pierre Rosanvallon, “Le politique,” in *Une école pour les sciences sociales. De la Ve section à l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, eds. Jacques Revel and Nathan Watchel (Paris, 1996), 302.

²³ Frank Berthot, “*Textures et Libre* (1971-1980). Une tentative de renouvellement de la philosophie politique en France,” in François Hourmant and Jean Baudouin, eds., *Les revues et la dynamique des ruptures* (Rennes, 2007), 105-129.

²⁴ Claude Lefort, “Maintenant,” *Libre* 1 (1977), 3-28.

published in *Libre* repeatedly referenced the book Furet co-authored with Denis Richet, *La Révolution française* (1965–66). When Manin joined Furet’s seminar, he was thus already familiar with the historiography of the French Revolution and had embraced Furet’s thesis of the *dérapiage révolutionnaire*. According to Bergounioux, Soboul was “horrificed” by Manin’s DEA.²⁵

The two articles for *Libre* reveal the extent to which Manin’s early reflections on democracy and “representative government” (the title of an entire section of the Saint-Just piece) grew out of an early exploration of the fate of democracy during the Revolution. They also show that these reflections emerged from a French antitotalitarian matrix and involved, from the outset, a clear normative choice in favor of a deliberative form of representative democracy and against direct democracy.

Manin’s reverential review of *Penser la Révolution française* closely followed Furet’s argument that the eruption of popular sovereignty culminated in the Terror. Drawing on Lefort’s categories, he praised Furet’s analysis of the Revolution’s “delirium about power”: “Why did the French Revolution seek to embody society in a unified image and, ultimately, in a single power?”²⁶ The answer, he argued, lay in Jacobinism. In the name of popular sovereignty, the Jacobins denied the plurality of interests constitutive of the social and erased the distinction between state and society, claiming to embody the people in their unity.²⁷ Following Furet, Manin emphasized that this project depended on the manufacture of public opinion: “This confusion between society and the State...makes it necessary to establish transparency between the People and Power. This identification can only be achieved on the level of opinion: the People are in agreement with their rulers; they think like them and vice versa.”²⁸

²⁵ Interview with Alain Bergounioux, March 5, 2026.

²⁶ Bernard Manin and Alain Bergounioux, “La Révolution en question (à propos d’un livre de François Furet),” *Libre* 5 (1979), 195; 204. According to Bergounioux, the piece was Manin’s initiative, and the “main ideas” were Manin’s. By that time, Bergounioux and Manin had become friends (see below). It was Manin who encouraged Bergounioux to attend Furet’s seminar and asked him to write the article with him.

²⁷ “La Révolution en question,” 196–199.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 200–201.

Furet's interpretation also led Manin to distinguish between two forms of democracy: "deliberative democracy" and "demonstrative democracy." The Terror marked the victory of the latter. At the beginning of the Revolution, democracy had appeared as "the deliberative political regime par excellence," preferring the "uncertain dialogue of deliberating men" to the certainty of those who claimed to know. Under Jacobinism, however, it became a regime of self-assured leaders claiming to act in the name of an abstract general will. Deliberation gave way to political demonstration, whether in the Jacobin clubs or the Assembly.²⁹

While Manin's review of Furet distinguished between deliberative and demonstrative democracy, his essay on Saint-Just emphasized representative government as the alternative to Jacobin direct democracy.³⁰ Analyzing Saint-Just's speeches from 1793-94, Manin sought to uncover the "fundamental alchemy that transforms the demand for direct and terrorist democracy into support for dictatorial parliamentarism."³¹ Following the August 1792 insurrection, the sans-culottes demanded an "immediate government, without mediations," seeking permanent popular control over representatives through recall. By the summer of 1793, Jacobin leaders had to reconcile these aspirations with their authority over the Convention. The solution was to portray sovereignty as residing simultaneously in the people and in the Convention, thereby collapsing the distinction between representatives and represented. "This," Manin reflected, "is all the more remarkable given that the very notion of representation implies an essential separation: the people govern only through

²⁹ Ibid., 202.

³⁰ It is noteworthy that Miguel Abensour, who sat on the editorial committee of *Libre* and would go on to develop the notion of *démocratie insurgeante*, disapproved of the publication of Manin's piece on Saint-Just in the journal "because it was tinged with 'Furetism.'" On this point, and on Abensour's different reading of Saint-Just, see Patrice Vermeren, "Saint-Just contre Saint-Just ? Miguel Abensour, la Révolution comme énigme et le paradoxe de son héros," in *Désir d'utopie. Politique et émancipation avec Miguel Abensour*, ed. Manuel Cervera-Marzal and Nicolas Poirier (Paris, 2018), 35–58.

³¹ Bernard Manin, "Saint-Just, la logique de la Terreur," *Libre* 6 (1979), 226. A slightly revised version of the article became the final chapter of a later manuscript by Manin on the French Revolution, which must have overlapped with his work for Furet's *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution*, prepared for the bicentenary of the Revolution. He apparently stopped working on it in the early 1990s. The book is now available as « *Un voile sur la liberté. » La Révolution française, du libéralisme à la Terreur* (2025). Although Manin disagreed with some of Gauchet's analyses of Rousseau and the Revolution in it, he remained faithful to—and again credited—Furet's thesis of the *dérupage révolutionnaire* from liberalism to Terror.

their representatives; to represent someone is necessarily to be distinct from him. Representative government is, by definition, the opposite of direct government. Therefore, constantly asserting the identity of the people and the Convention serves both to politically legitimize the authority of the assembly...and to take a clear stance on one of the central problems in all political theory.”³²

Echoing Furet and Lefort, Manin argued once again that this operation depended on the manipulation of public opinion that allowed the Jacobins to project the image of a unified sovereign people and erase “social heterogeneity.”³³ Alongside the suppression of unruly popular societies, the Convention transformed the Jacobin mother society into the “sole center of opinion,” reducing civil society to a platform for the dissemination of a “single party” ideology.³⁴ The logic of Terror followed. Leaders could endlessly invoke “the people” against its “enemies,” while the boundary between the two remained fluid, enabling arbitrary purges. Manin compared this dynamic to Lenin’s everchanging distinction between working and property-owning peasants.³⁵ Direct democracy thus culminated in Terror; the alternative was representative government—a model that Furet had only sketched, but which Manin would soon develop in greater detail.

Settling Scores with Marxism, Embracing Social Democracy

As he was engaging with Furet and Lefort, Manin was also involved in the late 1970s, along with Rosanvallon, in the intellectual “reconstruction” of the Left, at a time when the question of the faltering alliance between the *Parti socialiste* (PS) and the *Parti communiste français* (PCF), originally sealed in a *Programme Commun* (1973), was a key point of debate.³⁶ It was in that context that Manin forged a

³² “Saint-Just, la logique de la Terreur,” 172.

³³ Ibid., 203.

³⁴ Ibid., 195-197.

³⁵ Ibid., 219-220.

³⁶ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Notre histoire intellectuelle et politique (1968-2018)* (Paris, 2018), 152.

close partnership with Alain Bergounioux. They met at the École Normale supérieure of the Rue d’Ulm, where their studies overlapped (Manin studied philosophy there from 1970 to 1973). In 1973, Bergounioux passed the *agrégation* in history, and Manin the *agrégation* in philosophy. Bergounioux founded the ENS’s first socialist section in the Autumn of 1971, which Manin, then a left-wing Catholic, joined three months later. Both were inspired by the PS’s Épinay Congress held in June 1971, where François Mitterrand became First Secretary of the newly unified socialist party, and by a search for an alternative to the pragmatic centrism and economic modernization program associated with Georges Pompidou’s presidency (1969–1974).³⁷

As members of the ENS socialist section, Manin and Bergounioux became active in CERES—the *Centre d’études, de recherches et d’éducation socialiste*—whose national leadership controlled the PS’s Paris federation.³⁸ At that time, CERES was a powerful left-wing faction within the PS. Founded in 1966 by Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Didier Motchane, it advocated a synthesis of socialism and “revivified Marxism,” emphasizing economic planning and *autogestion*, understood as workers’ control over production through workplace deliberation.³⁹ From 1974 onward, CERES competed within the PS with Michel Rocard’s “Second Left,” which favored a market economy tempered by *autogestion* and negotiation among employers, unions, and associations. The conflict intensified at the 1977 Nantes Congress, where Rocard contrasted a Jacobin-Marxist tradition of class struggle and state-led transformation with a social-democratic tradition that accepted the market while pursuing redistribution through state intervention.⁴⁰ CERES intellectuals responded by denouncing Rocard’s “social democracy” as a reformist accommodation with bourgeois democracy and the dominant

³⁷ Interview with Bergounioux.

³⁸ For texts written by young CERES members, see Jean-François Claudon and Julien Guérin, *Cheveux longs et poings levés : Les jeunes du CERES de 1971 à 1981* (Paris, 2012).

³⁹ Michel Charzat, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Ghislaine Toutain, *Le CERES, un combat pour le socialisme* (Paris, 1977), 15. See also the earlier book co-authored by Didier Motchane, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, and Alain Gomez, published under the pseudonym Jacques Mandrin, *Socialisme ou social-médiocratie* (Paris, 1969) as well as Motchane and Chevènement’s *Clefs pour le socialisme* (Paris, 1973).

⁴⁰ Michel Rocard, “Les deux cultures politiques,” in *Parler vrai. Textes politiques* (Paris, 1979), 76-84.

classes.⁴¹ From February 1977 to November 1978, Manin and Bergounioux sat on the editorial board of CERES's journal *Repères*, writing several articles and editorial notes, as well as a CERES programmatic statement emphasizing the need for a "break with capitalism" and for *autogestion*.⁴²

Manin and Bergounioux's first book, *La social-démocratie ou le compromis* (1979), marked a different intervention. Having taught philosophy at a lycée in Charleville-Mézières in northern France from 1975 to 1977, Manin was then teaching in a preparatory class for the ENS in Reims (1977–1982). In Bergounioux's recollection, the book had been commissioned by Motchane, editor-in-chief of *Repères*, for publication with the left-wing Catholic press CERF.⁴³ "The aim was to deliver a severe critique of social democracy, at a moment when tensions within the Socialist Party were rising sharply."⁴⁴ Starting from this initial idea, Bergounioux and Manin set to work, revisiting the major debates of socialism and analyzing in detail the policies pursued by social-democratic governments since 1945. As they made progress, however, what was originally intended as a *critique* of social democracy became a *defense* of it and, between the lines, a charge against CERES. By Bergounioux's account, the book turned into an occasion to "settle our scores with Marxism."⁴⁵ That change of orientation was encouraged by their concomitant engagement with Furet's and Lefort's work (the articles in *Libre* also came out in 1979). Predictably, "the completed manuscript was rejected by the series editor... We submitted it to the Presses Universitaires de France, who published it."⁴⁶

⁴¹ Charzat, Chevènement, and Toutain, *Le CERES*, 197 ; 247.

