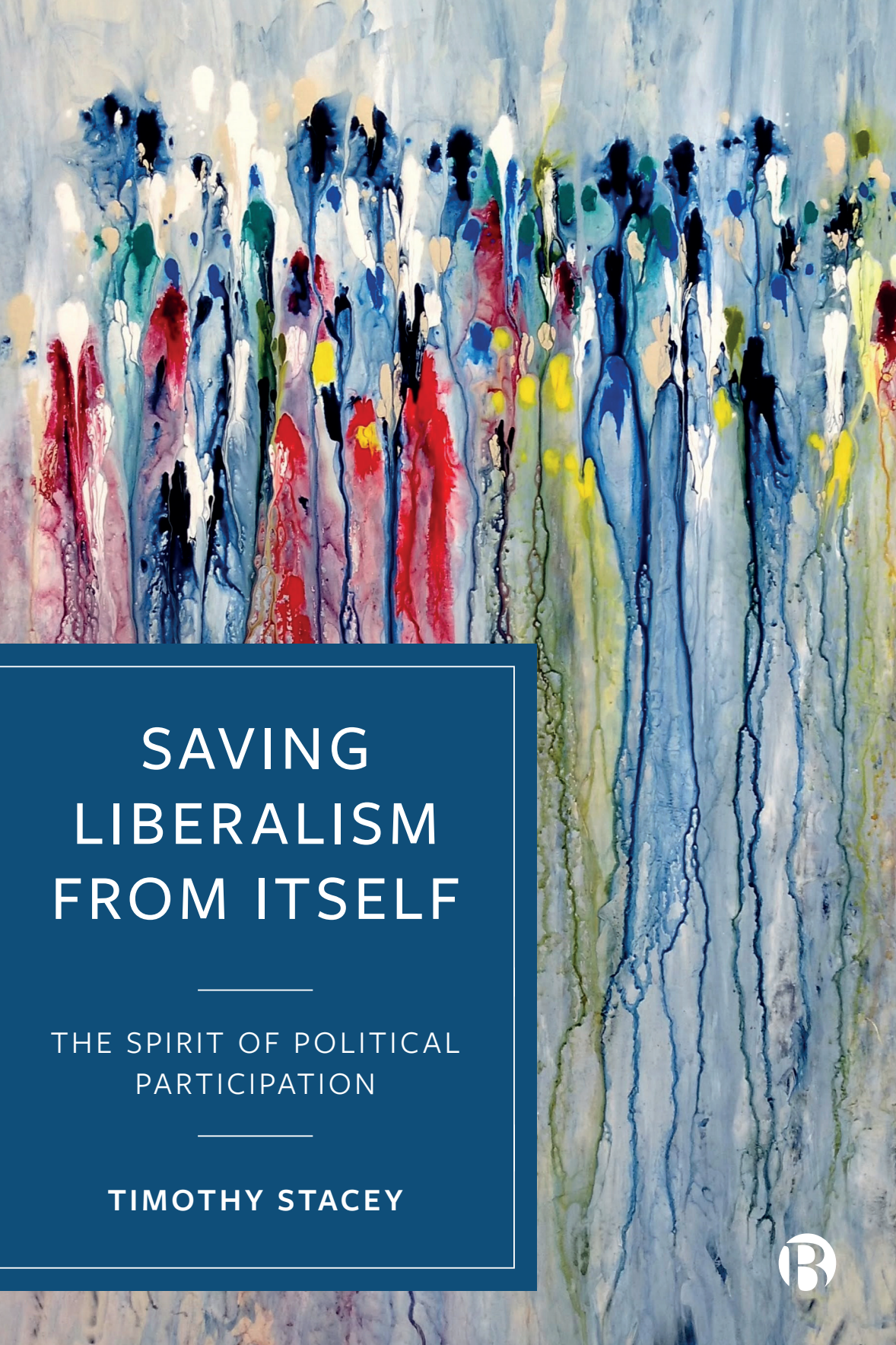

SAVING LIBERALISM FROM ITSELF

THE SPIRIT OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

TIMOTHY STACEY

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Contents

Acknowledgements

This book advocates for people to re-embed themselves in their institutions and communities, largely through the telling of stories. With this in mind, it seems important to tell the story of the institutions and communities that have shaped me. I was raised in a lower middle-class town called Woodley on the outskirts of Reading, UK. No one was particularly poor, but few people were expected to amount to much. Most of my friends' parents were builders. My headteacher once claimed to my mum that kids in our school didn't know there was a world outside of Woodley. It was quite a shock, then, when one day my dad got a big promotion and we moved out to Moscow. I was put in a private school with the kids of diplomats, lawyers and 'businessmen' (this was Moscow after all!). My parents taught me to think that people have equal value regardless of their background and I quickly became first confused and then angry about the differences in life chances between the people I knew back in Woodley and the people I was meeting at school. Though on the surface I acted the irreverent fool, I felt disconnected from my place in the world, and I started to ask questions about what makes a life worth living, and what inspires those with privilege to act in the interests of others.

The first institutions in which I had the chance to explore these questions were the Departments of Philosophy and Theology at the University of Nottingham, where I did a joint honours BA in Philosophy and Theology and a subsequent MA in Philosophical Theology. I was schooled in theories of liberalism and its discontents, and in particular the works of Alisdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and John Milbank (the latter being one of my teachers). As I argued in my first monograph, *Myth and Solidarity in the Modern World: Beyond Religious and Political Division* (Routledge 2018), the main thread tying these authors together is a stress on the place of shared narratives in making collective life meaningful. I was enamoured by the theory but frustrated by the lack of engagement with people's lived realities. These authors drew heavily on Christian theology in making their arguments. Even looking at the post-Christian students of music, philosophy and politics with whom I spent most of my time, these arguments weren't going to work. How then could they be expected to speak to the complexly religious and non-religious landscape characterizing global cities?

In search of an alternative, I undertook a PhD in the Faiths and Civil Society Unit (FCSU), Goldsmiths, University of London. Guided by Adam Dinham, who himself had been a student of Milbank's at Cambridge, I engaged with sociological and policy literature in a precocious search for the sources of solidarity in religiously plural settings. During this time, the London riots of 2011 broke out. I realized that this might finally be a chance for me to reconnect deeply with the place I was living. Working with London Citizens, I started engaging with local people to understand why the riots had happened and to ensure nothing like them would happen again. At this point, I almost quit my PhD. "Why sit in libraries reading about solidarity," I thought, "when I can do solidarity with these people here?" Struggling with these questions, I soon realized that my new passion could also be my research data. I would research how people build solidarity across differences at the community level. Chris Baker, who examined my PhD and joined the FCSU after my time there, has continued to support and encourage me ever since. This has helped me hold on when times are difficult.

It was during a subsequent Postdoctoral Fellowship funded by the John Templeton Foundation's *Understanding Unbelief* programme led by Lois Lee at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Kent, that the data for this book was gathered. I am deeply grateful for the faith Lois put in me at the beginning of my career to lead a project, both theoretically and administratively. Without that faith, my career might have ended shortly after my PhD, as it does for so many, and this book certainly would not have happened. During this Postdoc, guided by Lori Beaman at the Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa, I for the first time learnt to truly put theory aside and listen to the stories people were telling. Lori has very little time for theoretical grandstanding and sees it as a social scientific duty to convey people's meanings in their own words. Lori pressed me to question the use of the social scientific term '*my* participants' to denote those involved in our research because it seems to imply that we possess them. Between her and Fernande Pool, a brilliant anthropologist-cum-peasant farmer who just happens to be my wife, I learnt to understand the people I observed from their own perspective.

Let me turn then to the land and the people. The research took place on the traditional and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people, primarily in the city that settlers have called Vancouver. I, like many before me, am enchanted by what this place might have been before settlers arrived. Instantly the trees, waterways and other-than-human creatures come to mind. But I also fell in love with the city: its microbreweries and bars; its leisure and community centres; its art and theatre; and its beautiful seawall. I am angry about colonization, and I am a colonizer, even if only temporarily so. I am thankful for the time I had

on your territories, and I hope I am sufficiently changed by my experience to be an ally to you.

Hundreds of people gave me their time and guided me in understanding the city and its culture. Those who officially participated in the research are just a segment of these. So, I want to offer a shout out in the dark to all those people. Then there are those who participated and who I came to call my friends. Thank you for making yourself vulnerable to me. I know the experience can leave you empty at times. I hope that this book can fill you back up. Special mention must go to a small circle who gave themselves to me intensely. For the sake of your anonymity, I cannot go into detail. But I think you know who you are. Thank you. For your patience. For your generosity. Beyond this book, you have changed me and my understanding of right and wrong.

Before acknowledging those who helped me through the writing process, I want to briefly take a moment for Fernande, who often introduces me to ideas, people and things, only then to suffer as I turn them into writing projects. Even amidst the precarious situation that I, alongside so many academics, am confronted by, even as we bring a child into this insecure world, Fernande keeps pushing me to pursue my dreams. Fernande knows, like no one else does, that I obsess over the smallest things. If the music I put on as background to enhance our dinner won't play, I will often let my food go cold before I am thwarted by an insubordinate machine. Putting that level of obsession into a book project is a dangerous thing. Writing, when it becomes an obsession, can do to us the opposite of what I advocate in this book. It can tear us away from the world, lock us up in our own heads, block us from forming memories, and, with these, relationships. Too many beautiful walks have blurred into one as I get lost in my head. Each time I re-emerge from this state, like a zombie who has found a cure, I am amazed that you're on the other side waiting for me. Thank you. I will endeavour to care for and enchant you as you do me.

I also want to thank a number of people who generously read and discussed early drafts of this book. Fernande, again, is foremost. It is not just that nothing goes to print without her approval, but that she encourages me to completely overhaul projects three or four times before the first draft emerges. This one was no different. Following Fernande, it was Stephen Wenham at Bristol University Press who made me believe this was indeed a viable project. I want to thank the whole team at Bristol University Press, and in particular Lorna Blackmore for being good enough to accommodate my many little requests, and Phylicia Ulibarri-Eglite for making sure people hear about and read the book. I am also very grateful to Annie Rose of Newgen Publishing, who was meticulous in editing the final manuscript.

Throughout the writing process, in no small part thanks to Nathal Dessing and Lindsay Black, I was lucky enough to be employed at Leiden University,

speaking at public events and teaching my research to students. I am grateful to all the colleagues and students who listened, and yet more so to those who questioned and pushed back.

During the most intense writing phase of the book I was lucky enough to work with Jan Willem Duyvendak at both the Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS). Our dialogues over liberalism and its discontents were vital in helping me frame my argument in a way that could be convincing to liberally oriented people generally and liberally oriented sociologists in particular. My colleague Josip Kešić too gave his attention to one chapter – and this amidst writing up his PhD and a separate monograph. I admire your generosity. Cathy Wilcock and Chris Lyon were good enough to make the first draft one of their 'projects'. In this regard, I had the privilege of sitting alongside Brexit and other conundrums that they collectively pick apart of an evening. Cathy inspired significant edits to most chapters, while Chris (unintentionally, he insists) made me rewrite Chapter 1 and entirely invent Chapter 2. Doug Ezzy kindly reflected on two chapters, and particularly pushed me to revise Chapter 7. Helena Rosenblatt, whom I had not met before sending her the manuscript, was generous enough to read and provide comments, advising me to make amendments to Chapter 2 and assuring me that the book was ready for a wider public.

The finishing touches were being put on the manuscript during my tenure at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, at the University of Victoria. I am grateful to Paul Bramadat and Rachael Brown for giving me that intellectual home, and to Meharoona Ghani for generously reading and commenting on the manuscript.

Finally, John Milbank, my former teacher, was generous enough to read and critique the book at the eleventh hour, even as he disputes its very premise: that a middle way between liberalism and its post-liberal critics is possible. Regardless of whether reconciliation is truly possible in theory, that these ideologically opposed thinkers have each been magnanimous enough to give their time to this project gives me hope that common ground can be found in practice.

1

Alternatives on the Horizon

If you stand at English Bay in Vancouver, looking out to the Salish Sea, and beyond that to the Pacific, particularly amidst a stormy, autumnal twilight, it can feel as if the archipelagos of Point Grey and Horseshoe Bay are two gates opening onto the edge of the world. By now, the orange rays will have long since burst into a pink haze of clouds, and the emerging night will envelop the seemingly unsuspecting ships, which soon too will disappear over the edge and, their international adventures all but clandestine to the average onlooker, perhaps never to return. When I stand looking out at the horizon, usually holding my bike and on the way to an evening meeting, I can't help but be carried away with the alternative existences: distant cultures across the Pacific; indigenous cultures still holding on amidst the rolling tide of capitalist modernity; journeying cultures of sailors embarking on ever new adventures; subterranean cultures of orca swimming out to more abundant seas.

There in front of me linger dreams of elsewhere and other. Behind me the reality of the city grinds on: the lawyers' lights go on in Downtown's scrapers, the construction workers clock out from their Sisyphean existence for the night, and the homeless scurry for the safest spots. I know that my childlike dreams are not real, or perhaps only represent half-truths. But that brief moment of calm, wondering about the alternatives that lurk on the horizon, refuels my soul as I remount my bike and head off on a ride through the rain for my meeting with people fighting a seemingly insurmountable tide of social and economic change in the city.

This book is about the alternatives on the horizon that keep these folks going: their imaginary anchors in the storm. I first got thinking about alternatives on the horizon as a source of inspiration for resistance in London, UK. I was intrigued by the way some of the activists I spoke with harked back to a Christian past in developing their critiques of contemporary materialism and instrumentalism by which they felt themselves to be surrounded. I saw connections between this and how other activists harked back to when the Soviet Union had presented a radically different possibility

of how people might live in relation to one another. Like my daydreams of sailors' adventures, these alternatives are of course naive. Certain strands of Christian theology contributed to the rise of the capitalist practices that some Christians now interpret as the barbarisms of secular society. The Soviet Union committed myriad atrocities in the name of its ongoing revolution towards Communism. But it was the very empirical inaccuracy of these alternatives that first sparked my interest. How could such illusory images inspire such concrete action? More fascinating still was that many of the beholders of these dreams were aware of the flaws and did not deny them. Indeed, some of those exploring these alternatives were neither Christian nor Communist. In Vancouver, as well as in ongoing work with environmental movements in the Netherlands, I note a similar tendency among activists to invoke 'the indigenous peoples of the world' as if this term represents some homogeneous whole that uniformly stands in opposition to Western modernity. What Christian, Soviet and indigenous cultures present are not a set of dogma as to what must be done, nor even always ideals towards which to strive, but the possibility that *some* other way of living might be possible. They are subjunctive imaginaries, playful conjurings or heuristic devices. They are deliberate escapes from reality that nonetheless demonstrate that reality could be very different.

It was while ruminating over these ideas that I came across the phrase 'there is no alternative' in a speech by David Cameron, the then UK Prime Minister in 2013, as he struggled to push through his austerity agenda. Originally used by Margaret Thatcher in the UK in the 1980s, 'there is no alternative' became a phrase so regularly invoked and so powerful in its ability to incapacitate opposition that it received its own acronym: TINA. The beauty of this simple phrase is that, in a culture dominated by belief in the rationally explicable and empirically observable, it was able to suggest that while radically neoliberal policies are not favourable, indeed not even to their reluctant implementers, they are nonetheless natural, embedded in the inevitable reality of the way the world really is. Neoliberalism, according to this logic, is the only ideology free of imaginary elements, rooted solely in human nature.

It is alarming how well this narrative has worked. Indeed, I am reminded of a phrase, attributed to multiple authors, that today it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. With the fall of the Berlin wall, and the so-called 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1992), the old left across the world has turned to embrace neoliberal economic policies, albeit mitigated by 'light-touch' social democracy and cultural inclusion (Fraser 2000). To me, this feels like including ever more people on a ship that is already sinking. I am not making a claim about the need to protect 'Britain first', 'India first', 'Canada first' or 'the Netherlands first'. Indeed, I am a roaming citizen of the world who feels a sense of longing for each of these places, even if the latter three do not recognize any claim I might make to belong to them. Nor am

I suggesting that identity is some new 'heart of a heartless world' that must be put to one side to focus on what 'really matters'. I fully support those who are fighting for religious, racial, sexual and gender-based equality. But I am arguing that greater inclusion in theory to a system that robs the vast majority of their dignity in practice is not getting us anywhere. Too often in our institutions, we see leaders triumphantly proclaim they have done their bit for justice by recruiting a handful of people who happen not to be white, male or heterosexual, while their overall success as an institution remains reliant on exploitative contracts for the majority of workers and investments in oil, arms, airlines and payday lenders. If we are to confront this situation, we must find ways to sit in a room with those we radically disagree with and practise imagining alternatives together.

Meanwhile, where alternatives are offered, such as on international cooperation, migration and the environment, they are pitched as if to self-interested rational actors. Remaining part of Europe or the North American Free Trade Agreement, voters are endlessly assured, is ultimately in their long-term self-interest. Migration is crucial to economic growth and healthcare as populations decline. Acting now to mitigate the costs of climate change will be much cheaper in the long run. Amidst the ongoing failure-to-land of these narratives, we have seen the rapid rise of radical right narratives that place meaning and belonging front and centre, insisting that their culture has been hollowed out by an elite that cares more about migrants and people suffering elsewhere than they do about their 'own people' (Duyvendak and Kešić 2022). They refuse to take in more migrants, to give way on issues of identity, or to act on the climate.

We are suffering from a failure of the imagination. We can no longer imagine ourselves as being but a small part within a larger whole, let alone living a life of self-imposed limitations for the good of people and planet. How did we get here? The core premise of this book, to be more fully explicated in Chapter 2, is that in their noble quest to secure equal dignity for all regardless of background, liberal societies and institutions have concerned themselves with the 'letter' of political procedure and policymaking at the expense of the spirit of political participation. They have made the abstract Individual into both the theoretical basis on which arguments are developed and the moral endpoint against which arguments are judged. People have been encouraged to break free from the institutions and practices that oppress them: from religion, to class, to the family, and even politics. They have been told that the only institutions that can legitimately make a claim on their identity or their time are those that they have entered into voluntarily. They have been warned not to be lured in by 'irrational' elements like myths, rituals, magic and traditions, which ultimately lead down the road of violent oppression and exclusion. But I contend that together, these elements form the spirit of political

participation, helping people to feel that they are part of a larger whole. For this reason, giving up on these elements has made people ever less willing to cooperate with individuals or groups that do not share their particular package of convictions. In search of arguments that appeal to all of these individuals simultaneously, regardless of background, we have dropped grand narratives and developed instead a secular public rationality that ultimately appeals to no one. Generational political programmes that invite individuals into a collective give way to meticulously tailored packages that appeal to target groups. Politics is something done by people with the logical capacity and empirical knowhow to divine what these groups need and deliver it to them, rather than a process of empowering people to take control of their lives. Improvements in security and wealth are treated as the only ideals with obvious mass appeal, and the state and the market the best means of delivering them. There is no alternative. And now, with no broader community to which they feel they belong, people are asking themselves, "why should I look out for migrants when no one is looking out for me?"; "why should I care about the environment when no one else will?"; "why would I pay taxes when bankers don't?"

This cynicism is robbing us of the capacity to build coalitions and stand as a collective against the forces that oppress us. The desire not to be cheated, not to be made a fool of, not to be robbed of one's dignity, is itself allowing us to be robbed of our dignity on a daily basis. Not only do our actions feel ever less meaningful in themselves, but by breaking ties with any institution that fails to uphold our particular package of ideals, we have made ourselves vulnerable to two super-institutions: the state and the market.

The famous poem about the Holocaust by Martin Niemöller captures my concern quite well:

> First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—
> Because I was not a socialist.
>
> Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
> Because I was not a trade unionist.
>
> Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
> Because I was not a Jew.
>
> Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.
>
> Niemöller, Martin, 1947. *Of Guilt and Hope*.
> New York, NY: Philosophical Library.

We have allowed ourselves to be dictated to by the state–market dyad because we can no longer even imagine cooperating across differences of class, ethnicity and ideology. Indeed, we rarely imagine ourselves as a 'we' at all, but rather as an 'I', who only voluntarily, temporarily, and with a number of caveats, becomes a 'we' when doing so is beneficial. We may claim that every individual deserves equal dignity, but we no longer have the capacity to collectively stand up to the forces that threaten our dignity, let alone to confront the key challenges of our time, such as migration and climate change.

How can we begin to once more collectively uphold one another's dignity and stand together in the face of global challenges? My answer, elaborated in the course of this book, is that we need to rediscover the spirit of political participation. By spirit, I am not referring to something associated with religion broadly or any particular religion. I acknowledge a widespread 'disillusionment about the capacity of the economics, science, technology and ethics of the neoliberalized secular age to offer any solutions to fundamental issues of inequality, injustice and commodity fetishism' (Cloke et al 2019, 2). But this does not imply that religion is uniquely able to fill the gap. As we shall see, religion does not have a monopoly on compassion, value or meaning. Nor, to be very clear, am I suggesting an ontological distinction between spirit and matter. Instead, I use the term with awareness of, and appreciation for, the way that it has been employed variously by indigenous authors, by social scientists, and in popular parlance. Those interested in indigenous knowledge will be aware of frequent references to spirit among indigenous authors when they translate their insights for English-language audiences (Simpson 2012; Kimmerer 2015). Social scientists will be aware of its use in phrases like 'the spirit of capitalism' and 'the spirit of the gift'. And many readers will have instantly recalled metaphors like 'the spirit of the law', 'the spirit of '45' and 'team spirit'. The *spirit* of political participation, then, is everything that makes it feel worthwhile beyond its immediate material impact. It is that something that makes people feel part of a larger whole that is prior to, greater than, and will succeed their own limited life. For a long time, I found myself struggling to invent a term that captured this essence without assuming a 'will to religion' (Beaman 2013), or reproducing the dominance of Christian metaphysics. I hope that the insights of this book can be equally appealing to Christians and non-Christians. But rather than starting from Christianity and inviting others into its orbit, as so many have before me (Bretherton 2010; MacIntyre [1981] 2012; Milbank [1991] 2013), I wish to explore a space that is equally welcoming to all. Eventually, the widespread use of the term 'spirit' among non-Christians convinced me that our discourse is already rich enough to articulate what is missing. The problem is that Christian metaphysics has colonized the way that many of us imagine the meaning of words (see also Blankholm 2022). I choose to push through this domination and reclaim the discourse. Because of the

metaphysically Christian and New Age connotations, however, I avoid using 'spiritual' as the adjective for spirit, and instead opt for 'spirited'.

Reclaiming this discourse helps me to assert an existential inalienability that I feel is lost in calls to revive the theatricality of politics (Geertz 1981) or public drama (Alexander 2017). I appreciate how these terms indicate the need for engagement with something beyond universalizing logics, and I will use theatrical language throughout the book. But I worry that using drama as an overarching category implies something inauthentic, artificial and top down; assumes that actions always have an audience in mind; and risks constructing a 'fourth wall' between actors and their audience that then has to be theoretically overcome. As a category, I consider spirit simultaneously grand enough to speak to what makes a human life feel worth living, humble enough not to alienate people, and authentic enough not to appear as something we do to manipulate people.

It is further important to differentiate spirit from emotions. The emotional turn in political sociology (Jasper 1998; 2018; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2016) has been crucial to unsettling the assumption that cognitive processes are the only ones that matter, and that human actions can be reduced to cost-benefit calculations. Pushing against the hegemony of rationality is likewise a core aim of this book. But the word spirit also implies something deeper than this. When people talk about 'the spirit of the game', they are referring to a game's intrinsic meaning that transcends any external reward that may derive from its being played, such as money or fame. When people speak of the 'spirit of the law', as opposed to its letter, they are referring both to the moral intention of those that formulated it and the good faith with which it is hoped people will respond to that intention. And when people talk of 'team spirit' or 'the spirit of '45', they are conjuring the intangible feeling of collective identity and solidarity that emerges in certain groups and certain moments in history, as well as the moral weight of that feeling. The spirit of political participation, then, refers to the intrinsic meaningfulness of engaging with others in a common pursuit, of acting in good faith, of feeling oneself part of a larger whole, and the sense of satisfaction that comes with it. The search for spirit is inevitably bound up with powerful feelings and emotions such as hope, a sense of purpose, belonging, and security but this does not mean that spirit can be reduced to these.

Successful movements and actions across the political spectrum and throughout recent history have all shared in common that they captured spirit somehow: from mid 20th-century fascism and the radical right today; to the foundation of welfare states; to the civil rights movement and Black Lives Matter (Alexander 2017, 30); to the climate movement and Extinction Rebellion (Stacey 2019). Each of these projects has at its heart the rediscovery of the power of a story about where we have come from and where we are going; the sheer thrill of taking action into our own hands; the need to

be part of something bigger; and the yearning to leave something behind when we are gone.

While I do not wish to proclaim the specialness of religion, what I do claim is that categories associated with the study of religion can be helpful in understanding how to rediscover the spirit of political participation without further fanning the flames of division. Because secularization narratives have become so dominant within liberal societies, we have blinded ourselves to the activities that *already* imbue our lives with rich meaning and which can be employed in resisting instrumental logics. My focus, then, is on the myths, rituals, magic and traditions that can help liberally oriented people to rediscover the spirit of political participation.

I drop the word 'liberal' in favour of 'liberally oriented' because in identifying participants for the research, I deliberately avoided pinning people down into preconceived categories, instead feeling my way towards those who expressed liberal sentiments and ideas such as the need to treat people with equal dignity regardless of their background or positionality; the failure of institutionalized religion to uphold this dignity; the need for a strong state that can sustain the dignity of the disadvantaged; and solidarity with people living in different countries and continents. I moreover avoid the more common identifier 'liberally minded' because it makes political engagement and political choices seem like the outcomes of purely cognitive, calculative processes, when the purpose of this book is to show that so much more is involved.

I aim to appeal to politicians, activists, policymakers and the politically engaged public, as well as to academics and thinkers. To the former, I do not by any means wish to dictate answers or provide simple solutions. You know your own worlds far better than I ever could, and anyway ours is not a time for quick fixes but for the hard work of the imagination. An activist friend recently reminded me of Bayo Akomolafe's appeal: "when times are urgent, let us slow down." I hope this book can help you to slow down, reflect on your practice and renew your public spirit – something we all need to do from time to time. To academics and thinkers, I hope to show the importance of placing certain concepts from the study of religion into dialogue with the study of politics and society. Those interested in religion will gain new insights into where the boundary lies between purportedly religious and non-religious ways of imagining and being in the world. I will show how myth, ritual, magic and tradition are and can be employed by those who see themselves as using a primarily rational lens. On the other hand, political and social theorists rarely regard the study of religion as relevant to their practice and I hope to show how misguided this is.

While many readers may worry that a spirited politics leads us on the road to manipulation, oppression and war, or that only by discarding spirit can we maintain peace, two points are worth bearing in mind. First, it is important not to ignore the ways in which we are already, even in the most

purportedly rational of cultures and institutions, always being influenced by myths, rituals, magic and traditions. In my view, these elements cannot be overcome but only better understood and engaged with. Second, I will claim that it is possible to rediscover spirit in ways that facilitate self-expression and remain always open to the next claim to difference. This is because the spirit of political participation need not entail a pre-given artifice that cannot be altered, but rather can be considered as an ethereal feeling that is rediscovered and reassembled by each new generation, each new group and each new individual. What *may* trouble some readers, however, and which I neither apologize for nor seek to mitigate, is my claim that if we want to inculcate sources of belonging that are open to people's myriad claims to difference, then we must re-embed ourselves in real communities of place. It is not enough to have the right ideas and to vote for the right parties. Perhaps paradoxically, the spirit of political participation requires material presence within our communities.

This claim may feel problematic because, for many people, the liberal project of offering equal dignity to all seems to require that no people or place take priority over any other. Critics of liberalism have turned this into an interminable issue, a key fault line, separating liberals from the rest of humanity (Sandel 1998; Spaemann 2005; Walzer 2010). Liberals are seen as 'anywheres' (Goodhart 2017, 34–8), whose allegiance is to universal concepts like freedom and equality, rather than to people and places. Their identity is achieved, rather than ascribed, and is thus easily transferable to other towns and countries (Calhoun 2003). This is as opposed to 'somewheres', who are less mobile, less educated, tied to particular places and people, and concerned with maintaining their cultural heritage, as well as with economic justice.

Drawing on these and similar distinctions, numerous attempts have been made to reconcile people to 'older' or alternative ideas of spiritedness and, through these, to one another. In Chapter 3 I will address what I consider to be the most prominent among these.

I first engage what is often called post-liberalism. The central argument is that since myths, rituals, magic and traditions are crucial to meaning and mobilization, and since those from which we most recently 'liberated' ourselves are both retrievable and the best, it makes sense to restore these to the centre of social and political life: depending on the context, arguments will be made to restore Christianity, Islam or Hinduism; essentialist understandings of gender; or heterosexuality to the centre of social life. Connections are drawn between social and economic liberalism, LGBTQ+ rights and capitalism, as if these are mutually reinforcing. Much energy is spent on denouncing transgender campaigns, while suggesting that these are linked to transhumanism and, through this, the capitalist disregard for bodily suffering. While there may at times be elective affinities between these ideas, and there is certainly evidence that the post-1960s left has emphasized

identity at the expense of economics (Piketty 2020, 871), to make this into a necessary link is just as simplistic as arguments that say Christianity and environmental destruction are inextricably paired. It seems to me unfair for post-liberals to attack the left for having given up on class in favour of identity, at the same time as being preoccupied with questions of gender and sexuality themselves. I will show in the course of this book that it is perfectly plausible to care equally about social and economic justice. But just by way of example here, it is often in those enclaves outside of the state and market, in which post-liberal principles such as radical trust and gift exchange are being lived out, that we find the most socially liberal people. This is because those genuinely invested in building an alternative world are often experimental and open to new ideas. Rather than imposing their own limited take on what is natural, people seeking alternative visions are often willing to accept that the patriarchal, heterosexual, monogamous past *may* itself be a corruption of nature; that ownership over one's sexuality and that of one's partner *may* be the first and most fundamental form of ownership; and that a genuinely solidary society *might* be one in which reciprocity is underwritten by a range of exchange practices, including the exchange of bodily fluids. Social liberals do not by any means have a monopoly on building egalitarian, gift-exchange communities but they certainly are not incapable of it either.

The second set of arguments I will address are those that seek to speak up for indigenous and minority cultures that are undermined by liberalism. Proponents draw on the theory of post-liberal philosophers and theologians to demonstrate the ways in which ethical decision making is enabled through social contexts and that greater space must therefore be given to local particularities. Even though their proponents often radically reject post-liberal arguments in practice, I suggest that their work risks legitimizing post-liberalism by warning of liberalism's corrosive impact without offering an alternative.

Just as with post-liberals, I have also been disappointed by supposedly liberally oriented people themselves in their aggressive denunciation of anyone that dares question the dominant ideology. I find the tendency to shame one another for failing to use the correct discourse particularly pitiful. The words we use really do have an impact, but so does our approach to conversation. Rather than getting easy 'likes' by putting down potential allies, I favour gently helping one another in the complex search for an alternative vision. Meanwhile, liberally oriented commentators have often treated the rise of right-wing populism as an indicator not that something is wrong with liberalism, but that still more people need to be educated. Those who question liberal orthodoxy are nothing more than 'deplorables'. Rather than slowly watching the edifice of liberalism crumble, it is time, I argue, to really think through where the problems lie and to address these head on.

Fourth, I turn to more favourably discuss the work of those who have noticed a gap between liberalism and the reality of how people make their lives meaningful, and who in response have sought to build a civil religion around liberal ideals. Notwithstanding the good intentions involved in this approach, I suggest that it reproduces a key shortcoming of liberalism: it is focused on how those in positions of power can guide the masses 'across the Red Sea'. It fails to reflect on the stories that liberally oriented people are creating on the ground, as they navigate between their desire for equal dignity for all, and the reality of a landscape that has become deeply divided.

This critique of critiques then lays the ground for my own approach. Rather than inventing and imposing a new spirit of political participation from the top down, I start where people are at. By reflecting on the myths, rituals, magic and traditions of a selection of 'anywheres' in the somewhere they call home, I will show how they reconcile a universalist ethics with the human need to feel rooted in a particular history and place. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 4, I choose to work with liberally oriented people for whom neither religion nor its renunciation figures strongly in their identity, most of whom are highly educated, and who are of a range of ages, ethnicities and sexualities. I do so because I want to understand liberalism's limits among its ideal citizens as they seek to build a movement in their communities. I focus on individuals involved in one way or another with a broad-based community organization called Metro Vancouver Alliance (MVA) that brings together religious groups, trade unions, community groups, and schools to work towards the common good. Affiliated organizations can be found in the US, UK, Germany and Australia, and similar organizations can be found in Hong Kong, India and South Africa. I focus on such groups to ensure that I am working with people engaged in building bridges at the grassroots. Understanding how they do this provides important lessons for how to engage other liberally oriented people in similar processes. The people I have spent time with reject institutional religion; radically question their heritage; believe firmly in freedoms of sexuality and gender; and, indeed, operate within what I call global networks of sympathy. But they also seek to heal the consequences of social fragmentation and urban population turnover, working to embed people in relationships of mutual responsibility across differences of race, religion, values, gender and sexuality. Often this means softening their ideological stance and prioritizing local connection over conviction.

I spent a year with MVA between the beginning of July 2017 and the end of June 2018. This followed a number of years following and reflecting on the work of similar organizations around the world. I attended as many private meetings, training events and public actions as I could. Although I could not attend every event, when the lead organizers began to tease me that I was attending more events than they had time to attend, I knew

I was sufficiently integrated. Indeed, after a while the lead organizers would ask me what had happened in the meetings they missed. I got to know these organizers, as well as the more active members, intimately. I still have contact with many and, as I write, I have just returned from a second visit.

I interviewed 36 people. I was able to meet with almost every one of them before the interview so that we could get to know one another in more detail. In most cases we met on numerous occasions at a range of actions, and both the interviews and my analysis were informed by these meetings. With over a third of them, I like to think we became close friends. All of them inevitably changed me in some way but I hold a handful largely responsible for the ways in which I was transformed intellectually and ethically in my time in Vancouver. Their insights struck me the first time we spoke. I kept meeting with them in the hope of learning more, and, in the process, I was changed. For these reasons, I call the 36 people I worked with my friends. Although some of those with whom I had less contact might not see it that way, that is the bond I feel with them.

I am aware that describing my participants as my friends risks making my work appear unscientific. But I regard this attitude as bound up with a positivist, objectivist understanding of the social sciences that, though an important aspect of the pursuit of human understanding, can also be myopic and short sighted, if not hubristic. I wish to push against a positivist sociology focused on cause and effect and gilded in numbers, just as I do the rationalist politics that is so enamoured of it. Riffing on the likes of Lori Beaman (2017, 20) and Les Back (2007, 21; 2015), rather than mapping the entire ocean floor, I wish to find little treasures that can illuminate the intimacy of life 'down there'. Often, this means crossing the 'fourth wall' between researcher and researched to find the truths that only emerge between two people who have made themselves vulnerable to one another.