⁴² Their contributions to the journal included Bergounioux's "Léninisme et transition au socialisme" (*Repères*, no. 48 [December 1977], 6–14); a co-authored article by Manin and Bergounioux titled "P.C.F.: continuité et changement dans l'impasse" (*Repères*, no. 52 [April 1978], 30–39); and the collectively signed programmatic note "Combattre aujourd'hui pour vaincre demain" (*Repères*, no. 58 [November 1978], 6–20).

⁴³ Alain Bergounioux, "Comment je suis devenu rocardien," *MichelRocard.org*, December 2021. <https://michelrocard.org/parcours-rocardiens/alain-bergounioux>. Motchane's proposition was made to Bergounioux and Manin through the left-wing Catholic Pierre-Luc Séguillon, series editor at Éditions du Cerf and also a member, under a pseudonym, of the editorial committee of CERES' *Repères*. On Motchane's political thought and itinerary, see the special issue "Le grand Motchane" (1931-2017), intellectuel et socialiste," *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques* 59/1 (2024).

⁴⁴ Bergounioux, "Comment je suis devenu rocardien."

⁴⁵ Interview with Bergounioux.

⁴⁶ Bergounioux, "Comment je suis devenu rocardien."

La social-démocratie ou le compromis revisited the history of European socialism to identify a divide between social democrats and radical socialists, based on how they envisioned democracy and compromise. In the early nineteenth century, Manin and Bergounioux's argument went, socialist thinkers were overwhelmingly hostile to representative democracy. They criticized it for failing to guarantee real power to the people and for establishing instead the rule of the bourgeoisie. "The reference to direct democracy has remained the norm for socialism," they lamented.⁴⁷ This created a problem, because in practice, socialist movements were confronted with representative institutions. With the acceptance of universal suffrage throughout the nineteenth century, socialists across Europe entered the electoral competition. They understood that accepting the logic of representation, changing majorities, and compromises between parties could benefit the interests of the working class. This was the birth of social democracy—a "political form" that "essentially results from the practical confrontation between the workers' movement and representative democracy."⁴⁸ Following the 1917 Russian Revolution, however, social democracy clashed with Bolshevism, particularly Lenin, a theorist of "direct democracy" through constant recalls—a democracy from which enemies of the people were excluded. Reprising Manin's earlier comparison between Lenin and Saint-Just, Manin and Bergounioux identified a common obsession with the people's unity and a refusal to admit a distance between rulers and citizens—a distance that, in practice, was bridged by all-powerful leaders, thus paving the way to "totalitarianism."⁴⁹

Furet had sought to trace the ailments of French political culture to the Revolution's totalitarian impulse. Manin and Bergounioux found additional evidence for this diagnosis in the history of French socialism. In their view, unlike its German or British counterparts, the French socialist

⁴⁷ Bernard Manin and Alain Bergounioux, *La social-démocratie ou le compromis* (Paris, 1979), 19. The book was translated into Italian as *La sozial-democrazia o il compromesso*, with a preface by Norberto Bobbio (Rome, 1981).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15; 194.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 94-96, at 96.

movement had never fully embraced social democracy. Instead, it remained divided between a weak reformist wing and a powerful communist wing that, for historical reasons, exercised a strong hold over the working class. As a result, from the Revolution to Mitterrand, French socialism remained attached to dreams of direct democracy and to a conception of class struggle that pitted the majority against a privileged minority, who were denied social legitimacy and a place in collective deliberation.⁵⁰

This was, in effect, an extension of Manin's analysis of Saint-Just's proto-totalitarianism to what Rocard identified as the First Left. Yet *La social-démocratie* also laid the groundwork of a positive theoretical defense of representative democracy, weaving together the earlier defense of deliberation and political representation that Manin had begun articulating in his articles for *Libre*. For Manin, regular elections, representation, and pluralism were all locked together. This conviction aligned with the Second Left's approach to economic and political reforms, and to its relativization of the idea of class struggle. *La social démocratie* presented elections as an institutional mechanism designed to "pacify" class struggle, which originally had expressed itself through violence, by expressing that struggle "in a symbolic and appeased way."⁵¹ When socialist parties began competing for elections in the nineteenth century, they transformed democracy from an instrument of bourgeois rule into a regime where political conflict amongst competing groups occurred against the background of a fundamental consensus that majorities in power were never the definitive holders of power. "Thus becomes possible that tense, always unstable and threatened compromise between the unity of a social formation and the conflict that tears it apart, in which political thought today tends to see the essence of democracy." This was followed by a note: "We refer in particular to the work of Claude Lefort, whose analyses of democracy and social conflict seem to us to be decisive."⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid., 210-211. Bergounioux had already explored the historical tensions between reformist and communist tendencies within a French trade union confederation founded in 1947 in his first book, *Force ouvrière*. The book was published in 1975 by the Second Left intellectual Jacques Julliard as part of his *Politique* collection at Éditions du Seuil.

⁵¹ *La social-démocratie*, 47.

⁵² Ibid.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of regular elections, *La social-démocratie* introduced another key idea that would reappear in *Principles of Representative Government*: representatives, though independent from their electors, remain subject to popular oversight between elections. Rather than seeking to restore an impossible immediacy between society and representatives, Manin and Bergounioux argued that (French) socialists should focus on how society could exercise *control* over representatives between elections: “Democracy no longer simply means the power of the people, but the control of the people over power; it is the only viable form of democracy in a complex society.”⁵³ In 1979, they believed that a revitalized worker’s party, operating in close interaction with worker’s associations and labor unions, was best positioned to perform this supervisory role. As Bergounioux later recalled, for Manin social democracy in the 1970s was “the age of parties.”⁵⁴ As we will see, over the course of the 1980s, Manin would come to argue that the age of party democracy was over, and assign this controlling function to a free-floating public opinion.

La social-démocratie appeared as the conflict between CERES and Rocard’s faction reached its climax. At the PS’s Metz Congress in April 1979, competing motions were submitted to a vote of party militants, with the results expected to determine the party’s future direction. CERES advanced a motion emphasizing socialist-communist unity, *autogestion*, and a decisive break with capitalism. The motion outpolled both Rocard’s Second Left motion and a compromise motion co-authored by Bergounioux and signed by Manin.⁵⁵ At that juncture, Manin and Bergounioux moved into the orbit of the Second Left. Although Manin resigned his PS membership, he joined the editorial boards of

⁵³ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁴ Interview with Bergounioux.

⁵⁵ “Motion F. Revenir à la ligne d’Epinay. Union pour l’autogestion,” *Le poing et la rose*, 79 (February 1979), 37-42; Bergounioux, “Comment je suis devenu rocardien.”

the Rocardian journals *Intervention* and *Faire*.⁵⁶ The same year, *Faire* published a special issue entitled *Qu'est-ce que la social-démocratie?*, which included a contribution by Rocard.⁵⁷

After the Metz Congress, Mitterrand renewed his alliance with CERES to counter Rocard, securing re-election as First Secretary and restoring CERES to the party leadership. Soon afterward, Manin and Bergounioux published an article in the antitotalitarian journal *Le Débat* attacking the *Programme commun* and invoking “the historical experience of totalitarianism” to criticize the French socialists’ dream of a unified society free of political adversaries. In a subsequent essay on “Marx and the State,” Manin echoed Lefort’s programmatic essay for *Libre*, contending that Marx’s “utopian vision” and “economic scientificity” shared a common anti-political aspiration to an undivided society.⁵⁸ Together, these essays marked a definitive break with CERES and confirmed Manin’s turn toward social democracy and its institutional counterpart—representative democracy.

Deliberation versus the General Will: Rawls meets French Antitotalitarianism

In 1985, Manin published in *Le Débat* an article titled “Volonté générale ou délibération?” Translated in *Political Theory* in 1987, the piece would go on to play a significant role in the deliberative turn in democratic theory and marked an important milestone in the development of the arguments later presented in *Principles of Representative Government*.⁵⁹ Both the place of publication and the title signaled its roots in the anti-totalitarian reflection that Manin and Furet’s circle had begun in the late

⁵⁶ *Intervention* was overseen by Jacques Julliard, with Patrick Viveret serving as editor-in-chief. Viveret, who was also editor-in-chief of *Faire*, co-wrote with Rosanvallon the Second Left manifesto *Pour une nouvelle culture politique* (Paris, 1977).

⁵⁷ “Faire,” *Qu'est-ce que la social-démocratie ?* (Paris, 1979). Rosanvallon’s introduction, titled “French socialism and the fear of social democracy,” began with the phrase: “A specter haunts the French left: that of social democracy. It lies at the heart of all the polemics and insinuations that the Communist Party directs against the Socialist Party.”

⁵⁸ Bernard Manin, “Marx et l’Etat,” *Le Débat* 6 (1980), 84-85.

⁵⁹ Loïc Blondiaux, “Hommage à Bernard Manin,” *Démocratie & participation. Groupement d’intérêt scientifique*, n. d., <https://www.participation-et-democratie.fr/hommage-a-bernard-manin>. Blondiaux and Manin co-edited *Le tournant délibératif de la démocratie* (Paris, 2021).

1970s. The article is notable for combining two strands: a reflection on the political culture of compromise promoted by the Second Left in the early 1980s, and an unusually early engagement by Manin with John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971). In this section, I examine both aspects before analyzing Manin's seminal text against that background.

Following Mitterrand's election as president in 1981, in the pages of *Commentaire*, another antitotalitarian journal launched by Raymond Aron in 1977, Manin urged the new government, of which several members of CERES were part, to embrace social democracy.⁶⁰ The vision of two antagonistic classes—the *patronat* and the *saliariés*—no longer conformed to the reality of complex Western societies, which were composed of multiple subgroups, including new ones such as the ecologist movement. The challenge, Manin believed, was to create nation-wide consultation procedures that would allow all these groups to make their interests heard and to strike political compromises.⁶¹ Part of the solution, Manin argued in another article for *Le Débat*, published in 1981 and co-authored with Bergounioux, lay in decentralization, which turned regions and communes into valid interlocutors for the government. It also lay in the acceptance that solutions to political problems were not ready-made, supposedly waiting for a vanguard party to impose its predetermined will, but were instead the product of compromises between multiple social agents endowed with some form of rationality, rather than absolute knowledge.⁶² This theory of large-scale compromise between social groups through decentralization was at the top of Rocard's agenda when he was appointed Minister of Planning and Territorial Development in 1981. As part of that agenda, Rocard set up a Planning Reform Commission in 1982 to associate social partners, through consultation procedures, in the

⁶⁰ On *Commentaire* and Aron's role in French liberal thought in the 1970s, see Iain Stewart, *Raymond Aron and Liberal Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 2020), chapter 6.

⁶¹ Bernard Manin, "Que la social-démocratie n'est pas seulement une forme modérée de gouvernement," *Commentaire*, 3 (1982), 362-367. Manin's article was published as part of a "debate on social democracy" organized by *Commentaire*, and was followed by a piece by Michel Rocard, "La social-démocratie et la liberté."