My friends are drawn from trade unions, educational institutions, and community groups. As befits Vancouver's status as a transient, immigration city, about a third of my friends were born and raised in Vancouver and a couple more in British Columbia (BC), the province of which Vancouver is by far the most populous city. Of the 16 born and raised in BC, five of those are the children of immigrants and two are Indigenous. Twenty-four of my friends are of White European origin, with three of those being ethnically Jewish; and three of East European origin – both marginalized groups in Canada. Five are ethnically Chinese; one Korean; one Filipino; one Latin American; one Indian; and, as stated, two Indigenous. Six told me that they are of sexual minorities. Nobody identified to me as being transgender. Sixteen had male characteristics and the other 20 female characteristics. Four are in their early twenties; 15 in their late 20s or early 30s; 11 in their late 30s or early 40s; four in their late 40s or

early 50s; and two in their 60s or early 70s. All but six have a university education. All are well read. Throughout the book I will frequently refer to my friends' level of education, ethnicity or sexuality as a reminder to the reader of the diverse backgrounds from which they come and the fact that they are working together across multiple differences. To protect their identity, I use pseudonyms both for my friends and for the organizations that employ them.

I locate the study in Vancouver because it is simultaneously at the vanguard of social and economic liberalism, and a hotbed of resistance. Vancouver is a multi-ethnic city with progressive approaches to LGBTQ+ issues. But it is also an unfinished colonial project with resource extraction at its core. And at the same time, it is a site of indigenous resurgence, reconciliation and indigenous-led environmental movements. By unravelling Vancouver's and my friends' complexities, I am able to complicate the necessarily narrow take on liberalism offered in Chapter 2. My friends teach me how to think globally while acting locally, and with their help I was able to theorize about the determinative power of liberal culture on a global scale while nonetheless appreciating the idiosyncratic ways in which it is promulgated and resisted in different contexts: what I call a varieties of liberalism approach.

I treat the solutions my friends are finding as simultaneously leading a global project of saving liberalism from itself, and as in many ways unique and unrepeatable. As they seek to navigate between freedom and solidarity, my friends arrive at cultural practices that are remarkably similar to those of the people that they regard as being deceived by religious and political lies, and who in turn denounce them as 'citizens of nowhere'. They are searching for and creating what they perceive as older forms of belonging and community rooted in place and tied together through shared myths, rituals, magical feelings, and traditions. But the specific content is often unique to Vancouver, drawn from interactions between hyper-local institutions; and from encounter with First Nations people (primarily the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh), with the wild landscape and with environmentally and socially destructive economic policies.

Chapters 5 to 8 detail the myths, rituals, magic and traditions that make my friends' work meaningful. It is not that each chapter tries to fill a hole created by liberalism, but that they collectively show how liberally oriented people can build a spirit of political participation in a way that champions individual dignity.

I begin with myths. While there is an increasing recognition of the role of narrative in politics (Alexander 2005; Mayer 2014), myth has received far less attention. It tends to get associated with the elsewhere and other, and those who study it are quickly put in a religious studies box. But I argue that this is to reproduce a core problem with liberal modernity: that we think we are, or ought to be, free from myth. As I have argued elsewhere (Stacey 2017a;

2018a), all paths of human life are shrouded in myths: stories of great events and characters that serve to illuminate the alternative worlds we envisage and work towards. Any ideology that succeeds in suggesting it is free from myth is an ideology whose myths have become so deeply ingrained as to hold sway over our understanding of what is real. Yet liberalism is special in this regard because one of its central myths is that myths themselves are dangerous, divisive and, most fundamentally, can be and have been overcome. Instead, I have argued, if myths are so fundamental to the way that we act in the world, then the aim of peace-loving people should not be to build a world without myths, but to replace divisive myths with hopeful myths.

In Chapter 5 I conceive of myths as supplements to normatively secular theories of action and ethics. Such theories have failed to take seriously the importance of myths to motivation. I propose a way of thinking about ethics as a constellation of myths that beholders pick at as needs require. These stories need to be constantly updated, refurbished, thickened or replaced lest stories emerge that challenge the overall family of resemblances. Ethical constellations do not replace but rather stand in for and supplement more systematically conceived moral systems. I show how my interlocutors develop a culture of online and offline myth sharing as a form of what Hirschkind calls a 'portable, self-administered, technology of moral selfhood' (Hirschkind 2006). These technologies are crucial in mobilizing the emotions necessary for extending sympathy beyond people's immediate sphere of interest to people of other races and creeds. Finally, I point to the key plots and characters that make myths effective (Campbell 2008).

Myths are not simply 'disembodied texts' (Perry 2012, 4–5, quoted in Alexander 2017, 20–1). Rather, a whole performance is involved in bringing them to life. Chapter 6 thus turns to explore how myths are brought to life in rituals. Far more than myth, ritual has been unharnessed from religion and made into something in which all humans engage (Goffman 2008). Yet there is much confusion about what role ritual plays. For some, its decline in modern society has been the cause of social fragmentation. For others, ritual is alive and well in secular societies. For some of these people ritual is to be found in the nationalist civil religions of the American presidency or the British monarchy (Bellah 1967; Hobsbawm 2012b; Williams 2013; Williams and Fuist 2014). From their perspective, the liberal tendency to question these top-down rituals is corrosive of collective identity per se. For others, ritual is to be found in handshakes and other informal gestures (Collins 2005). Ritual can be left unattended since it is always weaving people together beneath the discursive surface.

I treat rituals as embodied dramas: the performative realization of myths. Rituals are morally neutral and just as crucial to the development of an individualist culture as they are to a collectivist culture. I divide the rituals that are important for political participation into subtle gestures, solidarity

games and public dramas. In subtle gestures, the aim is to trigger change from the bottom up. My interlocutors seek to relate to each individual they meet on a less instrumental basis. I suggest that these small gestures act as carriers of magical feelings. For this reason, I challenge the standard narrative that suggests magical feelings necessarily decline as structures fall into place. Magic is not just a rupture but can be found in planned encounters. In solidarity games, the aim is to assist individuals in once again imagining themselves as part of an institution and, through this, a collective. In public dramas, the aim is to plot a myth in dramatic form, drawing the audience through the fourth wall, into the story and allowing them to experience moral transformation (Alexander 2004). Public dramas seek to change people from the top down by literally staging an intervention.

Magic is another term, like myth, which has been used to delegitimize certain ways of understanding the world. Early theorists of magic like Tylor ([1871] 2016) saw magic as a competitor to science. Contemporary theorists of magic among the non-religious like Irvine and Kyriakides (2018) similarly show how in turbulent environmental and economic contexts, their participants resort to magical thinking when all rational resources are expended. For Evans-Pritchard (1976) and, more recently, Stroeken (2012) on the other hand, magic is a way of attributing moral weight or meaning to a situation. Magic doesn't compete with science but complements it.

In Chapter 7 I develop this theory. Magic is a feeling which is ascribed to moments that convince us that another world is possible. It is both the source of myths and the feeling one gets when myths are embodied and emulated in rituals. Magic is thus woven into activism, which often involves taking on causes that all the evidence suggests are impossible to win or else already lost. In an individualist, instrumental exchange-based society, standing together "like a wall holding back the tide", as one interlocutor puts it, is magical. My interlocutors do not dispute scientific explanations for these events. Rather, they imbue these events with a richness that causal explanations alone seem *aesthetically* insufficient to explain. I focus on what I call 'substantive poetry' and 'enchanted speech' wherein people ascribe a power to things that they know not to be real, and yet which they performatively imbue with a reality.

The heaviest work towards my claim that self-expression requires being embedded in a community is found in Chapter 8. I treat tradition as a larger context into which one's myths, rituals and moments of magic fit. There is an abiding desire, I argue, for one's story to fit within a larger whole – to be inherited from past exemplars and passed on to future generations. I show how liberals struggle with this reality as they try to select a past that is free from exclusionary baggage, and to imagine a future self, looking back and judging their actions in the present. The key to building tradition in an inclusionary way, I argue, is by understanding that tradition is both an object *and* a process. It is a litany of stories and performances that are handed down,

but it is also the process of selecting what is to be received from the past and what to be handed on. The question then is not only 'what are the myths, rituals and magical moments that we want to pass on?' but also, and more fundamentally, '*how* will we decide, and *who* will be involved?'

Chapter 9 concludes by offering an alternative model of truth with an attendant politics. I claim that liberalism has become obsessed with two ideas of truth that are supposed to save us but are in fact digging us into a deeper hole. The first is rational truth: something is only true if it can be logically argued or empirically demonstrated. This model of truth tends to fit well with top-down, technocratic politics. The second is confessional truth: something is true because it feels true for me. This model fits well with grassroots identity politics. To complement these, I offer a third understanding of truth: compassionate truth, that is, the truth we experience when we engage with the being before us from their perspective. Compassionate truth is elicited by the myths, rituals, magic and traditions that liberals have lost sight of in their relentless march towards progress. By reconnecting with these, they can begin to reconnect with those they despise and, in the process, find common ground once more.

Many liberally oriented readers will be and have been instantly turned off by my talk of the spirit of political participation. After centuries of seeking to liberate ourselves from myths, rituals, magic and traditions, it is with horror that many people have seen the return of these elements in populism. Reason, they feel, is the only safeguard against violent oppression. I ask such readers for patience. It is with you in mind that I have written this book, and I carry these concerns with me through the writing of each chapter. I would ask, however, that before you go on, you do bear one thing in mind: secular rationality is the dominant ideology of our time. If it has failed to safeguard us against populism in what is increasingly recognized as the most secure and prosperous era, both historically and for the foreseeable future, what is to say it will safeguard us in the turbulent years ahead?

2

What's Liberalism Got to Do with It?

In our attempt to offer equal dignity to all regardless of background, and to stand up to institutions that fail to safeguard people's dignity, we liberally oriented people have enabled an ideology that makes people suspicious of institutions per se and the traditions that uphold them. We have convinced people that the only way to make their lives meaningful is to discover their own path, encouraging them to cut ties with any institutions that stand in their way: from churches and mosques, to movements and parties, to families and friendships. In the process, we have separated them from crucial sources of meaning and belonging and have made it increasingly difficult to work together towards common goals. Meanwhile, in order to govern these increasingly disparate individuals, we have invented a mode of public reasoning that is in principle agreeable to anyone, regardless of their background and positionality, but which appears to appeal to no one. Because such reasoning is thought to require indifference and a high level of education and thus cannot be entrusted to just anyone, we have come to accept an understanding of politics as something that is done *to* people, or on their behalf, rather than *by* them and with them. And every so often, when people revolt, usually from the right, we either stand our ground like mighty old-growth trees in a forest fire, hoping we'll be left in one piece and that, in time, a new forest will emerge around us, or we make mild concessions to right-wing populists and nativists, dredging up the symbols of yore such as faith, flag and family. In either case, possibilities for genuine reform and renewal are lost. In this chapter I explain how we got here and why it matters.

Given the sensitive and divisive nature of the topic, it is important to stress again that I do not wish to dismiss liberalism outright or rediscover some lost golden age. I cherish the many liberties that have been achieved in contemporary Western societies and I do not wish to revive oppressive structures of the past. My argument is subtler than this. What I want to

suggest instead is that while the liberal ideal of offering equal dignity to all is laudable, liberalism fails to achieve this. In an attempt to relieve us from the oppressive institutions of the past, liberalism has made us suspicious of institutions per se. This has left us exposed to two super-institutions: the state and the market. Let me dive in.

We need to talk about liberalism

Liberalism is a funny creed in that most of us who live under its auspices rarely consider ourselves to be liberals, or of our shared domain as, say, 'liberaldom'. While many people seem to get the gist of a term like 'the free world', there is limited discussion as to what this means in practice. In the US, 'liberal' was until recently used as an aspersion for what Europeans tend to call social democrats (Appiah 2001; Rodgers 2004). In this instance, the term is derived from the modern 'New Deal' liberalism of Roosevelt. Europeans of the early 20th century called this 'new liberalism', which arose as a middle ground between classical liberalism and socialism, seeking predominantly free markets, while allowing for a degree of state intervention to promote equality of opportunity. In Canada and the UK, new liberalism is associated with the left wings of the Liberals and Liberal Democrats respectively, both of which are flanked to the left by a more socially democratic alternative.

With the rise of populism at the beginning of the 2010s, 'liberal' came to be used in the US and UK as an insult meaning unrooted elites who support racial, religious, gender and sexual equality as well as, somewhat paradoxically, immigration from places with very different attitudes on these matters. After all, supporting immigration is no skin off their backs. They are anyway mostly living in luxury apartments in the trendy parts of major cities where they rarely have to rub shoulders with those that differ from them. They are 'anywheres' whose identity is chosen and whose allegiance is to abstract, universal concepts such as liberty and equality; as opposed to 'somewheres', whose identity and allegiance are to the people, institutions and places that surround them – so the story goes (Goodhart 2017, 34–8).

While this critique is quite simplistic – not least because it suggests that the people risking their lives to protect vulnerable migrants are in cahoots with the governments, resource-extractive industries, arms dealers and monetary institutions forcing people to migrate – it is important to recognize that it is not baseless. The dominant philosophies of our time, as well as dominant values, policies and practices on the ground, do bear some resemblance to these criticisms. We need to acknowledge where the critiques are and are not factually justified, before we decide whether they are morally justified.

In the following I try to account for those aspects of liberalism that contribute to its present failings. It is important to note that I do not consider the story I tell as representing the entirety of liberal thinkers or

thinking (for a broader overview, see Manent 1996; Rosenblatt 2018). I am aware, for example, that both David Hume and Adam Smith emphasized the importance of emotions in cultivating virtuous behaviour (Hume [1739] 2004; Smith [1759] 2002). And I am aware that Rawls goes further than Habermas in making accommodations for spirited forms of reasoning (Nussbaum 2015, 9–10; Tamimi Arab 2022). This said, however, the broad contours I offer will be comprehensive enough to demonstrate how the many, seemingly unrelated iterations of liberalism outlined earlier in fact share some core tenets, the realization of which has undermined the capacity to imagine and enact alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. I further want to stress that I do not think that the aspects I mention are necessarily problematic when emphasized to *any* degree or in *any* circumstances. I simply maintain instead that they are essential for understanding some of the impasses plaguing contemporary political culture.

I am going to draw together both philosophical ideas of liberalism as they emerge historically, and social scientific accounts of how these ideas have played out in reality. The world is not a blank slate, and no philosophy is simply transposed from a book onto the world. Nor for that matter is it all that easy to trace what Alexander calls the 'proximate actors and agencies' through which ideas are made into reality (Alexander 2005, 14). It is easy enough to explain how a particular book became popular, was read by this or that person and translated into this or that context, such as the fabled scene in which Margaret Thatcher slammed Friedrich Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* on the table and said, "This is what we believe." But it is far harder to trace the myriad ways in which an ideology comes to dominate the minds of a people. What I try to do instead is to detail the ways in which ideas that have dominated in the academy have *also* unfolded in practice.

The broad contours I offer here will form the basis of my 'critique of critiques' of liberalism in Chapter 3. Although this overview gives a good basis for understanding numerous iterations of liberalism throughout the world, it should not be used as a monolithic guide to what is going on in any given context. Instead, I offer a sort of 'history without a place' and recommend that readers think critically about whether and in what ways this history applies in their own context. I encourage what I call, following those who have spoken of 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2000) and 'multiple secularities' (Burchardt et al 2015), a 'variety of liberalisms' approach, wherein we recognize that certain themes are globally circulating even if they play out very differently in each context. By way of an example, and by way of setting the scene for the rest of the book, in Chapter 4 I turn to detailing the variety of liberalism found in Vancouver, and I summarize how my friends' work begins to overturn *that* variety's shortcomings.

I suggest that liberalism is dominated by four interconnected ideas: individualism, the severing of head and heart, the social contract and

public rationality. These ideas are upheld by three mechanisms: the state, the market and civil society. Although these mechanisms deliver unparalleled freedom to choose how to live one's life, I argue, they also corrode the ways in which those choices are made meaningful. This has four consequences primarily. First, liberated from the institutions that impose meaning on them, many people find themselves at a loss as to how to make life meaningful on their own terms. Second, because the ideal relationship is one freely entered into and opted out of, people become increasingly contractarian in the way that they approach everything from political parties to their sex life. Third, because we increasingly only enter into contracts with institutions and individuals that meet all of our ideological requirements *before* we walk through the door, it becomes more and more difficult to mobilize at the grassroots. Finally, and giving this book a new sense of urgency, these three consequences converge on a fourth: the rise of the radical right as a reactionary response. Any vision that is to save liberalism from itself must find a way to offer equal dignity to all in theory without succumbing to these same pitfalls in practice.

Four ideas

The four ideas to be discussed in this section are so inextricably intertwined that separating them out is necessarily artificial. Nevertheless, understanding each as a separate category allows us to better grasp *how* they feed into one another, the mechanisms that are invented to implement them, and the problems that follow for social and political life.

Individualism

Individualism is liberalism's core idea and as such requires most attention. At its root is an assumption with far-reaching consequences as to people's understandings of how they arrive at truth, meaning and moral judgements, and with this, how and why they should engage with other people: namely, that meaning can be, and is at its most pure when, arrived at independently of external input.

The history of individualism in the West is inextricably bound up with the history of Christianity. This does not mean that all of Christianity is or that all Christians are consumed by inwardness – far from it – but that the tradition of interiority first emerged as one among many threads of theological reflection. Already in the writings of St Paul, circa 50–60 CE, we find that one's particular background and even one's obedience to the law no longer defines a person. Instead, it is one's internal conviction in the truth of the resurrection that determines one's character. And indeed, it is not for others to decide whether one's faith is true (Badiou 2003, 21–2).

Although Paul need not be read in this Protestant way, doing so will prove important in the formation of ideas still to come.

In the last few years of the 4th century CE, drawing on the earlier philosophy of Plotinus, Augustine introduces the notion that the soul seeks its highest good not in something external but within itself (Cary 2003, 25). And later, drawing on stoical thinking, Augustine claims that we each have within us an individual will and thus the freedom to choose between right and wrong (Tornau 2020). This does not mean, however, that people can simply be 'true to themselves' in the contemporary sense. Indeed, in his *City of God*, Augustine criticizes the Roman obsession with individual '*dominium*, honour and glory' (Milbank [1991] 2013, 405).

Just over a millennium later, in the 16th century, wealth and, with it, education and literature have spread. As a result, more people become aware of the long-standing legitimacy of inward reflection. Martin Luther and many of his contemporaries begin to question why the church should be able to mediate between the individual soul and God. From this point forwards, a philosophy focused on interior conviction and sincerity develops in which authenticity trumps truth. This new philosophy is by no means purely liberatory and in fact brings with it a new existential angst. Descartes provides a good example of how the new philosophy of interiority deals with this anxiety. His ([1641] 2019) revelation, 'I think therefore I am', followed from an intense line of questioning as to whether, in a new, Copernican world, anything at all could be taken for granted (Seigel 2005, 54). In this context, Descartes came to see 'reason as most pure and solid when it was free of corruption by … social and cultural experience' (Seigel 2005, 62). From this moment forwards, it is not the church, the relationships in which we are embedded, or even our sensory experiences that confirm our existence to us, but the sheer fact that we are thinking things. Descartes' revelation proved pivotal in shaping two divergent traditions of individualism. According to the first, each of us has within us the capacity and duty to develop a rational self that stands outside of the laws of nature, rules over our sentiments, and guides our actions (see Seigel 2005, chapters 2, 3, 5 and 9). As we shall see, the idea that it is possible to stand outside of one's context and control one's emotions becomes crucial to modern understandings of moral and economic self-responsibility, as well as to how political order is legitimized. This line of thinking can be found in Locke and Smith but is especially strong in Kant and, later, Habermas. According to the second tradition, which develops largely through critiquing the first, a person's own deepest feelings are the most legitimate source of truth. We see signs of this way of thinking in early modern art, such as when, a few decades before Descartes' public interventions, Shakespeare's Polonius insists 'to thine own self be true' (*Hamlet* 1.3.78). It begins to flourish in the writings of Rousseau and Samuel Richardson, which emphasize that 'all people are fundamentally

similar because of their inner feelings … and desire for autonomy' (Hunt, cited in Blom Hansen 2009, 11). And it finds its fullest expression in the Nietzschean notion of affirmation, whereby the individual breaks free even from the action and reaction of ideas in history, producing a truth that emerges purely from within (Deleuze 2005, 175). In this tradition, truth is confessional: we each have within us our own truth.

Although these theoretical innovations marked pivotal moments in the intellectual history of individualism, it is only relatively recently that a majority of people in Western countries have started to reject traditional forms of authority in favour of their own convictions. Looking at 19th-century America, for example, liberalism was only really felt among wealthy white men – and even then, not thoroughly. Indeed, for many this remained the case right up until the late 20th century. Women were caught within an economy designed to render them dependent on husbands. Black Americans were first slaves, later second-class citizens, and still at present the victims of violence, injustice and exclusion (Stovall 2021). Industrial workers were caught 'between private dreams of success, rituals of masculine authority, and powerful visions of class and craft solidarity' (Rodgers 2004, 210).

Across the Western world, it is really the 1960s that mark a step change in identity. Since then, there has been a rapid rise in those who do not identify with any religion. And among Christians, even those within the church are less likely to take the Bible as the word of God or to follow church teachings (Bruce 2011b, 159–72; Hart 2014). People no longer place much stock in obedience to external authority, or the fulfilment of their role within a higher order, and are instead focused on carving out their own identity and finding inward fulfilment (Smith and Denton 2005; Bellah et al 2007; Aupers 2011; Bruce 2011). It has been suggested that these changes indicate nothing less than a spiritual revolution (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) and that the most successful institutions of the future will be those that cater to people's self-expression needs. Religion is, moreover, only the most visible indicator of these changes. While initially these developments are *sustained* by the rise of the state (Milbank [1991] 2013, 19–20), soon people begin to turn away from the state itself (Rosenblatt 2018, 229). And so when it comes to politics, people increasingly ignore national elections in favour of grassroots action (Pickard 2019, 57–88). People are moreover turning away from didactic journalism and towards media that allow them to express their own opinion (Orehek and Human 2017). With time, individualism comes to consume all spheres, with the result that at present knowledge itself and the 'experts' that produce it are called into question whenever their opinions seem to infringe on individuals' right to choose (Clarke and Newman 2017). This shift has become particularly problematic amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as people refuse, often with threats of violence, to be vaccinated or to wear a face covering. Paradoxically, this interior conviction

is increasingly expressed in exterior signs. From headscarves, to tattoos, to sex reassignment surgery, people feel compelled to impose their interior convictions upon their bodies and environments. Perhaps the body has become the last legitimate space for expressing one's private spirit publicly.

The turning away from traditional sources of authority gives way to, and is bolstered by, an idea of ethical pluralism: the notion that there is no single way to live a good life. The highest ethical standard becomes withholding judgement on how another person chooses to live their life. '[We] live in a world where people have a right to choose for themselves their own pattern of life, to decide in conscience what convictions to espouse, to determine the shape of their lives in a whole host of ways that their ancestors couldn't control' (Taylor 1991, 2). In this context, it becomes ever less acceptable to criticize others for the choices that they make. Provided they are being 'true to themselves', it is not for anyone else to judge (Taylor 1991, 14). Choice itself is the 'crucial justifying reason' for an action (Taylor 1991, 38; see also Norris and Inglehart 2019, 89–90). On this point, a kind of tension begins to emerge. Very few of us living in liberal societies would readily welcome a scenario in which our right to choose a life of our own is curtailed, and yet we equally feel that some behaviours ought to be called out.

The severing

Growing conterminously with these developments is a second idea. Following from but expanding on the work of Timothy Morton (2017, 20–5), I want to call this idea the severing: the separation between the heart and the head, poetry and philosophy, private passions and public reason. Although the severing is a long-standing and ongoing process in Western intellectual history, it becomes increasingly crucial to the European moral and political imaginary from the 17th century on. As already suggested, one of the first major shifts was Copernicus' assertion that the earth travels around the sun, rather than vice versa, and Descartes' subsequent search for a new, rational grounding for certainty. Following Descartes' revelation, there ensues an ontological and moral obsession with the autonomy of reason. In many thinkers the need for a morality that is free from the corrupting influence of personal biases leads them to move the object of moral reflection away from actually existing individuals and towards the abstract 'Individual'. Smith, for example, thinks it crucial that we imagine an 'abstract man' observing us when making decisions (quoted in Seigel 2005, 149). And for Kant, whether or not an action is right in any given context depends on whether it would still be right if made into a universal rule. The need for this abstract form of moral reasoning becomes paramount amidst the so-called (but see Diefendorf 2014) 'wars of religion'. Up until this moment in the history of Europe, collective identity and political legitimacy are still

cultivated through myths, rituals, magic and traditions. But as individual interpretations of Christian scripture, ethical duty and political legitimacy proliferate, and various political factions adopt alternate interpretations that suit their own ends, theology loses its political power from both below and above. For those resisting authority, any attempt to build *public* spirit is seen as a sly attempt to impose one's own interpretation on others. For those seeking to hold on to authority, a new standard of legitimacy is required that can transcend subjective beliefs.

The severing is further bolstered by what has been called the 'ontology of violence' or else the 'pessimistic anthropology': the assumption that if left to their own devices, the strong will impose their will on the weak (Milbank [1991] 2013, 4; Milbank and Pabst 2016, 21–5). It ends up appearing in the interests of individuals to place power in the hands of a rational ruler with a monopoly of violence. We can intuit how widespread this idea is today simply by considering how much fear and suspicion is generated by projects that draw on myths, rituals, magic and traditions. We tend to see people who conjure a spirit of resistance as great manipulators, and those who follow them as brainwashed. And so here another tension emerges. Many of us want to believe the best in people and to experience moments of deep trust, and yet we are also deeply fearful of what would happen if trust were all we had to safeguard us against the will of others.

The social contract

The emerging consensus between the governed and their governors coalesces around our third idea: the social contract . At this point, I will introduce the social contract only very briefly, bringing it back in as the chapter progresses. Because meaning is at its purest when free from external influence, because there is no best way to live one's life, and because any attempt to persuade us otherwise is really an act of manipulation, it follows that there are no involuntary, pre-contractual bonds to which people owe their allegiance. Institutions, from churches and mosques, to schools and jobs, and eventually even to families and friendships, can only make claims on people if they have entered into them on the basis of a hypothetical, tacit or deliberate contract.

Public rationality

Notice that the social contract takes the form of a tradition-transcendent form of reasoning. This, then, is the fourth idea. Severed from private passions, a new public rationality will take the place of public theology. The basic dictum of this public rationality is that political decisions must be articulated in such a way as to be, at least in principle, understandable and acceptable to all people regardless of the tradition in which they are raised. Anything else amounts

to obscurantism. This ideal is first articulated by Grotius in 1625: the same year that the Thirty Years War broke out. For Grotius, political arguments must 'have a degree of validity even if we should concede [*etiamsi daremus*] that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God' (Grotius in Miller 2021). Though the new rationality aimed at first only to put religion to one side and thus appears coterminous with secularism, it later aimed to do away with ideology altogether. Following the Second World War and the alarming spread of fascism and communism, the principle is reformulated and reproduced in the works of John Rawls (1987; 1999; 2005) and Jürgen Habermas (2005; 2011). For Rawls (1999, 11), a just polity must be constructed without favour for any particular 'conception of the good'; for Habermas (2011, 25), it must be justified in a 'secular language'.

Ironically, post-Second World War social theory might serve as one source of the hubris that has developed around the notion of rational purity. Just as thinkers before them had denounced religion proper as the great manipulator, so thinkers like Levi-Strauss ([1964] 1983), Barthes (1972), and Foucault (1982) creatively identified and unravelled the myths upholding unequal and imperial political orders. Whole subdisciplines of sociology still operate in the shadows of these towering figures today. Scholars demonstrate how discourse X sustains illusion Y, which underpins system of oppression Z. One might have suspected that this work of peeling away at the ostensibly objective edifice of modern societies would serve to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a logic that is free from cultural baggage. On the contrary, the illocutionary impact of this work seems to have been to build a wall of separation between 'them', those enamoured by false gods and shiny ideas, and 'us', who see through the illusion. To my mind, this impact seems best evidenced by the dearth of sociological work aimed at building positive mythologies to take the place of those being deconstructed.

As we saw with the social contract, according to this new public rationality, the rational individual is both the methodological starting point for arguments and the normative end against which those arguments are judged. It can no longer be assumed that anything is shared in common but the desire of individuals to preserve themselves and maintain their freedom (Milbank [1991] 2013, 10; Michéa 2009, 15). The result is that this desire becomes the primary basis on which political decisions are legitimized. Stewardship of the land, solidarity and the cultivation of good character, each at one time considered the basis on which a society could be judged, now become secondary to improvements in security and wealth. What is more, as I shall discuss further in the next section when I get to explaining the rise of the liberal state, because this new public rationality is highly technical, it follows that only certain people can engage in it. These 'specialists without spirit' (Weber 2001, 124) take it upon themselves to guide society from above,

leaving people disenchanted by, and alienated from, political life (Weber 2001, 59). Here, then, a cruel irony emerges. Finally liberated from theologies and ideologies for which the life of any given individual is less important than the greater good, people now find that the earth, life itself and their own dignity are expendable in the name of economic growth and security (Taylor 1991, 5). Anyone who resists measures deemed to increase growth or security is quickly ridiculed and deemed irrational, from the witches in early modern Europe (Federici 2004), to indigenous people in the colonized world (Povinelli 2011), to those resisting COVID-19 containment measures.

Now for many readers, this turn to rationality, though perhaps a shame, is inevitable, even natural. Indeed, the bestselling textbooks in political science still too uncritically teach, following Weber's later writing, that societies have gradually progressed from traditional and charismatic forms of political legitimation to rational-legal forms (O'Neil 2017). Self-preservation is what is left behind when fantasies of cooperation have been untethered. Against this, we would do well to remember that it is part of the human condition to insist on the inevitability, necessity and naturalness of what is in fact contingent, constructed and soon to change (Lynch 2014). Marxists call this 'reification' (Silva 2013), while social constructionists prefer 'objectification' (Berger and Luckmann 1967). In the following chapters, I will explain how even as liberal social theorists and policymakers have denounced certain ways of thinking for being swamped in myths, rituals, magic and tradition, and lauded their own 'rationality', they have tended to mobilize these same elements in legitimating their projects. Saving liberalism from itself will require that liberally oriented people recognize the inalienable role of spirited elements in our lives, and find ways of mobilizing them to our advantage.

Three mechanisms

There is a single contradiction at the heart of liberalism that accounts for most of its discontents: in its aim to serve the abstract Individual, liberalism ends up ignoring and dehumanizing actually existing individuals. This contradiction is built into liberalism's tripartite infrastructure: the state, the market and civil society.

State

The social contract just discussed is foremost an agreement between individuals and an all-powerful state. Although the precise terminology did not develop until the sociological writings of Max Weber ([1919] 2004), it was as early as the 17th century (Hobbes [1651] 2017) argued that in order to protect individuals from institutions that would seek to violently impose their ideas of how a life ought to be lived, it was necessary to hand

over a 'monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force' to the state. According to this new way of imagining the world, the institutions that surround us, from mosques to schools to families, are the greatest threat to our autonomy, and the state its greatest guarantor. It is for this reason that it has become so commonplace for liberal states to intervene in institutions where these are deemed a threat to the rights of the Individual (Milbank 2009). I stress the abstract 'Individual' and not 'individuals' here because, as Muslims living in Europe have long understood, some forms of individuality and self-expression are more desirable than others (Laborde 2017, 32–6). A hypothetical handing over of power is at the foundation of the liberal political imaginary. And for that handover to make sense to us, we must have a particular idea of individuality in mind: one with freedom from institutional influence at its core.

Whereas this handover of power began at the level of law making, the state is increasingly expected to intervene in realms once considered private. From the 19th century onwards, hospitals and schools, places of work, churches and mosques, private members' clubs and families, have all been incrementally regulated by 'liberal agendas of personal freedom, racial and gender equality, children's rights, and minority rights' (Laborde 2017, 108). My point here is not to lament the triumph of egalitarian principles, but just to notice the mechanism through which those principles are being introduced.

It is important to be clear that this handover of power is assuaged but not negated by the right to vote. This is because 'democracy appeals to the individual as the subject of law making, yet filters out, glides over and holds down the expression of individual will in the forms of representativity' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 25). Liberal societies have tended to favour representation over participation. It is not the average person but those they have elected who make decisions. And those they have elected are increasingly from similar backgrounds, with similar educational paths. What seems in keeping with pure reason for those in power may seem utterly unfair to those who have elected them. People thus often feel that there is no real choice to be made at the ballot box. With time, representation has increasingly been understood as a process of drawing on social scientific methods, from big data to representative samples, to gauge the electorate's desires and meet them, as opposed to *en*gaging them in the process of deliberation and action (Glasman 2011). Although the participatory gap is seemingly resolved by increasingly popular deliberative methods such as citizens' assemblies, in reality these only ever engage a small proportion of the population and ultimately rely for their legitimacy on the representativeness of those involved. 'Take back control' has been one of the most powerful political slogans of the last few years. What often goes unrecognized is that the feeling that control has been lost, and thus the power of this narrative, is intimately linked with the rise of technocratic governance across the

Western world in the period following the Second World War (Centeno 1993; Gould 2011; Pastorella 2016; Stacey 2018b; Godard 2020).

As states' duties to the Individual increase in the form of social security, so mass bureaucracies and legal frameworks develop to facilitate the distribution of resources. This development proves a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the welfare state facilitates individualization by giving people a safety net, on the basis of which they can leave oppressive families and communities behind and go off into the world in search of fulfilment. But on the other hand, because of this, people lose touch with networks of reciprocity and support. As Weber has argued, the new welfare state must ignore individual circumstances entirely in order to provide the most efficient system (for a more detailed explanation see Stacey 2018a, 111). We leave behind the institutions that moulded us, but in order to do so we have to now remould ourselves to fit with the state's expectations of those who receive its support (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 2, 203; WRR [The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy] 2002, 52): an individual who is hard working, efficient and willing to put fulfilment and dignity to one side in order to labour in whatever job is available. We have to present ourselves as a 'subject of value' (Skeggs 2011, 505; see also Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018).

The newly disembedded Individual is thus simultaneously re-embedded in a bilateral relationship with the state. This happens most obviously through the law courts. In an increasingly impersonal but also peaceful society, people more and more turn to courts to settle disputes. In the law courts, people learn 'to see the world in terms of autonomous selves, meeting in an arena of neutral rules, alchemizing competing private interests into collective justice' (Rodgers 2004, 215). And justice is both decided upon and enforced by representatives of the state. In the English-speaking world, this turn to the impersonal and ultra-rational was paradoxically upheld by myths of heroic lawyers like Daniel Webster and Clarence Darrow (Rodgers 2004, 215). As anthropologists have demonstrated, and as I experienced myself in counselling a friend about an insolent neighbour recently, the rule of law demands a powerful element of self-development, whereby those under its auspices must learn to separate what is emotional from what is legal. Lawyers thus make 'proper liberal subjects … out of ordinary litigants' (Merry 1990).