⁶² Alain Bergounioux and Bernard Manin, "L'option social-démocrate ?" *Le Débat* 15 (1981), 13-24.

design of the country's economic planning. Among its members was Manin, who that same year joined the CNRS as a research fellow in political science upon Furet's recommendation.⁶³

Around the time Manin was defending the Second Left's theory of compromise against the *Programme Commun*, he also became involved in an emerging debate among French intellectuals about the future of the welfare state. After a wave of nationalizations in 1981–82, Mitterrand reversed course in 1983, liberalizing the economy through privatizations and greater labor-market flexibility. The shift provoked extensive commentary. Chevènement, then Minister of Research and Industry, renewed CERES's defense of a Marxist socialist program and resigned in protest in March 1983, while Communist ministers left the government the following year.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, a group of neoliberal French intellectuals known as the "new economists" turned to Hayek to promote economic efficiency as the new political imperative.⁶⁵ Members of Furet and Lefort's circle, for their part, reflected on the implications of the new economic landscape for French democracy, though with different results.

Lefort and Gauchet debated the relationship between the welfare state and human rights, disagreeing over whether new rights invigorated democratic politics or expanded the state's role as guarantor of an ever-growing catalogue of claims.⁶⁶ Rosanvallon and Manin, by contrast, turned to Rawls.⁶⁷ Both were among the first French intellectuals to engage with *A Theory of Justice*, well before its French translation appeared in 1987. In 1982, Rosanvallon co-founded with Furet and two business

⁶³ Anonymous, "M. Michel Rocard a installé la commission de réforme de la planification," *Le Monde*, January 9, 1982. Manin described this experience in his 1984 application CV to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton: "For some months, I worked with the *Commissariat du Plan* during the preparation of the IXth Plan. This plan tried to set up a new pattern of consultation and cooperation with social groups (unions, etc.). I tried to gain a direct and practical knowledge of a problem in which I was theoretically interested." Furet's 1982 recommendation supporting Manin's appointment at the CNRS can be found in box 56 of Furet's archives at the Humathèque Condorcet. I wish to thank Michael Christofferson for this information.

⁶⁴ Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Dider Motchane and Pierre Guidoni (under the pseudonym of Jacques Mandrin), *Le socialisme et la France* (Paris, 1983).

⁶⁵ François Denord, *Néo-libéralisme version française : Histoire d'une idéologie politique* (Paris, 2007), 272-302.

⁶⁶ On that debate, see Samuel Moyn, "The Politics of Individual Rights: Marcel Gauchet and Claude Lefort," in *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day*, eds. Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt (Cambridge, 2012), 291-310.

⁶⁷ Lefort had little time for Rawls. See Alain Caillé, "Claude Lefort, les sciences sociales et la philosophie politique," in *La démocratie à l'œuvre. Autour de Claude Lefort*, eds. Claude Habib and Claude Mouchard (Paris, 1993), 62.

leaders the Fondation Saint-Simon, one of the first French think tanks, to unite “the liberal left and the enlightened right, or...the enlightened left and the liberal right.”⁶⁸ Manin was an original member and an active participant in its seminars. He later co-led with Rosanvallon a seminar on *The Future of the Welfare State* (1984-85), where Rawls was likely discussed.⁶⁹ In 1982-83, he joined the first French academic seminar on Rawls and contemporary American political philosophy.⁷⁰

With the end of the *Programme commun*, Manin considered that *A Theory of Justice* offered an apt framework for thinking through French socialism’s embrace of the market economy and the role of the welfare state. He read Rawls’s work as an attempt to reconcile market efficiency with social justice.⁷¹ In an article on Rawls’s reception in France, Manin argued that the book deserved a wider readership on the French left because it offered “a ‘left-wing’ justification of inequalities.”⁷² Rawls’s principle of fairness, he noted, justified rejecting redistributive policies that discourage effort to the point of worsening everyone’s situation, including that of the least advantaged. At a time when Second Left intellectuals increasingly invoked “social justice” in place “equality,” suspected of evoking Rousseauian uniformity, Manin emphasized that Rawlsian equality “has nothing to do with leveling.”⁷³ It legitimized differences in talent and reward insofar as they benefited all members of society. In this

⁶⁸ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Les Échos*, April 4-5, 1997, quoted in Laurent Bonelli, *Le passé d’une fondation. Projet intellectuel, groupes mobilisés et conditions sociales de la naissance de la fondation Saint-Simon*. DEA under the supervision of Michel Dobry, Université Paris X-Nanterre (1996-1997), 14. I wish to thank the author for sharing a PDF of this work with me.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 9 ; 42 ; 47. The Foundation had a note on Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* written in 1987.

⁷⁰ That seminar was organized by the *Centre de recherche sur l’épistémologie et l’autonomie*, co-founded in 1982 by Jean-Marie Domenach, a member of the editorial committee of the antitotalitarian journal *Esprit*, and Jean-Pierre Dupuy, who would become the principal editor of Rawls at Éditions du Seuil. See Mathieu Hauchecorne, *La gauche américaine en France. La réception de John Rawls et des théories de la justice* (Paris, 2019), 37-40. Originally a catholic vehicle for personalism launched by Emmanuel Mounier in 1932, *Esprit* had taken a sharp antitotalitarian turn in the 1970s, when it also opened its pages to Lefort and Furet. See Goulven Boudic, *‘Esprit,’ 1944-1982: les métamorphoses d’une revue* (Paris, 2005), 371-415.

⁷¹ Bernard Manin, “Pourquoi la République ?” *Intervention*, 10 (1984), 20-23. The article was published as part of a special issue aimed at doctrinally reconstructing a “new socialism.” See the contribution in this issue by Alain Bergounioux and Gérard Grunberg, “Le socialisme et la République,” *Intervention*, 10 (1984), 26-33.

⁷² Manin, “Tristesse de la social-démocratie ? La réception de John Rawls en France,” *Esprit* 136-137/3-4 (1988), 101.

⁷³ Ibid. On this substitution, see Hauchecorne, *La gauche américaine en France*, 89-90.

respect, Rawls offered a major theoretical alternative both to the Hayekian arguments advanced by the “new economists” and to CERES’s enduring attachment to Marxism.⁷⁴

At the same time, from Manin’s perspective, *A Theory of Justice* lacked an account of the social divisions that characterize democratic societies and, relatedly, offered no genuine theory of the practice that mediates them: political deliberation. This is evident in his 1985 piece on deliberation in *Le Débat*, which began with a discussion of Rawls. The article articulated the Second Left’s theory of compromise in the language of normative political philosophy, while also criticizing Rawls’s theory for being de-politicized. Manin reproached him for assuming that rational individuals with similar information in the original position would unanimously assent to principles of justice. This emphasis on rationality, pre-existing information, and unanimity left no room for deliberation—only assent to predetermined truths.⁷⁵ In short, Rawls was not Lefortian enough by Manin’s standards: he lacked a theory of democratic conflict.⁷⁶

Yet, alongside Rawls, Manin’s main target in “Volonté générale ou deliberation?” remained that of *La social-démocratie ou le compromis* (1979)—namely, a branch of socialism that remained imbued with visions of direct democracy and a vanguard party imposing its ideology. This time, Manin directed his blows not against Saint-Just or Lenin, but against Rousseau. Focusing on selected passages from *The Social Contract*, he portrayed Rousseau as hostile to parties and deliberation.⁷⁷ The culprit was his conception of the general will, which presupposed that, prior to voting, citizens, abstracted from their

⁷⁴ This stance was shared by other Second Left intellectuals. See Hauchecorne, *La gauche américaine en France*, 110-114. In 1983–84, Manin published two qualified critiques of Hayek, one in *Commentaire* as part of a debate involving two French “new economists.” Bernard Manin, “Le libéralisme radical de Friedrich-August Hayek,” *Commentaire* 22/2 (1983), 328-336 and Bernard Manin, “Friedrich-August Hayek et la question du libéralisme,” *Revue française de science politique* 33/1 (1983), 41-64. Manin took issue with CERES once more in “La réception de John Rawls en France,” p. 101.

⁷⁵ Bernard Manin, “Volonté générale ou délibération? Esquisse d’une théorie de la délibération politique,” *Le Débat*, 33 (1985), 72-74; 79-81.

⁷⁶ Rosanvallon likewise criticized Rawls for failing to provide a (Lefortian) theory of democracy in *La crise de l’État providence* (Paris, 1981), 99. He also treated *A Theory of Justice* as a “neoliberal” theory akin to those of Nozick and Hayek. Manin, by contrast, drew a more careful distinction between Rawls and Hayek. See “La réception de John Rawls en France,” 99.

⁷⁷ “Volonté générale ou délibération?,” 6-11.

concrete social identities, possessed a pre-formed will that did not need to be subjected to deliberation. For Manin, this version of unanimity overlapped with Rawls's, though in Rousseau's case, it was tied to a defense of direct popular sovereignty. The idea of a people directly expressing its will, however, was a chimera: "In its immediacy, the people have no predetermined will; they exhibit only a multiplicity of incomplete and often incoherent preferences."⁷⁸ For the people to have a will, they had to deliberate in the first place. This required representatives who could engage in deliberation, both among themselves and with citizens. A well-functioning decision-making process presupposed a distance between citizens and decision-makers. That distance was mediated by parties, which presented competing political options to the public. In an ideal "deliberative process," information was not pre-given but gradually emerged from interactions between parties and a "public" of relatively reasonable citizens. Accordingly, parties should serve as consultative platforms rooted in citizens' associations, rather than as vanguards. Rekindling the language of his earlier criticism of the Jacobins as "the sole center of opinion," Manin specified: "What we find here is not the pedagogical model in which an enlightened elite is presumed to bring, from the heights of its lectern, the light of Science to a backward people; rather, it is the citizens as a whole who educate themselves."⁷⁹

Ultimately, Manin was placing Rawls and Rousseau side by side as two flawed theorists of unanimity who remained imbued with what Lefort had denounced as the myth of Unity. At the same time, he was moving close to dismissing the very notion of popular sovereignty from his theory of deliberation through representative arrangements. In his words: "It is necessary to assert, even if it contradicts a long tradition: the law is the *result of general deliberation*, not the *expression of the General Will*."⁸⁰ In reality, Manin's depiction of Rousseau overlapped with that of Furet and Lefort, both of whom insisted in the early 1980s that Rousseau was a proto-totalitarian theorist of popular

⁷⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 11. Italics in original.

sovereignty.⁸¹ That concept, they argued, precluded both representation and deliberation, as it reduced individuals to numerical voting units, deprived of any concrete social identity—the very identity that should surface in, and nurture, deliberation.

The article's study of Rawls and its style of political theory (itself inspired by *A Theory of Justice*) helps explain why it appeared in 1987 in *Political Theory*, in a translation by Jane Mansbridge, a New Left-inspired theorist of deliberative democracy with a similar interest in Rawls.⁸² Mansbridge and Manin had met in Princeton, where they were both fellows at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1985-86—an affiliation mentioned on the frontpage of the *Political Theory* article.⁸³ In Mansbridge's recollection, "I asked to read his article and made a few suggestions for the translation. He was so taken by the suggestions that he insisted, over some protest on my part, on making me a co-translator of the article."⁸⁴ Manin's analytically rigorous engagement with Rawls no doubt made him more legible in U.S. political theory circles than, for example, Rosanvallon's more historical and Franco-centric approach. Indeed, his stay in Princeton and the concomitant publication of his article in *Political Theory* marked the beginning of his academic career in the United States and his entry into the field of American democratic theory. Yet the U.S. publication also obscured the article's original anti-totalitarian framing, reinforced by its initial appearance in *Le Débat*, where Manin had defended social democracy following Mitterrand's 1981 election. The French title suggested a stark opposition between a Rousseauist politics of will and a politics of deliberation among competing opinions. The article appeared in English under the more neutral title, "On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation."

⁸¹ In Lefort's words, the Terror was "the last of avatar of the theory we find in Rousseau." "Quinet and the Revolution that Failed (1983)," in Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, ed. and transl. D. Macey (Cambridge, 1988), 119. See also François Furet, "La Révolution dans l'imaginaire politique français," *Le Débat* 26/4 (1983), 176.

⁸² Bernard Manin, transl. Jane Mansbridge and Elly Stein, "On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation," *Political Theory*, 15/3 (1987), 338-368. On Rawls' impact on political philosophy in the United States and Britain, see Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice. Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 2021).

⁸³ Manin's application file for the Institute includes recommendation letters from Furet, Absensour and Pierre Birnbaum.

⁸⁴ Email from Jane Mansbridge, March 5, 2026. The Belgian-born Elias Stein had been a professor of mathematics at Princeton since 1963, and likely helped with the translation because of his command of French. The title aside, only minor stylistic modifications were made to the French text.

The Missing Piece: Public Opinion

By the mid-1980s, key elements of Manin's theory of representative government were in place. *La social-démocratie* had offered a normative defense of representative democracy as a regime in which rulers, elected at regular intervals, make political decisions independently, though under the people's control, through the mediation of parties. In "Volonté générale ou délibération?", Manin provided a normative argument for what would later be described as another core principle of representative government: that political decisions must be subjected to public discussion. Yet, alongside elections, the independence of representatives, and deliberation, a fourth principle remained absent: the freedom of public opinion. Until the mid-1980s, Manin assumed that parties would serve as the vehicle for popular control between elections, even if, as he noted in 1985, those parties were engaged in a deliberative process with citizens. Meanwhile, in his article for *Libre*, Manin had followed Furet's argument that the Jacobins embraced a proto-totalitarian conception of opinion formation as the top-down imposition of a single party's ideology. By the late 1980s, however, he began to suggest that this controlling function could instead be fulfilled by a *deliberative* and *free* public opinion.

The origins of this idea can be traced to a political theory seminar Manin ran between 1983 and 1987 at his alma mater, the École Normale Supérieure, where he also taught political theory (as well as at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris) until 1990. The seminar's program echoed the EHESS seminar launched by Furet in 1977. Each academic year focused on a key topic—"democracy" (1983–84), "public opinion" (1984–86), and "pluralism" (1986–87)—with contributors including

Furet, Rosanvallon, and Bergounioux.⁸⁵ As shown by the list of Manin's presentations, it was in this context that he refined many of the themes that would later appear in his magnum opus.⁸⁶

On January 31, 1985, Manin gave a talk titled "Opinion publique, volonté générale, et délibération," which likely overlapped with the article on deliberation published that same year in *Le Débat*, although "public opinion" was absent from both the title and the published text. His reflections on the subject, however, did not stop there. The ENS sessions on public opinion culminated in 1987 with the edited volume *Opinion publique et démocratie*, co-edited by Manin, Pasquale Pasquino, who was then working on Sieyès, and Dominique Reynié, who was studying public opinion in French thought.⁸⁷ The volume included contributions from historians of political thought on the concept of public opinion, as well as political scientists examining the recent influence of polling and mass media on French politics. It concluded with a 77-page article by Manin, "Le concept d'opinion publique."⁸⁸

Interest in public opinion during the mid-1980s was partly driven by recent political developments in France. The 1986 legislative elections marked a turning point for the French Left. Since 1981, Mitterrand had governed with a left-wing majority. But with polls predicting a heavy defeat under the traditional two-round system, he pushed to switch the vote to proportional representation (by department, in a single round), hoping to weaken the center-right. The move backfired: the Socialist Party lost, resulting in the first *cohabitation* between left and right under the Fifth Republic. In this context, academics began examining the reasons behind the Left's defeat, focusing in particular

⁸⁵ A list of these presentations can be found as an appendix to *Opinion publique et démocratie. Séminaire de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure*, eds. Bernard Manin, Pasquale Pasquino and Dominique Reynié (Paris, 1987). The following presentations are noteworthy: François Furet, "Souveraineté populaire et démocratie: de l'Ancien Régime à la Révolution" (9 February 1983); Alain Bergounioux, "La représentation de l'opinion dans la gauche républicaine et socialiste" (28 March 1985); Mona Ozouf, "Opinion publique et esprit public dans les enquêtes administratives (fin du XVIIIe-début du XIXe siècle)" (18 April 1985); Pierre Rosanvallon, "Le mouvement ouvrier et l'instauration de la démocratie pluraliste" (17 March 1987).

⁸⁶ Manin's presentations included: "Liberté des Anciens, liberté des Modernes. Démocratie et libéralisme" (12 January 1984) and "Unité et pluralité dans la pensée des constituants américains: Madison et le Fédéraliste" (6 January 1987).

⁸⁷ Pasquino would go on to publish "Emmanuel Sieyès, Benjamin Constant et le 'gouvernement des modernes,'" *Revue française de science politique* 37/2 (1987), 214-229. Reynié's reflections crystallized in *Le triomphe de l'opinion publique. L'espace public français du XVIe au XXIe siècle* (Paris, 1998).

⁸⁸ Bernard Manin, "Le concept d'opinion publique," *Opinion publique et démocratie*, 278-355.

on the role of mass media and polling.⁸⁹ In 1986–1987, Second Left intellectuals published edited volumes analyzing the behavior of “public opinion” during the elections and in response to the unprecedented phenomenon of cohabitation.⁹⁰ Some of these contributions also appeared in Manin’s edited volume *Opinion publique et démocratie* and were cited in his own essay.⁹¹

Manin’s seminar on public opinion also resonated with a broader revival of interest in the topic among members of Furet’s group. As noted, *Penser la Révolution* was ambivalent about public opinion. Although the Jacobins had manipulated it, Furet suggested that, under conditions of free expression, it could nevertheless play a constructive role in a representative democracy. During the 1980s, his colleagues explored both sides of this tension. Keith Baker, Mona Ozouf, and Bergounioux focused on its totalitarian potential, arguing that since its emergence in mid-eighteenth century French political discourse, public opinion had often been associated with unanimity, especially on the Left.⁹² Lefort and Rosanvallon, by contrast, emphasized its democratic possibilities.⁹³ In a critical 1980 review of *Penser la Révolution française*, Lefort praised Furet’s analysis of the Revolution’s creation of “a new figure: that of opinion,” while faulting him for overstating its totalitarian impetus. For Lefort, the emergence of public opinion signaled above all the promise of democratic politics. Its elusive and incorporeal character meant that it belonged fully neither to government nor to society. Rather, it

⁸⁹ For example, SOFRES (Société française d’enquêtes par sondages), *L’état de l’opinion. Clefs pour 1987* (Paris, 1987). Though television and polling had existed in French politics since the 1960s, they acquired an increasingly prominent role over the course of the 1970s, particularly during the presidential election of 1974 opposing Mitterrand to Giscard d’Estaing. Christian Delporte, *La France dans les yeux. Une histoire de la communication politique de 1930 à nos jours* (Paris, 2007), 145–164.

⁹⁰ See Elisabeth Dupoirier and Gérard Grunberg, eds., *Mars 1986: la drôle de défaite de la Gauche* (Paris, 1986), particularly the following contributions: Jean-Louis Missika and Dorine Bergman, “La campagne: la sélection des controverses politiques,” and Gérard Grunberg, Florence Haegel and Béatrice Roy, “La bataille pour la crédibilité : partis et opinion.”

⁹¹ Jean-Louis Missika and Dorine Bergman, “La sélection des controverses politiques. Mass-média, partis et opinion publique dans la campagne législative de mars 86 en France,” and Florence Haegel, “Le débat sur la réglementation des sondages politiques en France,” both in *Opinion publique et démocratie*, 202–228; 245–273.

⁹² Mona Ozouf, “Quelques remarques sur la notion d’opinion publique au XVIII^e siècle,” *Réseaux* 22 (1987), 79–103 ; Keith Michael Baker, “Politique et opinion publique sous l’Ancien Régime,” *Annales* 42/1 (1987), 41–71; Alain Bergounioux, “La gauche socialiste et la représentation de l’opinion,” in *Opinion publique et démocratie*, 179–201. The latter piece renewed the polemic with CERES and its conception of how to engage public opinion.

⁹³ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Moment Guizot* (Paris, 1985), chapter 2, “le pouvoir social,” particularly section 4, “l’opinion comme marché politique,” 64–74.

“provides the intermediary that allows them to be related to one another in the imaginary.”⁹⁴ Its strength lay precisely in its resistance to fixed definitions and its capacity to provide “signs of the people’s presence.”⁹⁵ Democratic politics, in turn, consisted in struggles to have particular opinions “accepted, disseminated, and recognized as the words of the people,” while preventing the process of opinion formation from being monopolized by a single party.⁹⁶

For key figures of the Second Left, public opinion offered an alternative to a conception of politics centered on class struggle.⁹⁷ The year Manin published his essay on the subject, Rocard declared: “In a certain way, public opinion tends to replace the class struggle as the driving force of History, by accelerating or slowing down public action...*La démocratie médiatique* is our current form of social organization. Let us make the best of it.”⁹⁸ It also avoided the pitfalls of popular sovereignty. Whereas the latter implied hostility to representation, pluralism, and deliberation, public opinion mediated the relationship between representatives and electors through a deliberative process involving multiple political actors. In the mid-1980s, Jacques Julliard, reflecting a widespread sentiment within the Second Left, traced the misfortunes of French politics to Rousseau’s conception of popular sovereignty, while celebrating the rise of rule by opinion: “Between parliamentarism and democracy, between the presumed sovereignty of the representatives and the impossible sovereignty of the represented, has our epoch invented something? Yes—the reign of opinion.”⁹⁹

Manin agreed that public opinion offered the key to a conception of politics capable of avoiding totalitarianism—its obsession with the people-as-one and refusal to recognize distance

⁹⁴ Lefort, “Interpreting Revolution within the French Revolution (1980),” in *Democracy and Political Theory*, 110.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Rosanvallon, *L’âge de l’autogestion*, 132-135 ; Rosanvallon and Viveret, *Pour une nouvelle culture politique*, 137-140.