Market

The second mechanism to which the contractarian logic leads is the market. To explain how, it is important to clear up two misconceptions. The first is that the state and the market are opposed. Still living amidst the shadow of industrial society, we are used to thinking that the state and market roughly align with the left and right of politics respectively and as such are

the manifestations of diametrically opposed ideologies. On the one side sit those for whom the state is the guarantor of equality; on the other sit those for whom the obsession with equality is a threat to freedom. In fact, both the state and the market are based on the principle of the illegitimacy of constraints that have not been voluntarily entered into. Nor is this alignment between state and market merely theoretical. Whereas free marketeers often claim that all they want is to be left alone by the state, they always in reality rely on the state to claim and defend their physical and intellectual property; to develop infrastructure; to invest in research; to educate and civilize their future workforce; and to severely punish those whose passions fail to align with private property and enterprise (Federici 2004; Povinelli 2011; Harcourt 2012, 94). This speaks to the second misconception. The oft-used notion of the invisible hand assumes that there is something natural in the way that the market operates, whereby, as a result of each individual acting purely in their own self-interest, the good of all is ultimately served. This idea is best known by Adam Smith's dictum that '[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner but from their regard to their own interest' ([1776] 2008). Put simply, it is in the interests of traders to keep their costs low and their quality high to ensure that customers keep returning. In smaller communities, reputation alone is sufficient to maintain moral behaviour. The contractarian logic is underwritten by the fact that a trader is likely to see their customers on a regular basis, and that their customers will talk with one another. As populations grow and urbanize, trust and reputation must be replaced with surveillance mechanisms like bookkeeping, through which '[e]xchange becomes precise, impersonal, undertaken by parties equal and independent' (Rodgers 2004, 214). Whether markets are local or widespread, deals are underwritten by a state with a monopoly on violence. The problem is that on the one hand, ever more surveillance is required, while on the other, no amount of surveillance, whether gossip among neighbours, bookkeeping or CCTV, is ever enough to safeguard against cheating (Milbank and Pabst 2016, 119). The functioning of markets is ultimately reliant on goodwill, and yet capitalism is parasitic upon that goodwill.

It is further important to recall that the liberal state makes markets partly by moulding people into traders of their own labour. People are rarely taught how to be self-sufficient on their own land or how to work together with a community to lead a rich and fulfilling life. Instead, we are encouraged to start writing our autobiographies and passing tests for the right to realize them (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 32–4, 60). We then enter into the labour market, where we are often forced to break ties with family, community and place, to take control of our own destiny, and to compete in an increasingly global market for finite jobs against those with very similar qualifications to our own. At the same time, there is no such thing as a job

for life anymore. In this context, the 'do-it-yourself biography can swiftly become the breakdown biography' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 3). The result is an increasing gap between winners and losers. Though there is no clear, causal link, the young, well educated, successful and well connected tend to support liberal ideas, while the older, less educated, unfortunate and marginalized hold on to 'older' values, or else turn to more radical alternatives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 38; Goodhart 2017; Ley-Cervantes and Duyvendak 2017).

It is worth remembering that alternatives do exist. Even as Smith was extolling the virtues of self-interest, his contemporaries like Antonia Genovesi were stressing 'that you and your butcher might well care about each other as neighbours, and this could influence even your economic transactions' (Milbank and Pabst 2016, 138). Indeed, Karl Polanyi (2001, 47) insists that if there is one thread uniting pre-modern and non-Western societies, it is 'the absence of the motive of gain; the absence of the principle of labouring for remuneration; the absence of the principle of least effort; and, especially, the absence of any separate and distinct institution based on economic motives'.

If examples are hard to find today, it is because the violent spread of the free market logic has tended to consign alternatives to the margins of society and ultimately to history. Hence the phrase that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. In fact, alternative ways of imagining and acting in the world can still be found today. It's just that whereas people could once point to entire civilizations from which they drew inspiration, today, following centuries of land robbery and imperialism, they must make do with alternatives that pop up amidst the ruins of capitalism (Tsing 2017): from alternative currencies, to time-banks, to Community Supported Agriculture.

Civil society

Alongside these two mechanisms sits a third: civil society. Ostensibly this is a realm free of coercion, in which people can organize as they see fit. But it is worth noting that the emergence of this free sphere of debate between autonomous individuals was inextricably bound up with the rise of a new capitalist class who could afford the time to critically reflect on the political issues of the day and who desired greater control over political decision making. Civil society theories take these uninhibited individuals as both the methodological starting point for argument and the normative endpoint by which arguments are judged.

The ideal of civil society began in the thinking of Kant. Dissatisfied with what he saw as the excessive emphasis on personal conviction and feeling outlined earlier, Kant encouraged people to formulate and act on the basis

of universal ethical imperatives that were in principle agreeable to anyone. This ethical vision involved desire, but it was no longer acceptable to merely be true to oneself. Instead, as with Aristotle before him, Kant felt that the desires had to be tutored so as to become indistinguishable from Truth (Blom Hansen 2009, 13). This seemingly abstract ideal becomes grounded and rather comically quaint when the great philosopher, famous for his opaqueness, makes a rare attempt at a kind of gentleman's guide to dinner parties (Kant [1798] 2006). We are told that the body is only to be satisfied in order to, and to the extent that it serves to, increase the capacity of the mind to be engaged in debate. 'Excessive eating and drinking that does not encourage sociability or the exchange of thought, has something shameful about it' (Kant, quoted in Cohen 2008, 317). Descartes' revelation now becomes the basis of human dignity. Indeed, one who, due to excessive consumption of alcohol, cannot engage in polite conversation 'is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being' (Cohen 2008, 317). As Cohen (2008, 317) explains, this is because 'what makes a human being properly human, and thus worthy of respect, is precisely his capacity for reason and autonomy'. Apparently, dignity is conditional after all.

Though less extreme in his language than Kant, Jürgen Habermas ([1962] 1989) took a very similar stance when he reflected on the heyday of what he called the 'public sphere' in the Europe of Kant's time. Asking whether such a world could be reconstructed in his own time, he identified key conditions for debate, most important among which was individual autonomy and the capacity for rational-critical reflection.

This emphasis on what has been called 'cool passion' (Blom Hansen 2009) is problematic for a range of reasons. First, it ignores the fact that dispassionate dispositions are much easier to maintain for those already served by the status quo. 'Calm down' is a chide that women, ethnic minorities and activists of all kinds are far too used to hearing. The most common rebuke one hears from so-called 'moderates' as an activist is that they agree with our cause but not our methods. "What if anyone with a cause behaved like that?" they ask. But not all causes are equally just, equally pressing or equally long ignored by those with the power to make a difference. In addition, it is often policymakers who decide which topics and which methods are least likely to stir the emotions. The result is a depoliticized hierarchy of citizen engagement with cosy issues like cohesion and innocuous acts like voting at the top, and economic justice and civil disobedience at the bottom (Verloo 2018). Finally, as will be further argued in the course of this book, the emotions play a vital role in driving political engagement and creative action (Jasper 1998; 2018). Asking people to disengage their emotions is asking them to disengage altogether. While it is important that we maintain peace, peace-loving people have too long been the quietest in the room.

Four consequences

Any work seeking a middle way is always liable to misinterpretation by either side of the debate. I therefore want to once again stress that I too desire a culture characterized by a collective belief in the equal dignity of all regardless of background and positionality. The problem is that liberalism, the dominant ideology of our time, does not deliver. It seems to rob us off some of the crucial elements that make for a dignified life: the feeling of having a part to play within an overarching human story; participation in the decisions that shape one's life; the ability to plan into the future without fear of breakdown; and the capacity to take action collectively.

Individualism is at the core of this story. I have already been stressing that liberal mechanisms cultivate in us a desire to 'write' our own biography that is distinct from 'anachronistic' narratives associated with religion, class and family. Being, say, the good Samaritan, the comrade or the dutiful brother are no longer enough. Ultimately what we really need is enough physical and metaphorical space to find meaning for ourselves. The result is that in some sense we have never had more freedom. But here a few problematic consequences emerge.

Meaning fatigue

The first consequence is what I call meaning fatigue. For many people, the apparent freedom that comes from shedding ties turns out to be quite hollow. Identity is no longer a 'given' on the basis of belonging to a collective, but has become a 'task' (Cortois 2017, 409). What Sartre thought a universal human condition might better be thought a consequence of the liberal ideas and mechanisms I have been discussing: we are 'condemned to be free' (Sartre [1946] 2007, 26). It is emotionally taxing to have to daily reinforce one's identity: putting out a new tweet; instagramming another moment; measuring meaning in followers and 'likes'; writing and rewriting one's CV for the next short-term job. What people perhaps hadn't reckoned with is the vital role that institutions actually play in providing us with meaning. As I shall be arguing throughout this book, we need myths, rituals, magic and traditions in order to have some sense of meaning and belonging. These elements are often contained in what I call pre-contractual institutions and relationships: those that we have no choice but to be already embedded in, like the family or the local community, or else that we enter into for no other reason than to belong to something. As they break ties with a range of pre-contractual institutions, a number of people actually find themselves incapable of creating that independent meaning that they so deeply desired. This partly explains why depression, anxiety and suicide seem to proliferate at present (Cortois 2017, 416).

A lack of talent in spinning a good story is not the only problem. Even the most talented storytellers can only rewrite their autobiography so many times before they collapse in exhaustion. Each failure must be covered over or turned into an opportunity; each opportunity begins a new story. Our ability to write and get meaning from our own biography thus requires that we have some kind of financial security. And hence, as I have already been stressing, it is only those with the most social, cultural and economic capital who can and do live their lives in this way (Goodhart 2017). But I seriously doubt whether the go-it-alone life is ultimately in the interests of the middle classes either. Drawing on research into the differences between working- and middle-class people regarding how they spend their leisure time, Skeggs explains that

> our middle-class participants were anxious to convert all their time into events and activities to generate cultural and social capital. They considered television viewing to be a 'waste of time', suggesting that time was a premium value to be used productively to develop a future. All friendship networks were connected to future enterprise. (Skeggs 2011, 505)

Meanwhile, those who refuse to give in to this anxiety feel socially judged and politically demonized. They are the 'workshy', the 'chavscum' or the 'white trash'. Skeggs shows that working-class women often push against the logic of self-improvement, evaluating themselves and their friends instead according to how much of their time and attention they are able to give to one another. Before moving on, I want to emphasize that this is not merely some quaint but ultimately insignificant mode of resistance. This alternative mode of judgement, a judgement based not on one's convictions but on one's willingness to be present, will prove similar to my argument made throughout the book, that the liberal value of having a story of one's own, if it is to be meaningful, requires that people are willing to listen to that story. And this requires surrounding oneself with people willing to offer 'the gift of attention over time' (Skeggs 2011, 505). As I shall argue in the last chapter, public, rational truth and private, confessional truth need to be supplemented with relational, compassionate truth. The power of this alternative is in its simplicity. It does not call for us to overhaul society from above, but rather to start reimagining the way that we relate to people from below. Even from a self-centred perspective, this reimagining may prove worthwhile. As shall be seen throughout this book, but particularly in Chapter 8, my friends feel that the anxiety associated with the need to improve oneself reduces in proportion to one's ability to identify with a collective and, through that collective, to an overarching story about the human project.

The social as contract

The second problematic consequence of liberalism that I want to address is the shrinking meaning of the social. Because liberalism undervalues the pre-contractual 'we', the community of people to whom we owe things simply by virtue of living alongside them generation after generation, we only owe things to people and parties with whom we enter into a hypothetical, tacit or deliberate contract. In the previous section I explained how this logic had reshaped people's relationships with major public institutions including religion, politics and the media. Rather than offering an overarching narrative, successful institutions today seem to be those that enable people to express themselves. Here I want to suggest that this logic shapes much more personal relationships too. The data on engagement with one's local community and neighbours, for example, shows a clear downward trend (Putnam 2001; Putnam and Feldstein 2009). I am aware that this argument depends on a particular reading of the available data. Research suggests, for example, that while liberals place less value in family, they place more in friendship (Waytz et al 2019). The social does not shrink but rather shifts. But this speaks to exactly my point: our relationships to institutions and individuals are becoming choice based. We are less likely to engage with people just because they live next door. Often this is because we don't know how long we will be around for before the next setback or opportunity that makes us move.

As to friendship, it too is less popular than it used to be. In 1984 Americans had a modal average of three confidantes. In 2004 the average was zero (Brashears 2011; Brashears and Brashears 2015; McPherson et al 2006, 358). Almost half of the population (43.6 per cent) claimed that they discussed important matters with either no one or just one person. Perhaps one of the most striking shifts towards a contractarian logic is in that proverbially deepest of friendships: marriage. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, 9–11) show, for example, that whereas marriage was once seen as serving social aims beyond the couple in question, it has increasingly become a contract between two autonomous individuals that can be easily broken off. This does not mean, it must be stressed, that there is less passionate love in a marriage. Indeed, there may well be more. But it does mean that once that love is diminished, there is a much lower pressure to stay with someone on the grounds of loyalty.

Sex, too, is reshaped by this logic. Already by the early 1990s, it was being suggested that sex was increasingly perceived as an act of exchange between two autonomous, consenting individuals (Giddens 1992).

> Within this view, there is the assumption that sexual relationships no longer involve the collective transformation of individual needs and

> desires into transpersonal social forms, with all the moral obligations this involves, but instead that they rest merely on the reflexive construction of a mutually beneficial confluence of interests and needs. (Mellor and Schilling 1997)

Put simply, the act of sex is no longer necessarily regarded as a ritual of dissolving the self into a larger whole – 'when two become one', as the Spice Girls put it. Mellor and Schilling (1997) contest that the potentiality for self-transcending effervescence is 'immanent within bodies' rather than a product of one's imagination or discursive repertoire, and as such cannot be simply lost. There are always pre-contractarian grounds of contracts: feelings, values, beliefs. Yet while I am inclined to grant Mellor and Schilling some level of universal embodiment (and partly the point of this book is to point out that even among those for whom liberalism is most deeply embedded and whose interests it most serves we nonetheless see a lack of resonance, which might suggest that there is always something continuous beneath the discursive surface), it is important not to neglect the wealth of theory regarding discourse as performative, and repetitive performance as entraining a way of understanding and feeling *into* the body (Collins 2004; Winchester 2008; Scheve et al 2017; Dougherty 2018). From this perspective, it must be the case that sex – and friendship, and faith, and exchanging goods and services – does different things depending on how it is framed.

One of the key impacts of thinking contractually is that it is hard to get contracting selves to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of a greater good. Political scientists present the problem as one of free riding: if it is possible to avoid the costs of cooperation while enjoying the benefits for free, then people will always choose to do so. Take paying taxes in a social democracy as an example. Considered from a purely rational standpoint, so long as I can get away with not paying my taxes while enjoying the benefits of free healthcare, I will do so. The question, then, is how to ensure that people are not only thinking in terms of their self-interest but rather imagine themselves as part of a grander human project (Mayer 2014, 4–5).

I want to make clear here that I am not making a communitarian critique whereby 'principles of justice derive their moral force from values commonly espoused or widely shared in a particular community or tradition' (Sandel 1998, x; see also Walzer 2010, 6–10). Rather, I am suggesting that principles of justice derive their *emotional* force from these values. Although I believe that embeddedness within a community makes a life feel whole, I am less interested in what people ought to do than in how we can inspire them to do it. Nor do I intend, as do communitarians, to revalorize the legitimacy of existing, traditional communities on the basis that they sustain values such as belonging and solidarity (for the most recent iteration of this thinking, see Etzioni 2017, 98). Communitarians

have an unhelpful tendency to reinforce the binary way of thinking that I am trying to overcome in this book. Their writing can often make it feel as though we are presented with a choice between the homogeneous and solidary but ultimately oppressive institutions of the past, and a lonely future without any sources of solidarity or belonging (Putnam 2001; Putnam and Feldstein 2009; Putnam and Campbell 2012). This then leads to discussions of where to draw the line between a community's right to define its own rules and a government's duty to intervene in communities to safeguard the rights of individuals. My project is different: it is about showing how liberally oriented people are able to build communities in ways that uphold individual dignity. Rather than speaking up for the value of particular communities against the spread of liberal ideology, I want to explore how liberals themselves navigate between their universal ideals and their desire to create communities of place. And in this way I hope to influence both liberally oriented people and their critics. I hope that I can encourage liberals to soften the edges of their ideological outlook and make room for compassion and solidarity across differences. And I hope that I can encourage critics of liberalism to take a step back, give credit where it is due, and acknowledge the spaces in which liberally oriented people are building communities of compassion and solidarity.

This is where the spirit of political participation comes in. We need overarching stories of a human project, in which we are slowly progressing from the world as it is to the world as it should be. We need a people to whom we belong that is engaged in that project. And we need exemplars who, despite the temptations and obstacles presented by the world as it is, nonetheless push forwards towards the world as it should be, at great personal expense to themselves and without ever really knowing if that world can be achieved. The question is how to build such grand projects in ways that not only respect but valorize the equal dignity of all and enable people to express themselves.

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as just finding shared stories. Not only have our worlds radically diversified since the Second World War, the rise of the civil rights movement and postcolonial migration, but they have done so partly by virtue of a new overarching narrative that claims we each have the right to a life of our own, free from judgement, with its own unique set of beliefs and meanings. And this narrative has developed alongside a material increase in mobility. Already in the 1980s it was the case that if you didn't like your church, you could find another (Spickard 2006, 19); if you didn't like your friends, you could find a new group; if no groups appealed, you could move town. We have liberated ourselves from a principle written into the human genome: we will have to learn to compromise because the people around us are the only ones we have. With the rise of online, this transition has exponentially accelerated (Sunstein

2017). Whatever our views and tastes, we can find people like us across the world. One of the more alarming results of this has been that extremists and racists can find online fora in which their views are confirmed and consolidated. But this same development is also making all of us a little less willing to compromise.

Political fragmentation

This, then, is the third consequence of liberalism: the inability to mobilize politically from the grassroots. In a time in which we are all self-enclosed individuals who only enter into or stay with institutions insofar as they serve our highly specific needs, it becomes harder and harder to find any common ground. And when, on top of this, we are used to only working with individuals and institutions that agree with us on *all* issues, then we will refuse to work with, and in some cases refuse even to speak with or listen to, people we disagree with: as the phenomenon of 'no platforming' has so neatly demonstrated. In our present circumstances, people no longer need to divide us before they rule us; we have already divided ourselves.

This division, it should be noted, comes from two sides. Individuals are less willing to stay with institutions that fail to meet their particular package of identities and convictions. But at the same time, institutions themselves, partly because they must cater to these diverse packages of identities and convictions, become increasingly specialist and esoteric. And since even these cannot speak for everyone who seeks belonging under their umbrella, splinter groups form and groups become yet smaller and yet more niche.

The turn to the right

These three consequences converge on a fourth that gives this book a sense of urgency. It is partly from a sense of feeling disembedded from their institutions that people are turning to favour the radical right. Inglehart and Norris (2016, 29) explain that 'since about 1970, affluent Western societies have seen growing emphasis on post-materialist and self-expression values among the younger birth cohorts and the better-educated strata of society' – values, that is, such as autonomy and self-expression. They continue:

> This has brought rising emphasis on such issues as environmental protection, increased acceptance of gender and racial equality, and equal rights for the LGBT community. This cultural shift has fostered greater approval of social tolerance of diverse lifestyles, religions, and cultures, multiculturalism, international cooperation, democratic governance, and protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights. (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 29)

Just as soon as such values began to emerge, a backlash was present. But the marginal popularity of post-materialism in the early years meant people saw little need to resist. Not so today. Liberal values have been enshrined in law and in the culture of public arenas such as the university. The civil rights, gay rights and feminist movements, though far from finished, have radically emancipated people from the dominance of white, heterosexual men. In Europe, the Convention on Human Rights has simultaneously made it harder for institutions to assume cultural consensus; made it harder to discriminate on the basis of religion, race, sex, sexuality or disability; and entrenched a tendency to turn to the law to solve disputes (Dinham 2009). In this context, 'less educated and older citizens, especially white men, who were once the privileged majority culture in Western societies, resent being told that traditional values are "politically incorrect" and they have come to feel that they are being marginalised within their own countries' (Inglehart and Norris 2016, 29). We might say that people increasingly feel that political liberalism is hypocritical because it turns out not to be neutral regarding conceptions of the good after all.

The central public value has become that no single combination of values may dominate. Amidst mass migration from former colonies, Western elites have paid an impressive amount of attention to critiquing dominant narratives and accommodating differences, but precious little attention to how to create shared identity across differences. To put this another way, the problem is not that there has been a policy of multiculturalism, a claim that has anyway been debunked (Van Reekum et al 2012), but that there has been insufficient attention to how to develop a shared sense of belonging. This apathy was abetted by the social democratic promise of perpetual growth alongside increasing alleviation of poverty. There was little need to question shared identity; we all just got along (Manstead 2018). Yet since 2008 this has changed. People are again feeling insecure and searching for forms of identity and belonging. And they are reaching back to the last robust forms that were available: religion, race, language, nation. To misquote the adage, we failed to fix the cultural roof while the economic sun was shining.

It is worth noting that my narrative runs contra to those of both economic and ethnic essentialists. According to the former, it is the economy that is the best predictor of support for the radical right (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Burgoon et al 2019). Instead, what I am arguing is not that the economy *causes* the rise of the radical right, or that identity is secondary, but that both culture and economics matter and that people can be quite patient and pragmatic as they navigate between these. When they have a strong sense of purpose, people can be willing to live on next to nothing. Equally, provided they are well paid, people can be willing to make a lot of compromises. But when both factors are threatened, the seeds of revolt are sown.

Contra economic essentialists, ethnic essentialists claim that couching identity in ethno-racial terms is inevitable and thus demographic transitions must be slowed down so that the organic capacity to form shared identity can keep up with the pace (Kaufmann 2019a; 2019b). Attempts to artificially cultivate a 'civic' identity that cuts across other differences will never prevail because ethno-racial identity is too deeply ingrained. We have tried this from the 1960s onwards, the critique continues. It's just not working. Meanwhile, we have all capitulated to the logic of capital, supporting equality in principle – in the form of equal opportunities irrespective of religion, race, sexuality and so on – but not in practice – in the form of autonomy, dignity, health and well-being.

The problem with ethnic essentialists is that they do not tend to do their cultural homework. As I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, the reality is that very little work has been done towards cultivating a genuinely collective identity that cuts across people's manifold differences. On the other hand, in my view, cultural constructivists, while being very good at noticing what is really happening, have tended to disregard questions as to whether discourses of loss and abandonment arise out of an objective need for some sort of ethnically rooted belonging. Much time has been devoted to the important work of deconstructing false myths, by showing, for example, that right-wing nativists' feelings of loss are in fact based on errant historical narratives about a monocultural past (Duyvendak and Scholten 2011; Duyvendak and Scholten 2012; Van Reekum and Duyvendak 2012; Van Reekum et al 2012) or a heterogeneous present. Far less time has been spent exploring how to build new myths of belonging, solidarity, resilience and inclusion. To say this is not to scorn this vital work, but to differentiate what I am trying to do here.

I want to carve a place between these two extremes. Unlike other broadly 'left' commentators, I want to acknowledge that even if belonging and identity are constructed rather than biologically rooted, and even if they are wont to engender acrimony, they nonetheless mean something to their beholders and cannot simply be swept aside. Work must be done to replace what is lost. I know that left commentators recognize this. It's just that they rarely do the work to back it up, and as a result leave a gap to be filled by the right. But contra ethnic essentialists, I want to argue that we are not living in some new Dark Ages or Jahiliyya; rather, part of the purpose of this book is to show that we are in fact in a period of interregnum. People are finally beginning to feel that they have gained sufficient distance from the oppressive structures of the past that they can begin to reassess what has been lost along the way. They are developing new ways of holding on to their autonomy while nonetheless embedding themselves in networks of sympathy and mutual obligation. In short: hope is on its way.

Conclusion

Although perhaps somewhat dizzying when unravelled, at its core the argument I have been trying to make is quite simple. The liberal ideal of securing equal dignity for all regardless of background is laudable. But liberalism fails to deliver this. Instead, in the name of protecting the abstract Individual, it sunders individuals from their institutional sources of meaning and belonging. This not only leaves many individuals struggling to find meaning, but also renders it ever more difficult to be respected by others regardless of our views. It is in institutions that we are taught platitudes like 'you can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family'. But liberalism tells us we *can* choose the groups to which we are bound. It tells us that in order to achieve equal dignity for all, we must liberate people from involuntary institutions and make individual choice the sole criterion on which institutions can legitimately have any claims to our time. In so doing, it creates pockets of shared conviction with strong in-groups and out-groups. What is being neglected here is that groups don't just chain people down in obligations; they also offer belonging. In liberal societies, in order to feel like we belong, we must either find the group that perfectly matches our own ideals, or else we must conform. And because it is very hard to find an institution that perfectly matches our ideas, the choice is more often between opting out altogether and conformity. Given the stark choice, many choose to opt out: from their churches; from their families; from politics. Those that do conform can take comfort in the fact that the institutions to which they are conforming are at least better tailored to their ideals than those of previous generations. But this is where the key problem emerges: none of these new, better-tailored but smaller institutions on its own has the power to stand up to the forces that are destroying people's dignity: the centralized state and capitalism. This then is the crucial contradiction in liberalism: in order to achieve equal dignity for all, we need to liberate people from involuntary institutions. But in the process of doing this, we make people entirely beholden to two institutions: the state and the market. Standing up for the abstract Individual comes at the expense of actually existing individuals. If we are to overcome this situation, we need to learn to love and respect one another once more: not because each of us synecdochally represents the abstract Individual but because we each play a part in a collective struggle.

Liberalism itself offers no easy way of achieving this. We would have to find some way of convincing people that giving up their short-term interests for a collective struggle was ultimately in their long-term interests and that in order to win, they would have to avoid free riding. So far this has not worked out so well. Socially democratic parties continue to die their slow

death. The environment remains a fringe concern. Instead, we need to rediscover the spirit of political participation. In the next chapter I turn to review some of the attempts to do this, before differentiating the basis of my own approach, the contents of which will be revealed in the remainder of the book.

3

How to Address Liberalism's Faults

There is a widespread sense that something is missing from liberal societies (Milbank [1991] 2013; Habermas 2015; Stacey 2017a). For far longer than opportunistic politicians have been stirring up anti-liberal sentiment, public intellectuals have been musing that liberalism is lacking some of that *je ne sais quoi* that we seek in a lover – that flare, mystery, depth and beauty. To many, liberalism can seem like the Dobbin character in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*: true, fair, stable, a perfect match on paper, and yet somehow lacking in romantic appeal. To others, liberalism is downright tyrannical. It is the heartless husband from the Moroccan folktale, who locks his wife away so that she will not be enchanted by the mysteries of the world.

Whatever metaphor we use, there is a perceived chasm between liberal political ambitions and lived political experience. This gap at least partly explains why today populists across the globe are rejecting liberal ideals in favour of traditional understandings of religion, nation, community, family and place (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Pappas 2019). If social justice is to advance, it is crucial that this gap is addressed.

This chapter summarizes four broad strands of critique with corresponding solutions, before proffering the beginnings of my own approach, to be developed in the course of the book. Each strand includes theorists, scientists, politicians and policymakers. I do not claim that any strand has been consciously constructed, but rather that multiple thinkers and actors can be clustered around a shared theme with common advantages and shortcomings.

The first response heralds the failure of liberalism and takes the populist hunkering down in nation, religion and race as evidence that these must be revalorized to the centre of political life lest people and nations alike lose any sense of identity. The second response protests liberalism's lack of resonance in postcolonial settings as well as among postcolonial migrants to the West. The third seeks to diagnose and 'cure' the nostalgia for traditional values and institutions – the fault is not in liberalism but in its recipients. The fourth and final response is found in the liberal 'civil religion' tradition (Nussbaum

2015). The aim here is to mount a religious canvas onto a preconceived framework of principles and values like a sail to a mast.

It is significant that none of these responses observes the ways in which liberalism is already and always being creatively figured and reconfigured by people on the ground, often in its 'home' territories, in ways that are complexly liberal, anti-liberal and post-liberal simultaneously. This seems short sighted because it may be that our shared political future can already be found growing within the shell of the past. With this in mind, the ethnographic research I will be elaborating in this book explores how people with liberal sentiments themselves are seeking to develop solidarity across differences. They reject institutional religion, radically question their heritage, believe firmly in freedoms of sexuality and gender and have a strong sense of solidarity with humans and other-than-humans halfway across the world. But they also seek to heal the consequences of individualism and pluralization, working to bring people together across differences of race, religion, values, gender and sexuality. As they seek to navigate between freedom and solidarity, my friends arrive at 'innovations' that are remarkably similar to the behaviours of the people whom they regard as being deceived by religious and political lies, and who in turn denounce them as liberal elites and 'citizens of nowhere'. They draw, that is, on myth, ritual, magic and tradition.

The post-liberalism narrative: where Jordan Peterson meets Narendra Modi

When I first began thinking about the failure of liberalism narrative back in 2008, it seemed like a relatively niche topic. Admittedly, this was almost 25 years after Alisdair MacIntyre had proclaimed that for the liberal world as a whole, in distinction to Ancient Rome, 'the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament' (MacIntyre [1981] 2012). But while MacIntyre is famous among students of theology, his works were not flying off the shelves of local bookstores. It would take another decade, as populist and nativist politicians were swept into power around the world, for commentators and authors to proclaim the failure of liberalism. Those of us well read in this tradition did not feel all that surprised by the denunciations when they came. Although claims about out-of-touch 'liberal elites' still sound almost nonsensical to some, I hope that the last chapter has shown that they do have some basis.

In the academic literature, proponents of the failure of liberalism narrative coalesce around the theme of post-liberalism. My work is so indebted to that of people in this camp that, for many years, I have described myself as post-liberal. But I have become ambivalent about the term because I increasingly

feel that much of the work in this camp should really be described as pre-liberal, since its proponents often end up betraying some form of religious or ethnic superiority, homophobia or patriarchy. Now I want to be clear that I do not by any means think that all of these problems apply to all those who identify as post-liberal. Indeed, I would like to think that they do not apply to me. But I do think that as they develop a means of overcoming liberalism's failings, post-liberals need to be very careful about where their theoretical pronouncements land in practice.

Post-liberalism begins with a series of assertions that follow a logic very similar to my own argument outlined in the previous chapter. To state this systematically:

1. In the name of defending the individual right to choose one's own conception of the good, liberalism has had to replace spirited appeals to political participation with a public rationality that in principle appeals to all individuals, regardless of what makes life meaningful for them.
2. The only actions that pass this test without controversy are improvements in security and wealth.
3. The political consequence is that in the name of building a system that effectively serves the needs of an abstract Individual, it proves increasingly necessary to, first, exclude actual people from the political process and, second, to intervene in institutions to protect the rights of individuals and minorities.
4. The economic consequence is that people and planet are treated as resources to be exploited for maximum gain. This then legitimizes further intrusions from the state, which must make people into good capitalists.
5. The social consequence is that we treat relationships as voluntary contracts, entered into only insofar and for as long as they serve all parties in generating social, cultural, physical and economic capital.
6. The individual consequence is that people treat their own time as a resource which must be utilized to generate capital, and the failure to do so as a cause for anxiety.

This systematic narrative allows us to see the logic of those lashing out against the advance of liberalism rather than dismissing them out of hand. Perhaps more importantly for those of us troubled by the recent rise of manifold hostile ideologies, this systematic narrative allows us to see parity between developments that might otherwise appear radically different: between, for example, Jordan Peterson and Hindutva. Normally the similarities come to light around points 1 and 3. So Jordan Peterson is troubled by the power of the Canadian state to impose gender-neutral pronouns and refuses to be 'a mouthpiece for a language I detest' (Sanneh 2018); while proponents of Hindutva are concerned by the Indian state's accommodation of what they

consider an insidious Islam. There is a feeling that too much ground is being given, the old ways and even common sense are being lost in the name of upholding increasingly divergent minority identities.

In some respects, these critics are correct – the target is moving and ever more ground is being ceded. It is now plausible, for example, to cast second-wave feminists like Germaine Greer as illiberal on the grounds that her fixation with biological sex distinctions is exclusionary towards transgender people. The problem is that post-liberals too often add a problematic seventh clause, which in my view makes them not post- but pre-liberal:

7. The only answer is to restore a comprehensive idea of meaning (usually religious, usually patriarchal, usually exclusionary) to the centre of social life.

Authors variously aim to restore Christianity or Christian ideas (Geary et al 2015; Milbank and Pabst 2016; Deneen 2018; Pabst 2018), traditional notions of masculinity (Peterson 2018) or racially selective immigration policies (Kaufmann 2019b). In many parts of the world, this agenda is encapsulated in the slogan 'faith, flag, and family'. This 'back to basics' agenda seems so intuitively plausible that politicians of the left flock back to it every time they are faced with losing an election (Bloomfield 2020; Duyvendak and Kešić 2022). But this is to reproduce exactly the logic I am seeking to push against in this book, a logic shared by unimaginative liberals and post-liberals alike: that we are faced with a stark choice between the supposedly homogeneous communities of the past and a free but lonely future. In contrast, I argue that the past doesn't have a monopoly on solidarity. We can creatively build new ways of organizing ourselves that are compassionate, welcoming and solidary.

It is easy to conjure a homogeneous past in which a shared moral imaginary provided a sense of meaning and order. But it's hard to find evidence that things ever really were quite so rosy. Looking at the history of Christianity in Europe as an example, I want to put aside that harking back to Christendom sidelines the role of non-Christians in European history. Instead, I want to stress the mountain of evidence suggesting that peaceful interaction with non-Christian others was usually the result of ordinary people's capacity to *ignore* church teachings (Green 2008; Jütte 2013; Eliav-Feldon and Herzig 2015; Nirenberg 2016; Shoham-Steiner 2016). It is, moreover, important to query the implication that somehow this 'Christian' past provided a more caring approach to people and the environment. Deliberately, for the sake of argument, putting aside its multi-sectional forms of exclusion, there is little evidence that Christendom was an exemplar for treating either people or the planet with dignity. Indeed, globally speaking, Christianity was and continues to be complicit in exploiting people (Fynn-Paul 2009) and planet, as well

as in ridiculing and denouncing ways of thinking, feeling and acting that are more harmonious with other humans and other-than-humans (Federici 2004). Christianity by no means has a monopoly on evil, but nor does it have a monopoly on good. Even if a sense of identity and belonging might have been lost with the rise of liberal forms of legitimacy, this does not mean that it is necessary, sensible or favourable to restore the most recent placeholder for collective identity. Indeed, even if the past *was* culturally homogeneous, and even if that homogeneity *had* underwritten a philosophy of solidarity and reciprocity, and even if liberating people from this oppressive homogeneity *did* require offering them an alternative safety net (as I confirmed in the previous chapter), this does not mean that reimposing a hierarchy with, for example, heterosexuals at the top, or removing people's social safety net will restore economic solidarity (Prochaska 2008, 161; Stacey 2018a, 15, 116).

To be clear, Christians and Christianity have an important part to play in saving liberalism, just as do Hindus, trade unionists and dramatists. Moreover, Christians and Christianity do play a vital role in MVA. But this does not mean that Christianity has or deserves a monopoly on spirit.