⁹⁸ Michel Rocard, *Le cœur à l’ouvrage* (Paris, 1987), 185. Reflecting how tightly intertwined political theory and practice were for the Second Left, Michel Rocard had, since the 1970s, embraced new communication techniques inspired by marketing and theorized the politician’s role as that of a privileged interlocutor of public opinion. See Pierre-Emmanuel Guigo, “*Le chantre de l’opinion*,” *La communication de Michel Rocard de 1974 à 1981* (Paris, 2013).

⁹⁹ Jacques Julliard, *La Faute à Rousseau. Essai sur les conséquences historiques de l’idée de souveraineté populaire* (Paris, 1985), 219.

between rulers and citizens. In his article, he explained that public opinion did not denote a single entity but multiple forms of expression, shaped through newspapers, demonstrations, petitions, polls, and elections. Echoing Lefort, he insisted: “The possibility of permanent critique of anything that claims to impose itself on everyone appears right away as an essential feature of liberal democracy. We then see the link between the plurality of forms of public opinion and the nature of democracy.”¹⁰⁰ For Manin, in a liberal or deliberative representative democracy (which he seemed to conflate), the people should not be conceived as a unified body with a common will, but as a disorderly multitude holding conflicting opinions. This contrast, he argued, “brings to light what separates a conception of democracy based on public opinion (the Anglo-Saxon tradition views democracy as ‘government by public opinion’) from a conception based on the will of the people.”¹⁰¹

Still, Manin went further than Lefort, Rosanvallon, or Julliard by offering a more precise theory of the role and formation of public opinion in representative democracies. In line with his interest in normative political philosophy, he developed this theory through a critique of Habermas’s genealogy of the public sphere, published in French in 1978 as *L’espace public*.¹⁰² Manin agreed with Habermas that mid-eighteenth-century Europe saw the emergence of a “public sphere” that would become central to democracies. As a result of this development, he wrote in the preface to *Opinion publique et démocratie*, “The actions of leaders and political and social decisions are now subject to the permanent tribunal of free discussion.”¹⁰³ In addition to highlighting the link between his conception of deliberation and public opinion, Manin stressed that public opinion was crucial because it empowered

¹⁰⁰ Manin, “Le concept d’opinion publique,” 306.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 342. Manin added: “The fact that the social sciences and common language no longer use the concepts of popular will or general will, but still employ the concept of public opinion, certainly raises questions, but it undeniably has considerable significance.” Manin also cited Julliard’s book on Rousseau. Ibid., 281

¹⁰² Manin also briefly engaged with Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action*, translated in French in 1987. On the French reception of Habermas’ work on the public sphere in the 1980s, including its impact on historical research on public opinion, see Jacques Guilhaumou, “Espace Public et Révolution française. Autour d’Habermas,” in *Pouvoir et légitimité. Figures de l’espace public*, eds. Alain Cottureau and Paul Ladrière (Paris, 1992), 275-290.

¹⁰³ “Avant-propos,” in *Opinion publique et démocratie*, 3. Although collectively signed by Manin, Pasquino and Reynié, the formulations unmistakably reflect Manin’s touch.

citizens beyond the ballot box: “The representative system finds an important characteristic here because the multitude also expresses itself outside the decisive moments of public choice and asserts itself more as a political actor.”¹⁰⁴ At the same time, Manin challenged Habermas’s claim that, since the mid-twentieth century, the public sphere had degenerated into a mass audience manipulated by elites. Habermas’ normative conception of public opinion rested on an “absolutist conception of rationality that is particularly inadequate to the political sphere.”¹⁰⁵ As with Rawls’s citizens in the original position, Habermas’s participants in deliberation were envisioned as purely rational agents who, given all relevant information, would somehow arrive at unanimous agreement, independently of the practical constraints, such as time, within which political decisions must be made.¹⁰⁶

Against Habermas, Manin advocated for a model of opinion formation grounded in recent political science research on the limited information available to citizens when making political choices, as well as studies on the agenda-setting function of mass media in Western democracies—some of which were authored by fellow Second Left thinkers after the 1986 elections.¹⁰⁷ Manin argued that democratic theory remained trapped in an outdated vision of the rational citizen because it had disdainfully neglected the notion of the “political image,” leaving it to communication specialists.¹⁰⁸ Revisiting the conception of deliberation he had developed in 1985, Manin explained that public opinion emerged from deliberative interactions among parties, media, and spectator-citizens. Parties and media introduced “themes” into public debate. However, they were not the manufacturers of opinion, since the types of themes they could successfully introduce were constrained by the receptiveness of the pre-existing state of public opinion. Once a theme was introduced, citizens formed and revised their judgments based on the limited information available to them. As Manin put

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰⁵ Manin, “Le concept d’opinion publique,” 327.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 331-337.

¹⁰⁷ Notably the work of Jean-Louis Missika, Dorine Bregman, Gerard Grunberg, and Florence Haegel, referenced earlier.

¹⁰⁸ Manin, “Le concept d’opinion publique,” 327 ; 339-342.

it, “The notion of a judgment made about something that comes partially from the outside and is endowed with a relative rationality seems to be the very meaning of the concept of opinion.”¹⁰⁹

As Manin’s 1987 piece reveals, his original conception of “the freedom of public opinion” was intended as a response both to the vanguard model that Furet had associated with Jacobinism, and to what he described as Habermas’s hyper-rationalist approach. At the same time, it reflected the intellectual milieu of the Second Left, which embraced the notion as an alternative to proto-totalitarian models of politics grounded in class struggle and popular sovereignty.

From Social Democracy to Liberalism

In 1989, the publication of the French translation of Fukuyama’s article “The End of History?” in *Commentaire* provoked a wave of critiques from antitotalitarian French intellectuals, Manin among them.¹¹⁰ As Manin later explained in an interview, one of the factors that spurred his reflections on what would become *Principles of Representative Government* in the late 1980s was a dissatisfaction with the simplicity of the “end of history” thesis.¹¹¹ This thesis famously held that the collapse of fascism and communism signaled the emergence of Western liberal democracy as the ultimate stage in ideological evolution—the final form of government. Yet, as his writings from 1989–1990 reveal, Manin did not reject this outcome as undesirable. Rather, he found Fukuyama’s approach overly simplistic for conflating two distinct liberal traditions: Western European and North American.

In the late 1970s, Manin had already lamented the persistent hostility of (French) socialism toward liberalism, though he preferred to frame his position in the language of social democracy.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 345.

¹¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, “La fin de l’histoire ?,” *Commentaire* 47/3 (1989), 457-469.

¹¹¹ Antoine Chollet and Bernard Manin, “Les postérités inattendues de *Principes du gouvernement représentatif*: une discussion avec Bernard Manin,” *Participation* 23/1 (2019), 180.

¹¹² Manin and Bergounioux, *La social-démocratie*, 19.

By 1989, however, he unmistakably endorsed liberalism. In an important article titled “Les deux libéralismes: la règle et la balance,” Manin contended that the emerging consensus around liberalism obscured the fact that it was far from a unified political doctrine. The foundational principle of liberalism, he posited, was that individuals must be free to organize their lives as they see fit and must therefore be protected from interference by others. Democracy, in itself, did not guarantee the limitation of power: even elected representatives could abuse their authority. This, Manin argued, was where liberalism proved essential.¹¹³ Yet there were different ways to limit power, and thus, different kinds of liberalism. *Rule-based liberalism* sought to establish clear boundaries between what the state could and could not do, typically reserving domains such as the market from state intervention, as in Hayek. *Balance-based liberalism*, by contrast, did not rely on absolute limits (which were, in any case, always subject to contestation), but instead divided power among competing groups to ensure mutual oversight, following the logic of Madison’s theory of factions or Tocqueville’s praise of American associations. Manin made no secret of his preference for the latter tradition, which, in his view, emphasized the need for counterpowers in a democracy.¹¹⁴

Balance-based liberalism increasingly overlapped with what Manin had been calling social democracy for over a decade. Also in 1989, Manin published *Le régime social-démocrate* with Bergounioux, updating the argument first developed in 1979’s *La social-démocratie ou le compromis*. In a chapter titled “Démocratie, pluralisme et libéralisme,” Manin explained that, since the 1970s, European social democrats had embraced the liberal idea that power must be limited. The relationship between social democracy and liberalism was “complex,” he noted.¹¹⁵ Social democrats never adopted the rule-based

¹¹³ Bernard Manin, “Les deux libéralismes. La règle et la balance,” in *La Famille, la Loi, l’État. De la Révolution au Code civil*, eds. Christian Biet and Irène Théry (Paris, 1989), 374-375. An earlier version of the article was published as “Les deux libéralismes: marché ou contre-pouvoirs” in the Rocardian journal *Intervention* 9 (1984), 10-24.

¹¹⁴ “Les deux libéralismes,” 385-388.

¹¹⁵ Bernard Manin, “Démocratie, pluralisme, libéralisme,” in Alain Bergounioux and Bernard Manin, *Le régime social-démocrate* (Paris, 1989), 45.

version of liberalism, which limits power by strictly separating the political sphere from particular interests. Instead, they chose an alternative means of limiting power: collective decisions should emerge from a balance of forces and interests negotiated through party compromise. In 1979, Manin and Bergounioux had described social democracy as a political *attitude* defined by a commitment to compromise and representation—an attitude still largely rejected by the French Left, which remained under the influence of communism and its rhetoric of class struggle. By 1989, with communism in disarray both in France and globally, Manin and Bergounioux could describe social democracy as a well-established *regime type* that had taken root in Western Europe since the 1970s and embodied the principles of balance-based liberalism. “In the end,” they concluded, “it may well be justified to consider this form of government as an expression of pluralism and liberalism.”¹¹⁶

In a revealing 1990 article published in *Le Débat*, titled “Du bon usage de la social-démocratie” and part of a broader reflection on the “end of history” thesis coinciding with the journal’s ten-year anniversary, Manin expressed satisfaction that social democracy, long scorned in his home country, was now receiving “fairly positive press” both in France and across Europe.¹¹⁷ This shift in perception, he noted, had its roots “in the critique of totalitarianism of the 1970s.”¹¹⁸ Yet, he warned, social democracy and its commitment to liberal or pluralist democracy should not be conflated with Reaganite liberalism or Thatcherite England. For Manin, social democracy served both as a complement to and a corrective of the market economy. The core issue, he explained, was “how to temper capitalism without stifling it”—through procedures that cultivate “moderation.”¹¹⁹ These

¹¹⁶ Bergounioux and Manin, “Introduction,” in *ibid.*, 8.

¹¹⁷ Bernard Manin, “Du bon usage de la social-démocratie,” *Le Débat* 60 (1990), 110. See, in the same issue, the contributions by Pierre Nora, “Dix ans de *Débat*” and Pierre Rosanvallon, “De la béatitude occidentale.”