It is important to make a second point in this regard too. Post-liberals seem to suggest that there is a necessary connection, even a 'collusion', between social and economic liberalism (Milbank and Pabst 2016, 3). They argue that an emphasis on identity over 'natural' characteristics is linked to a disregard for the body, and with it, the dehumanizing impact of capitalism (Pabst 2018). Now, I recognize the emergence of neoliberal (McGuigan 2014) and, more recently, transhuman ways of thinking about the self that draw together bodily, social and economic autonomy. Moreover, I feel quite convinced that there is a much larger population of people who unreflectively imbibe, live out and, in so doing, reproduce and popularize this idea of selfhood without realizing they are doing so. Yet this does not amount to accepting that anybody who sees autonomy of belief, practice, sexuality and so on as one of their most important values also supports capitalism. And this is because holding those values dear does not amount to operating in or aspiring towards a hollowed-out society of freely acting individuals engaging with one another on the basis of supply and demand alone. There truly are people – I count some of them among my (more awkward) friends (*not* the ones discussed in this book!) – who assiduously avoid becoming embroiled in relationships of mutual indebtedness. But there are others who hold autonomy dear while radically seeking to embed themselves in relationships of reciprocity. This book is about people like this. My friends in Vancouver deliberately place themselves in relationships of reciprocity and solidarity with others whose values make them feel uncomfortable. They do so in order to collectively challenge the capitalist forces that are humiliating them.

In short, then, just because I am critical of liberalism's ways of overcoming past problems, I am by no means enamoured of a romanticized past. Rather,

I simply recognize that the reification of the stand-alone individual, alongside a lack of trust in people, and an excessive emphasis on rationality, have together served to disengage people from the collective search for answers to global problems.

The parochialism of liberalism narrative: the strange collusion between post-liberals and anthropologists

Post-liberals and anthropologists may seem, not least to themselves, as sitting on opposite sides of a spectrum. Post-liberals appear as representatives of a culture that has concertedly oppressed and erased the ways of life that anthropologists bring to light. Post-liberals ask what people *ought* to think while anthropologists are interested in what and how people *do* think. Yet post-liberals and anthropologists have also converged in their assertion that liberalism's claim to universalism stifles tradition and potentially forecloses equally valid ways of life (Povinelli 2011). Liberalism, they argue, is not universal but rooted in modern, European ways of being.

Hickel, for example, notices that rural trade union activists in South Africa dispute the 'idea that all individuals are autonomous and ontologically equal' (Hickel 2015, 2). And this observation leads him to question his own liberal assumptions. He argues that 'we cannot arrogantly assume that liberal forms of life necessarily exhaust ways of living meaningfully and richly in this world; we have to be able to parochialize our own political certainty on this matter' (Hickel 2015, 5). In making this claim, Hickel draws on the work of Mahmood, for whom Western perceptions of veiled women as unfree are a consequence of the false assumption that Western understandings of freedom are universal. Freedom, for Mahmood's Egyptian interlocutors, is a positive freedom characterized by the ability to realize one's place within a tradition rather than by the ability to make free decisions. Mahmood refers to writings from Native- and African American scholars who, amidst calls from 'white middle-class feminists to dismantle the institution of the nuclear family', were defining their freedom specifically in terms of the capacity to form a family. After all, 'slavery, genocide and racism had operated precisely by breaking up their communities and social networks' (Mahmood 2011, 13). Post-structuralist feminists went further, criticizing 'the *illusory* character of the rationalist, self-authorising, transcendental subject presupposed by Enlightenment thought in general and the liberal tradition in particular. Rational thought … secures its universal scope and authority by performing a necessary exclusion of all that is bodily, feminine, emotional, nonrational and intersubjective' (Mahmood 2011, 13–14, emphasis in the original).

Mahmood seeks to go a step further still, arguing that in the case of veiling in particular, 'what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of

agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment' (Mahmood 2011, 14).

Mahmood's discussion can be situated within a wider trend in anthropology to set up the caricature of Western, Cartesian, disembodied *man*. This critique has its merits in pinpointing sources of Western discomfort with Islam, as well as more broadly in understanding Western histories of liberation from sources of oppression. But it can also conjure unhelpful and self-perpetuating images of Westerners generally as disembedded automatons, and Western culture as hollowed out and incapable of renewal without inputs from 'older' cultures from prior to modernity and outside of the West that are presumably more 'in touch' with what humans 'really' need. This sentiment is encapsulated in proclamations often heard among well-meaning activists about how much people in the West have to learn from 'the indigenous peoples of the world'. There may well be much to learn. But to treat 'indigenous peoples' as homogeneous serves to reproduce lazy, albeit 'positive' stereotypes. These romantic images may conjure false links between indigenous beliefs, sustainability and ethical practice (Raymond 2007). They may also drive shallow and short-lived rejections of Western modernity that in reality only enable it. There is an increasing tendency, for example, originating with the Beatniks, to favour dropping out from society, rather than seeking to transform it (see Chapter 8. See also Dart 2016; Itel 2019). Although the two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive and indeed dropping out may for some people serve as a precursor to stepping back in with an alternative perspective, this is not always the case. It may well be that while maintaining curiosity in other places and cultures, Western liberals may already possess many of the beliefs and practices necessary for resisting exclusionary rationalism.

'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,/But in ourselves': Enlightenment all over again

The inverse of parochializing liberalism is to parochialize all those who fail to live up to its lofty ideals. This attitude has been present in elite culture in Europe at least since the Middle Ages. As 14th-century elites sought 'to increase productivity, and to inculcate a more rational, hard-working, industrious and production-oriented outlook in their subjects', they became ever less tolerant of disorder and indulgence (Taylor 2007, 111). This meant, for example, increasingly policing festivities such as carnival, which were thought to encourage unruly behaviour (Schielke 2012). It meant identifying and burning witches (Federici 2004); demonizing and wiping out indigenous cultures (Leech 2012); and problematizing the working class and migrants (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). As explained in the previous chapter, in the

space of five centuries, this focus on treating as backwards those behaviours that serve no instrumental purpose has slowly become dominant. But small pockets of dissent remain. So I explained there, for example, that among working-class women in the UK, there is a rejection of the utilitarian, self-developmental approach to time that they observe among middle-class women on the grounds that it leaves insufficient time for taking care of one's children or friends (Skeggs 2011). Similarly, it has been observed that among migrants and their children with non-Western backgrounds, there remains a much greater focus on taking care of the extended family (Glick et al 1997).

It is commonplace in policy spheres to see these non-utilitarian lifestyles as a kind of deviance that needs to be diagnosed and cured (Jones 2012; Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). While views radically diverge as to whether individuals themselves or their socio-economic circumstances are to blame for their behaviour, precious little time is spent reflecting on whether there is something positive to be learnt from their alternative lifestyles. People who voted for the likes of Donald Trump in the US, Brexit in Britain, or the Forum for Democracy in the Netherlands are seen as a 'left-behind' class, who failed to take advantage of the global liberal project and whose circumstances must be improved before they can again be expected to vote sensibly (Goodwin and Heath 2016; Ash 2017; Gordon 2018; Jarvis 2020). This narrative creates a scale, with the winners of global liberalism at the top and the losers at the bottom. And this scale undermines the notion that liberal societies are normatively neutral because some individuals, namely those who are able to accrue the most social, cultural and economic capital to themselves, are demonstrably more valued than others (Skeggs 2011; 2012). The scale has been adopted in both noble and malicious ways in recent years. It can be seen, for example, in *The Guardian* newspaper's beautiful 'Anywhere but Westminster' short film series developed in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum in the UK. The series depicts scenes of a seemingly forgotten Britain, leaving the viewer to conclude 'no wonder these people voted to leave the European Union'. But the perspective is also evident in more malign calls to introduce IQ tests and other educational requirements for voting as a means of stemming support for populism, as well as in research designed to explore the intelligence of those who vote for populist causes (Sumner et al 2018).

What if, rather than being left behind, we see these groups as dropping out from the liberal system of values? How might our analysis change? This line of questioning can be hard to understand for readers embedded within a liberal ontology. So just by way of demonstrating that this is indeed a normative rather than objective hierarchy, we might instead base class on an alternative metric such as has been offered by, for example, the Doughnut Economy. New metrics can and have been designed to measure, say, embeddedness within a community, or, more radically, adaptability, not to the way the

economy is but to the way that it needs to be in order to sustain fulfilling human and other-than-human lives for as long as possible. According to this alternative metric, it might be considered deviant to shun aimless socializing in favour of self-improvement or living a resource-intensive lifestyle. Those flying all over the world in search of fulfilment or spending more time at work than is necessary to survive, would be seen as the left behind. Their voting patterns would be linked to these unfortunate circumstances. I am not, by the way, seeking to impose a new system of judgements but just to trigger an alternative way of imagining how we value one another.

The now centuries-old liberal hierarchy is also implicit in social scientific practice. The dogma in the social sciences is that values and choices always ultimately derive from the economic and power structures by which people are constrained. It is for this reason that Bauman has labelled much of sociology the 'science of unfreedom' (Bauman 2010). The role of the good sociologist is to reveal how choices have been determined by one's gender, ethnicity or class. Laidlaw (2014, 6–7) caricatures the position thus:

> Taking part in a sponsored charity run, offering your seat on the bus to an expectant mother, giving directions to a lost tourist in the street: all these are really small investments to build up future cultural and social, and ultimately therefore real economic, capital. … [I]t passes for hard-headed insight to portray any state of affairs in any part of the world as always the same self-interested contest of power and resistance: an ethnocentric projection of the modern West's most self-hating self-image.

Yet the thing is, as Eliasoph (2015) has so eloquently pointed out, this always applies to everyone but researchers themselves. Sure, as social scientists they may well be able to offer a class-based analysis of their own values and choices but as human beings they – many of them at least – continue to operate as if they have agency. And so again, a classist mentality emerges in which certain people are rational, capable of taking the bird's-eye view, and others, through no fault of their own, are less so. They must be *given* autonomy, after which they will use it more wisely. But what if, as one of Pool's (2016, 125) interlocutors put it, 'we don't want your freedom'?

I want to be clear that I am offering a cultural analysis rather than a character assassination. It is patronage *mixed with sympathy* that is most insidious. Malice can easily be identified and called out. It comes with cruel-sounding tones and obviously dehumanizing consequences. But when people have fully imbibed the liberal hierarchy, they benevolently, from their own perspective, look on those deficient in various forms of capital as if they are children who have failed to understand reality. "The world," they seem to say, "is incredibly complex and must ultimately be left to the adults." It can

be hard to see through the goodwill, but it is important to recognize the ways in which this logic reproduces the idea outlined in Chapter 2, that politics should be the preserve of a minority.

Putting lipstick on a pig: the civil religion tradition

The final attempt to address the gap between liberal political ambitions and lived political realities is what I refer to as the civil religion tradition. Again, this is a multifaceted approach, but the unifying process is to hash out political ideals in the realm of abstraction and subsequently find mechanisms for luring people towards these ideals. For thinkers like Locke, Kant (see Nussbaum 2015, 4) and Durkheim ([1902] 1984), it was intermediary institutions like schools and churches that would serve this function. Rousseau, on the other hand, felt that the state itself should construct a civil religion of rituals and ceremonies designed to elicit a sense of civic duty. For Rousseau, this civil religion has to be enforced, and dissenting religions suppressed. I call this the suppress-and-replace model. Revolutionary France, Atatürk's Turkey and present-day China represent only the most extreme cases of the suppress-and-replace model. Elements of the same logic can be seen in liberal societies in legal debates as to what counts as legitimate religion. Legitimacy is often defined on the basis that one's beliefs remain private and do not present a challenge to the political status quo (Asad 2003; Laborde 2017).

Seeking a third way, the key question for Martha Nussbaum is 'how can a decent society do more for stability and motivation than Locke and Kant did, without becoming illiberal and dictatorial in the manner of Rousseau?' (Nussbaum 2015). Like Rousseau, for Nussbaum it is not enough to believe in liberal principles or agree with them; we have to love them (Nussbaum 2015, 7). They thus must be 'connected to a particular set of perceptions, memories, and symbols that have deep roots in the personality and in people's sense of their own history' (Nussbaum 2015, 10). Nussbaum then goes on to identify key *political* emotions such as love and disgust. Although she does not explicitly say so, we can think of these emotions as political in that they are linked to including and excluding people from our networks of sympathy. She subsequently reflects on artistic endeavours that are best placed to guide these emotions towards liberal ideals. So, for love, we would want to find ways to extend our networks of sympathy as widely as possible to include people irrespective of gender, ethnicity, sexuality or disability. As to disgust, we would want this to be inhibited as much as possible and reserved for those who break the social contract. In this regard, Nussbaum pays particular attention to humour and tenderness, which she regards as the best means of attenuating aggression (Nussbaum 2015, 16). Against what were once considered 'masculine' virtues such as honour and competition, she focuses on 'feminine' virtues such as lightness, tenderness and reciprocity.

Nussbaum is all encompassing, seeking to include 'political rhetoric, public ceremonies and rituals, songs, symbols, poetry, art and architecture, the design of public parks and monuments … public sports, education and the family' (Nussbaum 2015, 17). She moreover wants to cultivate a common curriculum, ensuring that everyone has access to the same core culture from an early age. But she wants to build this civil religion while nonetheless giving absolute autonomy to civil society.

Now I happen to think that Nussbaum is striking a pretty good balance between cultivating public culture and encouraging dissent. But the problem is that building a civil religion tradition from the top downwards, no matter how open to dissent, reproduces the liberal idea that an elite knows best how the rest of us ought to engage. Indeed, in my view, even the term 'religion' reproduces this idea: it implies a *system* of meaning that must be cultivated and managed from above, rather than something that people participate in from below.

An interlude: does liberalism have a religion?

Before I turn to my alternative, it is worth briefly reflecting on whether and how each of these four narratives relates to real attempts to cultivate shared identity. Each narrative brings with it a very different understanding of what humans are capable of based on very different histories. Whether religion, race, gender or – as is often the case – all three, underlying all failure of liberalism narratives is the assumption that there is no alternative. Unless we bring back Christianity, people will descend ever further into selfishness and depravity. Unless we allow for mild ethnic self-interest, people will burst out full racist. Unless we allow men to behave like Stanley in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, they will roam the earth forever lost, or worse will turn to rape. Seeking to build some, presumably more artificial, alternative will never make up for the real thing: humans have certain essential features that must be catered to no matter how immoral they seem. Eric Kaufmann (2019b, 173), in particular, has suggested that the civil religion tradition has failed. It is for this reason, he argues, that ethno-nationalist movements have again reared their heads. The three other narratives dispute this claim. For those that see liberalism as parochial, as well as liberals themselves, the civil religion tradition is in fact too strong since it tends to suppress traditional ways of life. For those advocating the construction of a civil religion, it is implied that this has not yet, at least not sufficiently, been attempted. In this section I want to attempt to contrast these historical narratives with the social scientific literature on civil religion. In particular, I will stress that far from ethno-nationalism emerging amidst the ruins of civil religion, the strongest civil religion movements have been ethno-nationalist. Any *liberal* civil religion has only ever emerged *temporarily* in response.

There is a relatively strong tradition in the social sciences of exploring civil religion. Overwhelmingly this literature is focused on the US (Bellah 1967; Angrosino 2002; Gerteis 2011; Gorski 2011; Williams 2013). There has also been a range of research in different European contexts, alongside individual studies from various countries (Moodie 1980; Davie 2001; Pieke 2018; Weiss and Bungert 2019). Even in the more recent globalized context, research is almost always nationally oriented. Though scholars recognize that civil religion often returns when the nation is perceived to be under threat, still the nation state is the assumed source and focus of public rituals. But considering the universalist focus of liberalism discussed in the previous chapter, and given the long-standing and increasing presence of a globalized imaginary (Steger 2008), it seems particularly odd that the search for a liberal civil religion has not paid much attention to either transnational or local institutions, cultures and networks.

One reason for the national focus of the civil religion literature is the contexts in which it emerged and re-emerged. The period 1870–1914 has been heralded as a 'golden age' for the invention of tradition across Europe (Cannadine 2012, 138). The theory goes that periods of substantial social, political and economic upheaval require new myths and rituals that can make the new order feel as if it is really just the continuation of, or else fulfilment of, the past. In the case of the late 19th century, the mass mobilization of the culture industry was made necessary by the increasing domination of liberalism, which had simultaneously extended the vote to large swathes of the population while systematically undermining traditional forms of hierarchy and belonging, from the church to the aristocracy. Authorities thus felt an urgent need to cultivate collective identity. '[R]ulers and middle-class observers rediscovered the importance of "irrational" elements in the maintenance of the social fabric and the social order' (Hobsbawm 2012a, 268). Among these middle-class observers was Emile Durkheim, whose work has proved timeless in its use for those wishing to inject something akin to religious fervour into secular societies.

As if all of a sudden, it was widely recognized that 'whatever held human collectivities together it was not the rational calculation of their individual members' (Hobsbawm 2012a, 269). The idea was not misplaced. Even among the most rationalist of movements, still the masses found a way to institute their identity in rituals. The socialist labour movements, for example, which were often hostile to pomp and ceremony, nonetheless found themselves institutionalizing May Day on the initiative of their followers (Hobsbawm 2012a, 283–6). The period thus saw large-scale investments in education; public ceremonies, buildings and statues; the arts; and sports, all directed at cultivating a strong sense of allegiance to the nation. 'Nationalism became a substitute for social cohesion through a national church, a royal family or other cohesive traditions, or collective group self-presentations, a new

secular religion' (Hobsbawm 2012a, 303). So profoundly powerful were these forces that they were able to legitimize some of the most extreme ideologies and terrible atrocities in the history of mankind: from imperialism, to communism, to fascism.