¹¹⁸ Manin, “Du bon usage de la social-démocratie,” 110.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* Manin associated moderation—a key concept in his work from the 1980s—with Montesquieu, who, in his analysis, functioned as a kind of founding figure of balance-based liberalism. Its antithesis was Rousseau and his anti-pluralist conception of popular sovereignty. See, in particular, Manin’s two contributions, “Montesquieu” and “Rousseau,” to Furet and Ozouf’s *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1988), 728–741 ; 829–843. See also Manin’s recently published manuscript on Montesquieu, dated 1983—a piece he noted had been “presented to the *groupe de réflexion sur le politique* gathered around F. Furet and C. Lefort” at the EHESS. Manin described it as part of a “broader reflection on the modern

procedures, visible in Western Europe (but absent in Eastern Europe), enabled ongoing negotiation between employers and trade unions. To address the recent economic crisis, an adjustment between the employers' and the worker's interests had been necessary—one achieved through deliberation rather than through unregulated market mechanisms, as in North America. Making his commitments to both capitalism and rule-based liberalism clear, Manin concluded that “tempered capitalism may well be Europe’s contribution to world history.”¹²⁰

Such statements are striking in that they show how, by 1990, someone who began his political journey in the ranks of the *autogestionnaire* Left could now present his theory of deliberation—and liberal representative democracy more broadly—as the political counterpart of the market economy.¹²¹ They also underscore the extent to which many figures of the French antitotalitarian Left, including Manin, in fact agreed with Fukuyama’s core claim: that liberal democracy and capitalism now formed an inseparable pair with no serious global challengers. Rather than rejecting this thesis, Manin only qualified it, cautioning against both hasty generalizations and naïve optimism. In addition to arguing that Western Europe’s liberal-democratic model should not be conflated with the American version, he warned that the liberal democracy/market economy combination would be difficult to implement in Eastern Europe, where a culture of compromise was still lacking and post-revolutionary politics remained mired in a people-versus-its-enemies rhetoric.¹²²

idea and practice of sovereignty,” which began with his article on Saint-Just. “Montesquieu, théoricien de la monarchie,” in Manin, *Montesquieu*, 13-98. This research agenda also formed the basis of Manin’s 1984 “research project” for his application to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, in which he proposed “the completion of an already undertaken work about Montesquieu and the origins of liberalism and pluralism” (p. 1).

¹²⁰ “Du bon usage de la social-démocratie,” 110.

¹²¹ Incidentally, in 1994, Manin’s article on deliberation was reprinted in *New French Thought: Political Philosophy*, edited by Mark Lilla for Princeton in a section titled “The Liberal Political Order.” The *New French Thought* series, edited by Lilla and Thomas Pavel, aimed to introduce Anglophone readers to thinkers “who represent the new liberal, humanistic bent of French intellectual life.”

¹²² “Du bon usage de la social-démocratie,” 112.

“La démocratie du public”

Where Manin really diverged from Fukuyama was in his more systematic investigation of the history and theory of (liberal) democracy. At the turn of the 1990s, he, Lefort, and Rosanvallon initiated a renewed reflection on representation and its relationship to public opinion. In April 27–29, 1989, all three presented papers at a Paris conference titled *Les métamorphoses de la représentation politique au Brésil et en Europe*. In the resulting edited volume, the organizers outlined the motivations behind the event. Recent socio-economic changes had triggered a “crisis of representation.” Traditional modes of political mediation such as labor unions were being challenged by the growing influence of “public opinion,” now increasingly shaped by polls and mass media. What weight, they asked, should be given to these new techniques? What impact did they have on democratic deliberation?¹²³ Manin, Lefort, and Rosanvallon all addressed these questions, though they reached different conclusions. It is in this context that Lefort and Rosanvallon began discussing the concept of “populism” (a then-emerging term in French discourse¹²⁴) and that Manin introduced his notion of “démocratie du public.”

In the first round of the 1988 presidential election, 15% of the electorate voted for the National Front’s leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen. In a text published in 1988 in a volume with Furet and Julliard, from which his presentation to the conference was extracted, Rosanvallon warned that the new “media society” had created fertile ground for a “populist sensibility.”¹²⁵ The proliferation of

¹²³ Daniel Pécaut and Bernardo Sorj, “Présentation,” in D. Pécaut and B. Sorj, eds., *Métamorphoses de la représentation politique au Brésil et en Europe* (Paris, 1991), 12-14.

¹²⁴ Anton Jäger, “The Semantic Drift: Images of Populism in Post-War Historiography and their Relevance for European Political Science,” *Constellations* 24 (2017), 317-320.

¹²⁵ Pierre Rosanvallon, “Malaise dans la représentation,” in F. Furet, J. Julliard and P. Rosanvallon, *La république du centre* (Paris, 1988), 143. Rosanvallon’s early theory of populism is explored in William Selinger, “Populism, Parties, and Representation: Rosanvallon on the Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy,” *Constellations* 27 (2020), 231-243.

communication channels and polling techniques signaled a “crisis of representation.”¹²⁶ As individuals no longer needed to associate in order to make their voices heard, traditional spokespersons of public opinion—already weakened by France’s enduring statist tendency—began to disappear, paving the way for an unmediated interpenetration of state and society. The result was a face-à-face between citizens and government in a high-tech society saturated with “informational procedures.” In this context, populist leaders like Le Pen thrived by deploying the anti-elite discourse that had resonated in France since the Revolution. By using “carnal language” and claiming to speak for the voiceless, Le Pen positioned himself as a modern-day *tribun de la plèbe*.

For Rosanvallon, the challenge in this emerging society was to safeguard citizens’ capacity for active “deliberation” against the media’s tendency to reduce opinion-formation to “slogans.”¹²⁷ Since the public could no longer be shaped by popular organizations such as labor unions, new opinion-makers should succeed them to foster large-scale debate. Reflecting his experience with the influential Fondation Saint-Simon, which by that time had been running for seven years, Rosanvallon declared: “We cannot be satisfied with merely praising the media as vectors of a new stage in democratic development. The spontaneous tendency of the media is indeed to reproduce already formed opinions, often reduced to the state of stereotypes. A deliberative society, on the contrary, implies circulating emerging opinions, reflections, and works that remain malleable. This is why, after the time of clubs, the era of *think tanks* has come.”¹²⁸

In his paper titled “Democracy and Representation,” Lefort concurred with Rosanvallon’s analysis of how populism distorts the public sphere, though his conception of opinion formation was

¹²⁶ Ibid., 152; 180. Compare with Rosanvallon, “La représentation difficile (Réflexions sur le cas français),” in *Métamorphoses de la représentation politique au Brésil et en Europe*, 123-138.

¹²⁷ “Malaise dans la représentation,” 140; 143; 181.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 181.

far more agonistic.¹²⁹ Populist leaders, he argued, changed the conditions of opinion formation. The rise of “populist ideology” was linked to a recent “extension of the public space,” driven by “the growth of organs possessing formidable means to reach the largest number, capture their imagination, and shape their judgment” (Lefort seems to have had television in mind).¹³⁰ In this new media landscape, some “leaders” embraced “demagogy,” that is, anti-elite rhetoric. FN electors uncritically accepted Le Pen’s promises to satisfy the needs of the masses, blindly identifying with him despite their very different social backgrounds. Based on this identification process, if the populist leader rose to power, he would be tempted to present his temporary government as the definitive incarnation of the nation. Reprising the language of his analysis of totalitarianism, Lefort noted that “the temptation of populism is to make the government and the State become and appear almost indistinguishable.”¹³¹

The opposite of a passive public admiring the leader was a conflictual “public space.” To introduce a counterpoint to the populist conception of opinion formation, Lefort turned to how mobilization for human rights could foster democratic politics, asking: “Is the repeated demand to have the legitimacy of a claim recognized by public opinion not a sign of a society’s democratic vitality?”¹³² This echoed an earlier article published during the debate over the welfare state, where Lefort had argued that “public opinion” gave demands for new rights the political weight they needed to be formally recognized. Opinion took shape when oppressed minorities strove for the recognition of new rights by appealing “to the conscience of the public,” which either confirmed or denied the

¹²⁹ The text of “Démocratie et représentation,” after being published in the volume on the *Métamorphoses de la représentation* conference, was republished in Lefort, *Le temps présent. Ecrits. 1945-2005* (Paris, 2007). References are to the latter edition. On the importance of that text as revealing the liberal character of Lefort’s theory of democracy, see Gregory Conti, “Representative Institutions and the Question of Lefortian Democracy,” *The Tocqueville Review* 39/2 (2018), 135-163.

¹³⁰ “Démocratie et représentation,” 615; 620. On Lefort’s theory of populism and its impact, see William Selinger, “From Totalitarianism to Populism: Claude Lefort’s Overlooked Legacy,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 51/7 (2025), 1075-1096.

¹³¹ Ibid. 615; 621.

¹³² Ibid., 622.

legitimacy of these claims. Once a minority had garnered enough support for their cause, public opinion exerted pressure on representatives, who then translated these demands into legislation.¹³³

Manin's paper at the conference, titled "Métamorphoses du gouvernement représentatif," can be read as a reply to Rosanvallon and Lefort's late 1980s reflections on representation and public opinion. He framed his presentation as a critique of the "crisis of representation" thesis. If one reconstructed the history of representative government since its inception following the American, French, and English Revolutions, he argued, the recent emergence of the media society did not signal a *crisis* but rather a *metamorphosis* of principles that had been present from the beginning and had already evolved since the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹³⁴ In his paper, Manin offered a systematic presentation of the four core principles of representative government: regularly held elections, the independence of representatives from their voters, the freedom of public opinion, and the principle of discussion. Present from the start, these principles evolved, shaping successive forms of representative government: parliamentarism (late seventeenth to late nineteenth century), party democracy (late nineteenth century to the 1970s), and "la démocratie du public" (1970s–present).¹³⁵

What is notable is that in the context of the conference on representation where Rosanvallon and Lefort were warning about how populism disfigured public opinion, Manin's portrayal of *la démocratie du public* was more restrained and optimistic. He acknowledged that, in this new form of representative government, parties and unions were no longer playing their traditional role in representing fixed social cleavages. Voters now floated more freely between candidates. Manin also concurred with Rosanvallon and Lefort that new "communication techniques" like radio, television, and polling enabled a more "direct" and "emotional" connection between voters and candidates.¹³⁶

¹³³ Lefort, "Human Rights and the Welfare State (1983)," in *Democracy and Political Theory*, 36-37.

¹³⁴ Bernard Manin, "Métamorphoses du gouvernement représentatif," in *Métamorphoses de la représentation politique au Brésil et en Europe*, 31-34.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 34-44.

¹³⁶ Manin, "Métamorphoses du gouvernement représentatif," 58.

Yet he was much less alarmed by these developments.¹³⁷ Whereas Rosanvallon and Lefort argued over who should shape public opinion—elite think tank

s from above, or activists engaged in horizontal mobilization—Manin, building on his earlier research on public opinion, cut across both positions. In *la démocratie du public*, opinion-formation occurred in a circular process: candidates proposed interpretative frameworks during elections or via polls, the public responded, and politicians then adjusted or refined their positions accordingly. Although the electorate becomes “a *public* that reacts to the terms presented to it on the public *stage*,” this did not mean it was a manipulated audience—a point, as seen earlier, that Manin had already made against Habermas.¹³⁸ (The French term *démocratie du public* suggests agency, unlike the English translation “audience democracy,” which implies passivity.) Populism went unmentioned in Manin’s paper. In his view, public debate now primarily took place within civil society, particularly among “informed electors” who sought new information and revised their judgments.¹³⁹

It is striking that Manin’s 1989 description of party democracy as the second phase of representative government reprised his earlier analyses of social democracy. While in 1979 he had presented a strong party rooted in workers’ organizations as the political force best positioned to drive political and economic change within representative government, he now suggested, without nostalgia, that this phase had ended. In a way, Manin’s rejoinder to the “crisis of representation” advocates was that they remained stuck in an earlier phase of representative government, in which mechanisms of delegation and intermediary bodies (like Rosanvallon’s think tanks) were still expected to mediate between state and society. That form of intermediation, Manin argued, was over—but not for the

¹³⁷ Rosanvallon deplored that polling reduced public opinion to a mere aggregation of preferences that obfuscated genuine political debate. *Pour une culture politique*, 138. During a 1989 debate on polling, in which participants voiced similar concerns, Manin, by contrast, adopted a remarkably analytical and detached stance. See Patrick Champagne, Bernard Manin and Jean-Luc Parodi, “Quand les sondages se débattent,” *Politix* 2/5 (1989), 25-46.

¹³⁸ “Métamorphoses du gouvernement représentatif,” 62. Italics in original.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 65. Compare with Manin, “Le concept d’opinion publique,” 321-327.

worse. In fact, the personalization of electoral choice in *la démocratie du public* could be seen as a return to one of representative government's original features.¹⁴⁰ During its first, parliamentary phase, in the absence of parties, representatives had built strongly personalized relationships with their electors, based on trust. Universal suffrage and new media had transformed the political landscape, but the fact that leaders now communicated through images could not simply be interpreted as a pathology. It was a transformation of features present from the beginning of representative government, and with which new forms of deliberation and public opinion formation remained compatible.

In his 1990 piece on social democracy, Manin made clear that his theory of *la démocratie du public* emerged from recent developments in French politics, and that he viewed this evolution positively. While most West European countries had addressed the economic crisis through compromise between ruling parties and unions, Manin specified that the French Socialists (led by a Mitterrand now reconciled with the market economy) had pioneered a different approach: “the strategy of public opinion.” Rather than negotiating with specific interest groups, they appealed to the public at large, seeking to persuade and ultimately succeeding: “public opinion was pedagogically taught that profit was not shameful.”¹⁴¹ This strategy, Manin admitted, had its drawbacks. The public was swayed through images, simplifications, and rhetorical escalations. Socialist leaders exposed themselves to criticism—not only from their base, but from the broader public, which perceived the growing gap between the new discourse and traditional socialist ideals. Yet despite its fragility, “this strategy of opinion is also a form of public debate and, as such, a form of democracy.”¹⁴² In some respects, it was even superior to the compromise model of party democracy, in which the public had been largely excluded from deliberation. In *la démocratie du public*, the public was involved.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴¹ “Du bon usage de la social-démocratie,” 112.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Weaving together his recent defense of liberalism with his reflections on *la démocratie du public*, Manin presented public opinion as the political force that enabled the reconciliation of liberal democratic procedures with the market economy. “All Western countries,” he wrote, “in order to deal with the crisis, had to limit wage growth and increase profits.”¹⁴³ In the U.S., this adjustment occurred through the free operation of the market. But in France, it became the subject of a broad public debate in which “a large segment of the population was persuaded. In a sense, the discussion became everyone’s business. France remains the country of public debate.”¹⁴⁴ While Rosanvallon continued to lament the erosion of intermediary bodies, Manin was suggesting that France had, at last, given rise to an original form of democracy in which public opinion became the beating heart of liberal-democratic politics. It operated as a catalyst, enabling the public, through the intercession of party leaders like Rocard, who had become prime minister after Mitterrand’s 1988 re-election, to reconcile itself with the new global economic consensus.

Sortition and Elections

Antoine Chollet has observed that *Principles of Representative Government* reads as if it were cut in two unequal parts: the first four chapters focus on the contrast between sortition and elections and could have stood alone as a separate book, while the final two explore the principles of representative government and their metamorphoses.¹⁴⁵ There is a reason for this structural split. The book is, in fact, the product of two originally distinct manuscripts: one centered on sortition and elections, and the other on the transformations of representative government. This becomes evident when we consider the first edition of the book—*La democrazia dei moderni*, published in Italian in 1992.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁴⁵ Chollet and Manin, “Discussion avec Bernard Manin,” 175-176.

The editorial notes at the beginning of that volume clarify that it was based on two separate texts translated into Italian: “Elections, Elites and Democracy: On the Aristocratic Character of Elections,” and “Métamorphoses du gouvernement représentatif”, the latter of which must have been the text Manin presented at the 1989 Paris conference on representation. This now rare edition provides the key to resolving Chollet’s puzzle. Unlike the later, consolidated French edition, published in 1995 and structured into six consecutive chapters, the Italian version is divided into two distinct parts, each named after the original manuscripts. The introduction, too, differs: it focuses exclusively on the contrast between elections and sortition, giving readers little indication that the second part of the book will shift toward an analysis of the historical transformations of representative government.

By 1989, Manin had already developed all the material that would eventually form chapters 5 and 6 of *Principles of Representative Government*. However, one crucial element was still entirely absent from his reflections: sortition, the theme to which much of the book’s later fame would be tied. In Manin’s recollection, his interest in sortition emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, driven primarily by academic curiosity about what he called a “still relatively unknown” topic.¹⁴⁶

It is likely that Manin began working seriously on sortition during his years at the University of Chicago (1990-1996). He overlapped with Jon Elster, who taught political science at Chicago from 1984 to 1995, and Adam Przeworski, who was on the faculty from 1973 to 1995. It is fruitful to read Manin’s discussion of sortition as a response to the work of Elster and Przeworski, both of whom are acknowledged in the preface to *La Democrazia dei moderni*.¹⁴⁷ Elster may have played a key role in spurring Manin’s interest in sortition. In *Solomonic Judgments* (1989), he had devoted around ten pages

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴⁷ Bernard Manin, *La democrazia dei moderni. Con due discorsi di Graciano Guicciardini sull’elezione e l’estrazione a sorte dei governanti* (Milan, 1992), 8. As its full title indicates, that edition included an *Appendix* with two texts by Guicciardini on election and sortition. These were edited by Pasquale Pasquino who, as noted earlier, co-organized the ENS seminar on public opinion with Manin and published a piece on representative government as *le gouvernement des modernes* in 1987—a title that echoes Manin’s Italian title, literally “The Democracy of the Moderns.”

to the topic of “political lotteries.”¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, we know from a subsequent interview that, alongside the ambition to complicate the “end of history” narrative, one of Manin’s objectives in *Principles of Representative Government* had been to criticize the idea that democracy could be reduced to competitive elections, and to challenge, by the same token, the view that elections were a simple, easily understood phenomenon—the only possible solution to designate rulers.¹⁴⁹ That democracies could be reduced to elections was perhaps the defining feature of Przeworski’s scholarship. As he put it in 1991, “Democracy is a system in which parties lose elections.”¹⁵⁰

In *La democrazia dei moderni*, Manin acknowledged in the introduction the importance of Elster’s work.¹⁵¹ But he insisted that his main concern was the *contrast* between sortition and elections—a contrast that allowed him to show, contra Przeworski, that elections had not always been associated with democracy. While *Principles of Representative Government* would portray elections as embodying both democratic and aristocratic dimensions, *La democrazia dei moderni* emphasized the aristocratic aspect. From Athenian democracy through Montesquieu and Rousseau, Manin insisted in 1992, election was considered for centuries an “aristocratic procedure” intended to select the best citizens. In contrast, the republican tradition regarded sortition as the “truly democratic method” of selecting rulers, because it offered participants equal chances of selection.¹⁵² This sharp contrast enabled Manin to argue that, historically, representative government was conceived as an alternative to democracy, understood as a system where sortition played a central role. At the same time, by associating elections with aristocracy, Manin could reveal *public opinion* as *the* democratic component of representative

¹⁴⁸ Jon Elster, *Solomonic Judgments. Studies in the Limitations of Rationality* (Cambridge, 1989), 78-92.

¹⁴⁹ Chollet and Manin, “Discussion avec Bernard Manin,” 180.

¹⁵⁰ Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market. Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge, 1991), 10. See also Przeworski’s earlier piece, “Democracy as the Contingent Outcome of Conflict,” in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, eds. Jon Elster and Rune Slagstad (Cambridge, 1988), 59-80.

¹⁵¹ *La democrazia dei moderni*, 11.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 9-12. The synopsis on the back of the book also emphasized the contrast, which was reinforced by the title: the *democracy of the moderns* is a form of democracy in which, unlike the democracy of the ancients, based on sortition, election is the primary method for selecting rulers.

government.¹⁵³ Even though elections were inegalitarian procedures intended to select a representative elite, the freedom of public opinion allowed citizens to continue making their voices heard between elections. As Manin later recalled, he had intense discussions with Przeworski on this issue, though he did not believe he succeeded in persuading him that representative democracies have other key principles beyond merely holding competitive elections.¹⁵⁴

In the finalized version of *Principles of Representative Government*, published in French in 1995, Manin nuanced the contrast between sortition and elections, which now acquired a hybrid dimension—they were an elite-selection mechanism, certainly, but they also gave citizens the opportunity to pronounce a binding judgment on rulers by reappointing or dismissing them, something Manin described as a truly democratic feature of representative governments.¹⁵⁵ This added nuance tended to obscure the originally sharp contrast drawn in *La Democrazia dei moderni* between elections as an aristocratic mechanism and sortition as the core, original feature of democracy.

Another key change in the 1995 version, compared to the 1992 Italian edition, was an overall effort to eliminate the impression that the book was a collage of two distinct manuscripts. To achieve this, Manin removed the Part I – Part II structure, replacing it with six consecutive chapters, and wrote a new introduction no longer exclusively focused on the contrast between elections and sortition. Manin opened the book with the idea that contemporary representative democracies derive from a form of government—representative government—that was originally conceived as an alternative to democracy. But whereas in *La Democrazia dei moderni* that contrast overlapped with the distinction between elections and sortition, in *Principles of Representative Government* the meaning of “democracy” in the introduction appeared broader: it designated a form of “government by the people.”¹⁵⁶ What this

¹⁵³ Ibid., 118-123.

¹⁵⁴ Chollet and Manin, “Discussion avec Bernard Manin,” 184-185.

¹⁵⁵ Bernard Manin, *Principes du gouvernement représentatif* (Paris, 2012), 301. Hereafter *PGR*.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 11.

meant, Manin never really clarified, although the introduction did specify that the notions of “political equality” and “popular power” were two “components” of “the democratic idea,” both historically and in contemporary discourse.¹⁵⁷ Perhaps popular self-government, in the case of sortition, referred to the equality component, while elections reflected the second component: through elections, the people exercise a form of power—the power to dismiss representatives and appoint new ones. Be that as it may, it was precisely the ambiguity of the concept of *autogouvernement du peuple* that allowed Manin to connect the two parts of the book, written at different times and in different contexts.

In chapters 1 to 4, the contrast between representative government and democracy largely remained that between elections and sortition, reflecting Manin’s engagement with Elster and Przeworski during his time at Chicago. By chapters 5 and 6, however, “l’autogouvernement du peuple” becomes a reference to mechanisms that seek, in Manin’s view, to undercut the independence of representatives, namely recalls and imperative mandates.¹⁵⁸ Recalls were the very mechanisms Manin had denounced in the 1970s as proto-totalitarian attempts, by figures like the sans-culottes and Lenin, to establish “direct democracy.” This reflected his engagement with Furet and Lefort. In both cases—the contrast with sortition and the contrast with binding mechanisms of elite accountability—the distinction between democracy and representative government remained effective, even if, under the label “autogouvernement du peuple,” democracy essentially meant different things.

What remains clear in *Principles of Representative Government* is the importance Manin ascribed to the freedom of public opinion, now explicitly described as one of its core “democratic features,” and his relativization of popular sovereignty, which he occasionally associated with voting in elections alone.¹⁵⁹ This should not come as a surprise: since the early 1980s, leading intellectuals of the French

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 209-214.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 176-177; 218; 234; 301. The “democratic” aspect of public opinion seems to derive, in Manin’s view, not from its association with some conception of equality, but from the fact that it gives some form of power to the people.

antitotalitarian Left had understood political agency through the prism of public opinion, positioning it as an alternative to both direct popular sovereignty and class struggle. In 1995, Manin redeployed the concept to criticize theorists of minimalist democracy like Przeworski: the expression of public opinion outside elections showed that representative governments were not *only* aristocratic regimes.

From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, public opinion served as the main conceptual category that enabled Manin (and other members of the Second Left) to criticize, in turn, socialist advocates of “direct democracy” and theorists of minimalist democracy—those he described in the book’s conclusion as those who, from “Marx to Schumpeter, seek to demystify what we call today democracy.”¹⁶⁰ In Manin’s view, theorists of direct democracy from Rousseau onwards extolled direct popular sovereignty, thus obliterating the distance that ought to exist between representatives and electors. Theorists of minimalist democracy, in contrast, believed that representatives substituted themselves for their electors once elected. The key to the enigma of representative government, Manin argued, lies in it being a balanced or mixed regime: the independence of representatives—an aristocratic element—is balanced by the “popular counterweight” of public opinion, which mediated, as Lefort and Rosanvallon also held, between rulers and the ruled, and offered signs of the people’s presence.¹⁶¹

Manin’s repeated claims in his magnum opus that he was refraining from any value judgment when presenting the principles of representative government tended to obscure the fact that, since the 1970s, he had been defending that form of government—first through his writings on social democracy; then on deliberation and public opinion; and all the way through his critique of Fukuyama and the “crisis of representation” debate in France in 1989–1990, by which time he was

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 306.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. Manin’s discussion of the “freedom of public opinion” principle in *PGR* echoes Lefort’s conceptualization of public opinion from the 1980s. In a footnote, Manin referred to earlier research he had conducted on the topic—an implicit nod to his essay “Le concept d’opinion publique,” where the Lefortian character of his argument is unmistakable.

conceptualizing the interconnections between deliberation, representation, pluralism, and the market economy. This sustained defense explains why, when Manin's *Principes du gouvernement représentatif* was published in its finalized French version in 1995, it appeared in the *Liberté de l'esprit* book series launched by Calmann-Lévy with Raymond Aron as founding director, under the additional label of the Fondation Saint-Simon.¹⁶² According to Rosanvallon, Manin's was in fact "one of the first books commissioned" by the Fondation.¹⁶³ In subsequent pocket editions with Flammarion from 1996 onwards, the Saint-Simon label disappeared from the cover, and it was, of course, omitted from the English translation published by Cambridge in 1997. With this removal, the most obvious link to the sources of Manin's liberal history of democracy—its roots in Lefort and Furet's 1970s anti-totalitarianism and the Second Left—also disappeared.

Conclusion

In interviews throughout the 2010s, Bernard Manin remarked that his book had been misunderstood. And he was right. Advocates of sortition have invoked his authority to assert its democratic character, despite Manin's firm belief in the importance of elections.¹⁶⁴ Meanwhile, theorists of the "representative turn," such as Nadia Urbinati, while acknowledging Manin's contribution, have tended to conflate him with proponents of minimalist democracy who reduce political participation to voting.¹⁶⁵ Intriguingly, both readings focus almost exclusively on the first half of the book, which emphasizes the contrast between sortition and elections. What they both miss is

¹⁶² On the antitotalitarian orientation of that collection, see Gwendal Châton, *Calmann-Lévy, éditeur engagé défendre l'antitotalitarisme dans la guerre froide des idées*. Paris, 2024. Other books in the *liberté de l'esprit* collection with the Saint-Simon label included Furet, Julliard and Rosanvallon's *La république du centre* (1988), Pierre Manent's *Histoire intellectuelle du libéralisme* (1987) and Lefort's *Ecrire. À l'épreuve du politique* (1992).

¹⁶³ Laurent Godmer and David Smaja. "Entretien avec Pierre Rosanvallon," *Raisons Politiques* 4/44 (2011), 186.

¹⁶⁴ Hayat, "La carrière militante de la référence à Bernard Manin."

¹⁶⁵ Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy. Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago, 2006), 9-10.

what Manin believed to be one of the core contributions of his theory: that public opinion is the democratic component of representative government (a point on which he and Urbinati, in fact, agreed). As Manin emphasized in these interviews, it was the omission of this aspect of his theory—the importance of public opinion as a way of maintaining dialogue between representatives and the people beyond elections—that surprised him most, even leaving him somewhat disappointed.¹⁶⁶

In defending public opinion as the cornerstone of representative government, Manin was, consciously or not, treading in the footsteps of earlier French liberals. The idea of “representative government” was deeply entwined with the invention of liberalism in the nineteenth century, both in France and across Europe.¹⁶⁷ In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant developed an elaborate theory of representative government in which the role of popular sovereignty was marginal and that of public opinion central. Drawing on the distinction between ancient and modern liberty, they argued that in modern commercial societies, citizens could no longer constantly exercise sovereignty by directly voting on political issues in the public square. In order to focus on private affairs, citizens elected representatives who would legislate in their name until the next election. The exercise of sovereignty, they claimed, had to be reduced to elections. Between elections, however, Staël and Constant insisted that popular power continued to be felt through newspapers, petitions, and associations, which helped shape public opinion. They emphasized that although public opinion was politically significant, it did not have legally binding consequences. Because it guided representatives without constraining them, “public opinion,” Constant wrote, was “the queen of representative government.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Chollet and Manin, “Discussion avec Bernard Manin,” 184; Bernard Manin, Olivier Mongin and Anne-Lorraine Bujon, “Les habits neufs de la représentation. Entretien avec Bernard Manin,” *Esprit* 437 (2017), 79. This neglect was all the more salient since, in a 2012 postface to *PGR*, Manin argued that one key development in democracies since the book’s publication in 1995 had been an increase in “non-institutionalized political participation,” which shaped the “public voice.”

¹⁶⁷ Gregory Conti and William Selinger, “The Lost History of *Political Liberalism*,” *History of European Ideas* 46/3 (2020), 341-354.

¹⁶⁸ See Arthur Ghins, “Gouvernement représentatif *versus* démocratie représentative,” *Raisons politiques*, 102 (2026), 5-31 and Arthur Ghins, “Representative Democracy versus Government by Opinion,” *Journal of Politics* 83/3 (2022), 1623-1637.

It is remarkable how closely the core features of Manin's theory of representative government—regular elections, the independence of representatives, control through public opinion, public discussion—overlap with those Constant laid out in his *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Representative Governments* (1815). There are, of course, differences.¹⁶⁹ But these should not obscure the fundamental continuities, particularly the sustained effort to set representative government in opposition to “direct democracy.” From Constant to Manin, French liberals have consistently warned against direct exercises of popular sovereignty as a means of holding representatives accountable, preferring instead the more diffuse and reflective power of public opinion.¹⁷⁰

Replacing Manin's masterpiece within its original French antitotalitarian milieu is not intended to diminish its importance, nor to suggest that it is no longer of use to us. Rather, my aim has been to show that *Principles of Representative Government* is not *the* history of modern democracy—it is *a* history of democracy, written from the standpoint of someone who embraced liberalism at the turn of the 1990s and sharpened his intellectual tools in the French antitotalitarian context of the 1970s and 1980s. That vantage point matters. Manin gives little space to the theorists of democracy against whom historical advocates of representative government, beginning with Sieyès and Constant, were arguing. In *Principles of Representative Government*, figures like Rousseau and Marx tend to be interpreted, hastily, as irredeemably hostile to representation and as proponents of direct democracy.¹⁷¹ Yet there exists a rich tradition of democratic thought that, rather than embracing what Manin describes as “direct democracy,” firmly upheld the importance of a representative assembly while simultaneously

¹⁶⁹ By the time Manin was publishing his magnum opus, universal suffrage—which Constant always resisted—had long become an established political practice in Europe and the U.S. Another difference is the centrality of the neutral power in Constant's theory, which is absent from Manin's exposition.

¹⁷⁰ On this story, see Ghins, *The People's Two Powers*. It is noteworthy that one of Manin's post-Brexit articles with Élie Cohen and Gérard Grunberg was titled “Le référendum, un instrument défectueux,” *Le Débat* 193/1 (2017), 137-140.

¹⁷¹ This is not to diminish the value of Manin's interpretations of other aspects of Rousseau's thought; his analysis of Rousseau's argument about sortition, for example, is first-class. *PGR*, 102-107.

advocating binding mechanisms—such as recalls, imperative mandates, or direct voting on laws—not to *eradicate*, as Manin contends, but to *limit* the independence of representatives.¹⁷²

By framing the first half of his book around the contrast between elections and sortition, Manin gave the impression that, once the “triumph of elections” occurred in the late eighteenth century, no sustained or elaborate alternatives to representative government remained. That may be true descriptively—representative government has arguably prevailed, in that its principles best capture the functioning of contemporary democracies. But that success should not obscure the fact that real alternatives were proposed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historicizing Manin’s *Principles of Representative Government* invites us to rediscover those alternatives. Writing the history of Manin’s history of democracy can encourage us to write new histories of democracy.

¹⁷² See, Arthur Ghins, “Scrutiny and Recall : Rousseau on Controlling the Executive,” *American Political Science Review*, Online First ; Ghins, *The People’s Two Powers*, chapter 2 ; Bruno Leipold, *Citizen Marx* (Princeton, 2024) ; James Muldoon, ed., *Council Democracy. Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics* (Londres, 2020) ; Camila Vergara, *Systemic Corruption. Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic* (Princeton, 2020).