But we hit a bit of a snag here. On the one hand, we might argue that societies require some kind of civil religion in order to avoid either a loss of solidarity or the descent into nationalism. And yet on the other hand, as the liberal tradition predicts, too much pomp and ceremony seem to be connected to nationalism. How to tread this fine line is the question that occupied the culture industry in the post-war period. Following the defeat of fascism on the one hand, and the rise of communism on the other, leaders of liberal democracies found themselves again drawing on spirited elements to legitimize the regime. Political leaders realized that '[a]ny attempt to put democracies back on their feet – or to bring democracy and political freedom to countries which had never had them – would have to engage with the record of the authoritarian states. The alternative was to risk popular nostalgia for their achievements – real or imagined' (Judt 2011, 78–9).

A significant part of this project was cultivating 'visual representations of collective unity' (Judt 2011, 184). Public institutions from post offices to buses and trains were given a uniformity of colour, 'emphasising the role they played as common transporters of a single people' (Judt 2011, 184). Again, a major upheaval led to an instinctive return to spirited elements.

Civil religion was then launched to the centre of sociological discussion with Robert Bellah's *Civil Religion in America* in 1967 – once again a time of turmoil for American and indeed Western collective identity. It was the middle and height of the Vietnam war and a year prior to worldwide protests against capitalism. Similarly, in Europe, civil religion literature gained most traction in the early 2000s in the context of the rise of nationalism (Weiss and Bungert 2019, 366). The timing of this interest supports the theory that the instinct for shared myths and rituals emerges in times of swift transition. It moreover highlights that rather than ethno-nationalism emerging from the ashes of civil religion, time and again it is civil religion that emerges in response to the threat of ethno-nationalism. Moreover, liberal civil religion does not simply fail of its own accord, collapsing under the weight of too many complicating factors but rather is often defeated by a well-intended moral relativism (Alexander 2005, 34; Duyvendak and Kešić 2022). It is in reaction to, and often through explicit critique of, this relativism that ethno-nationalism rises to the fore.

Despite widespread academic interest, liberal settings have seen very little policy attention to the development of civil religion. For me the most striking question to ask is why, given the unprecedented cultural and demographic upheavals of the 1960s to the present, there have not been entire government and university programmes devoted solely to generating

solidarity across differences of sex, sexuality, gender, religion and ethnicity. Of course, there have been numerous policies aimed at safeguarding core culture from external threats, but far less time has been devoted to exploring, highlighting and inventing traditions for the present and future, and still less in supporting the writers, artists and community organizers best able to do this inventing. Amidst the onward march of rationality, and particularly in times of economic turbulence, the vital binding role of the arts and humanities is increasingly neglected.

One obvious exception to this rule is the EU cultural policy, which has aimed at facilitating the exchange of people, ideas and art across borders. But, first of all, these policies themselves were initially developed to support, and continue to be guided by economic imperatives (Lähdesmäki et al 2021); and second, many of the principle policies anyway seem to mimic those of nation states, such as the waving of flags and the playing of anthems. Culture is treated as a way of generating mass support for the European state and market.

My reading of history thus sits between the failure-of-liberalism narrative and that generally supported by liberals themselves. First, far from civil religion's failure leading to the return of racism or nationalism, it is the rise of the latter that tends to spur a short-lived, civic alternative. Civil religion initiatives are often temporary and reactive rather than proactive. Even though background elements such as flags and constitutions maintain a semi-permanent position, substantive and reflectively held values, stories and practices are harder to find. Yet by the same token, liberal critics of the right should not be too quick to claim that the latter's discontents are utterly baseless. People are experiencing an absence of shared values, stories and behaviours. A positive programme for building solidarity across differences of class and culture is deeply required. Such a programme would not have to be exclusionary. Indeed, as I will suggest in the coming chapters, it could well be based specifically on people's willingness to come together across differences. Yet it would have to have core features that required cultivating and celebrating.

'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy': making meaning from where liberals are

With this short history in mind, we can begin to build a fifth approach to the apparent gap between liberal political visions and lived political realities. Like Nussbaum, I am convinced by the crucial role that something like civil religion has yet to play in the history of liberalism. And like Nussbaum I consider it important to think analytically about the kinds of characteristics it is important to encourage and disparage. But as anthropologists have long recognized, I also think it important to acknowledge that people themselves live with contradictions on a daily basis (Berliner et al 2016).

This is inevitable since human life is contradictory. It is rich with meanings that feel eternal and yet it is radically, tragically finite. We seek to construct universally applicable moral systems and yet there is always some exception (MacIntyre [1981] 2012). We seek to predict human behaviour and yet such is the complexity and unknowability of the world that we always fall short. While I am partly guided by philosophical ideals in my search for groups to research, and while these groups themselves are partly inspired by philosophical ideals, this is a two-way street. Philosophers require cases from which to build towards abstractions. 'Tastes and fashions … can be "created" only within very narrow limits; they have to be discovered before being exploited and shaped' (Hobsbawm 2012a, 307). As social scientists, as much as we are 'creators' of a new civil religion, we also have to be observers of what is already happening among those 'doing' solidarity across differences on the ground. And more crucially, it may be that there is good in a practice, undertaken by a real person in the messy world, that challenges, compromises or reforms philosophical ideals. As Shakespeare's Hamlet so beautifully puts it, '[t]here are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (*Hamlet* 1.5.167–8).

If we think of public culture as a canopy of meaning (Berger [1967] 1990), for me the perfect metaphor for Nussbaum's project is the feeling one gets when pulling the canopy of a tent over its frame. When the task is complete, you can be sure that it'll be more or less watertight. But it can often feel that it simply won't fit, no matter how hard you tug. And then just as, with huge relief, you manage to pull it into place, you realize the other side has come loose. Instead of a tent, I want to think of canopy making as a patchwork process. It may not be watertight, but it is built from the ground up from people's own points of cultural reference. I agree with Nussbaum that liberal ambitions must be connected to a particular set of stories and rituals. But I am not so bold as to begin by offering even an outline of what these should be. In line with Lori Beaman, as opposed to 'scholarly impositions of an imagined mode of justice or citizen engagement' I believe that it is from the lived political realities of so-called ordinary people 'that institutional frameworks, policy approaches, and imaginings of a just society might emerge' (Beaman 2017, 13). I therefore reflect on the myths, rituals, magic and traditions that are important to my friends and make suggestions based on these.

Given that my friends are just one group in one city on the edge of the world, theirs will only be one patch of the porous quilt. Yet their world is also one iteration of a grander project. Their myths, rituals, magic and traditions spring forth from globally circulating liberal ideas. Some of these ideas began circulating in books, upon ships, across oceans, hundreds of years ago. Others shoot across the internet at 99.7 per cent of the speed of light. Both are part of building a global imaginary that my friends' experiences speak to.

4

A Variety of Liberalism in Vancouver

I opened this book with a poetic reflection on how I like to stand at English Bay, dreaming up alternative worlds. Perhaps the key problem with this scenario is that I am standing alone, entertaining fantasies, rather than taking action with others in the real world and waiting to see what we dream up together. In some sense, as we shall see in this chapter, my whimsical musing performatively realizes the intentions of some of the people who designed Vancouver. They built City Hall upon a hill outside of the downtown area from where it could appear to rule over the city without being particularly accessible (Monteyne 2010, 52). They offered very little space for public gatherings, where people might face either those in positions of power or one another to engage in dialogue. And they instead developed a thin, two-lane walkway around the red cedar- and Douglas fir-lined West End archipelago, encouraging people to turn outwards towards the sea; to literally turn their backs on the city. They *wanted* us to stand there, alone or in groups of two, whimsically musing about aquatic adventures.

In this chapter I complicate the simplified picture of liberalism painted in Chapter 2, detailing the complex ways in which liberalism has and has not become embedded in the city my friends call home. The advantage of the critique I offered in Chapter 2 is that it gives us a broad overview of the history of liberal ideas and an outline of how these have become reality. But this same advantage is also a shortcoming. Such overviews end up assigning agentive force to a phantom. Liberalism becomes an ideology without real places or people. It is simultaneously the entire backdrop against which *everybody* operates and yet explains no single feature. It is the reason that society is crumbling around us and yet no individual person seems to fit the profile. With this shortcoming in mind, it is my contention that what is needed is a variety of liberalisms approach. This means recognizing that there are globally circulating ideas that have found their way into a range of institutions and individuals, producing similar results in seemingly disparate

places, while also recognizing that liberalism is not merely a framework that is preconceived and imposed from above. Rather, liberal ideas have been and continue to be forged anew in each particular setting in which they can be found. This involves negotiation with rival ideologies and the formation of hybrids. Just as American ideas of modernity are radically distinct from Egyptian versions (Eisenstadt 2000), and just as Dutch varieties of secularism are radically distinct from Mexican variants (Burchardt et al 2015), so Indian varieties of liberalism are radically distinct from Canadian variants. It is, moreover, the case that just as a ready-made public culture is not air-dropped from above, nor does a coherent whole emerge from below. Thus, we can see myriad features of liberal, anti-liberal and post-liberal tendencies harboured in a single place, and even in a single person.

Having in the first three chapters set out a tapestry of liberalism and its critics, in this chapter I explain whether and how public culture in Vancouver maps onto these nodes. In so doing, I am able to offer an inkling of the ideologies, institutions and practices that my friends cherish, as well as those that they are seeking to resist. Of course, I am aware that any such exercise can only ever be partially explanatory. I am not a cultural determinist, but even if I were, I would see little point in seeking to enclose my friends into a *The Truman Show*-sized world. Even in the impenetrable walls of such a canopy, there will always be unknown doors through which people can escape unseen. But no matter the expanses opened to us by the internet, no matter the time we spend online even as we traverse the streets, still the material world in which each of us lives remains a microcosm in which we put political ideas to the test. Every dilapidated building is a potential symbol of something rotten in the economic system, every small unkindness an anecdote from which a grander narrative of social malaise may be spun. This is particularly so for my interlocutors, for whom the local is a crucial standard by which to judge the success of political ideas. I will begin with a wide lens, enveloping Canada as a whole. I then zoom in to British Columbia (BC) and Vancouver. Focusing the lens still further, I introduce Metro Vancouver Alliance, its history, its aims and why its strategies might speak to the liberal world as a whole. Finally, I offer some insights into the struggle that my friends face in embodying liberal ideals.

Imposing a liberal order

It is widely thought that the social and political history of Canada is best understood as 'the story of how the worldview of a few liberal men, living in a few southern cities, attained power over half a continent' (Constant and Ducharme 2009, 18; for historiographical consensus see p 17). Most authors adopting this position limit liberalism to a triad including '(1) equality before the law, (2) the enjoyment of certain civil liberties, and (3) the sacred

right to private property' (Constant and Ducharme 2009, 8). Others add an emphasis on rationality or utility. While certainly alternative traditions such as conservativism, nationalism and socialism have been present in Canadian history, these have tended to collude with or at least conform to these three or four principles. Politicians of all stripes 'upheld the superiority of British political institutions over American ones, promoted industrialisation and the development of railways, and agreed that Métis and Aboriginal individual and collective rights should not infringe on the political and territorial reorganising and the economic expansion of Western Canada' (Constant and Ducharme 2009, 12).

Notwithstanding this widespread alignment, there is disagreement over exactly how liberalism spread. For some authors, the path to liberal domination in Canada is a classic case of hegemony: the national government designed municipal institutions and schools with the intention of embedding liberal ideology into the lived experiences of an often resistant populace (Dagenais 2009). From this perspective the history of Canada is a history of the 'tactics used by promoters of the liberal order to destroy the pre-existing social order and to impose on the population – sometimes by way of force and sometimes by obtaining their consent – a new social structure based on private property' (Constant and Ducharme 2009, 16). It is characterized by the 'replacement, often with a kind of revolutionary symbolic or actual violence, of antithetical traditions and forms that had functioned for centuries and even millennia with new conceptions of the human being and society' (Constant and Ducharme 2009, 16). For other authors, liberalism arrives as much from below as from above, with many people arriving in Canada generally, and BC specifically, with a strong mistrust of the church, the state and elites.

There is also disagreement as to the extent to which liberalism ultimately dominates. This has been contested on two fronts. First, it has been suggested that if liberalism truly were so prominent in Canada, then its political culture would be barely distinguishable from that of the US. In reality, however, Canada has a strong Tory culture that emphasizes the wisdom of tradition; the importance of the common good; the unity of ethics and economics; and an abiding respect for the land (Dart 2016, xxv–xxviii). It is crucial that observers take this parallel tradition into account to avoid a simplistically liberal narrative, the telling of which actually reproduces liberalism's dominance and with it the idea that the only non-liberals are the poor, the uneducated or the non-white. Real alternatives have existed in the upper echelons of Canadian political culture. Yet even though a distinguishing feature of Canadian identity is being 'not American', the refrain rings increasingly empty. The gap between Canadian and American culture is closing, just as is that between Britain and America.

The second front on which liberalism's dominance has been contested is in relation to its margins. Without wanting to exacerbate their marginality, it is

important to recognize those oppressed and ignored by the standard narrative. It has been suggested, for example, that 'those parts of the political economy and culture of Aboriginal peoples, other rural populations, and family life having little to do with markets, or rational self-interest, or improvement, or equality, tend to appear (when they do at all) as awkward exceptions hovering uneasily on the edges of historical significance' (Sandwell 2009, 263). I want to go further than this in two ways. First of all, it is not merely that some people have failed to adopt liberalism or have been confined to its margins. Liberalism is partly constructed *through* the invention of these margins. Dominating indigenous peoples simultaneously serves the purpose of appropriating their land *and* of defining what it means to be a rational individual (Federici 2004, 111). Second, liberalism's difficulties 'landing' are not confined to either its rivals or its marginal cases. Even my friends, for whom many liberal principles have achieved unquestioned status, are simultaneously liberal, anti-liberal and post-liberal.

I am not suggesting that liberalism is an illusion; that even as people come to see all of social, political and economic life as a set of contracts freely entered into by autonomous individuals, they do so to the neglect of the continuing influence of illiberal aspects such as 'loyalty, deference, faith, fear and hostility' (Reddy 2008, 87). As shall be seen in the following chapters, my friends are not deluded. Instead, they are complexly navigating between ideas that they regard as crucial to sustaining freedom, and their own feelings about what a full life consists of. Nor do I want to suggest, as with the failure of liberalism narrative outlined in Chapter 3, that social liberalism is in reality nothing other than a smokescreen for economic liberalism and that those who hold tight to the former, while criticizing the latter, are blind to the secret collusion between the two. My friends are not idiots.

Yet I do want to suggest that there is an implicit assumption among liberals that to be truly free, people must be autonomous, that is, unencumbered by social and class restrictions that obscure them from thinking for themselves. As explained in Chapter 2, to have this freedom, it turns out that liberals require an income, property and so forth of their own. And as this project unfolds on a global scale, ever more bodies, lands and resources must be exploited, and any detractors denounced and excluded. It is in this crucial way that the liberal logic fails to conceive of freedom as what we feel when we no longer have to fear our neighbour's intentions; when we feel empowered to act ethically; and when we live frugally. The choice, for liberals, is often framed as one between oppression and gated houses, without the possibility of an entirely different social order based on reciprocity. My friends are acutely aware of this, as are many of us who identify as being liberal. People can tacitly accept or even gleefully lap up an ideology and yet nonetheless feel the occasional itch. We can, for example, cherish our private space, prefer groups of elective affinity and find it frustrating communicating

with neighbours while nonetheless wishing we were somehow more embedded in our community. Or the other way round, we can strongly desire community while nonetheless always being fearful that any particular community threatens our autonomy. Or we can critique cosmopolitan 'anywhere' lifestyles while nonetheless finding ourselves moving from country to country in pursuit of our career goals. Both liberals and critics of liberalism at once, my friends' lives are largely characterized by the art of navigating this tension.

Meanwhile in British Columbia

British Columbia challenges the assumption that liberalism simply spread from the living rooms of a few men in the south-east outwards (McDonald 2009). One of the most striking reasons for this is the natural barriers surrounding the province: the Rocky Mountains to the east and south, the Pacific to the west, and the Arctic to the north. Until the Canada Pacific Railway was completed in 1885, it could take up to four months to travel from Ottawa to Vancouver by sea (Harris 1997, 164). Even today, the trip out east is unaffordable for many British Columbians, who often see themselves as being on the periphery of the Canadian federation. Indeed, whereas Quebecois separatism is well known outside of Canada, it is less known that any concession made by the Canadian government to Quebec risks triggering calls for equal treatment for BC (Resnick 2001).

So stark were the geographical barriers between the west and east of the country that for many years it may have seemed easier to get to BC from London, UK than from Ottawa. The journey from London could take as little as 42 days. This apparent proximity may account for why BC is thought to share much in common with Britain in terms of its political culture. The connections with Britain are not limited to common law, monarchy, parliamentary democracy and the Scout movement, which are found in the rest of Canada, but can also be found in values such as 'patriotism, compromise and gradualism' (Resnick 2001, 327). Vancouver's culture and landscape are partly shaped by its long-standing and continuing arrivals from Britain: from public gardens, to mock Tudor houses, to the occasional British accent. One consequence of this British connection is that alongside so-called classical liberalism, BC has always had a strong *popular* liberal tradition. Whereas classical liberalism is championed by large property owners and corporations and emphasizes 'individualism, property, lower taxes and limited government' (Resnick 2001, 328), the popular liberalism is defined partly by its resistance to these groups and their values. Popular liberalism is of a more communitarian bent, 'rooted in the culture of local communities and marked by small-scale production and face-to-face contact' (Resnick 2001, 335). BC thus exhibits a widespread valorization of so-called 'ordinary people' and

an equally widespread distrust of elites. As with Britain, in BC, resistance to the liberal order partly came from within liberalism itself and the 'taken for granted' nature of liberal ideas was not merely imposed from above but also wrestled from below (Resnick 2001, 326–8). And as with Britain, the dominance of an anti-elite, popular liberalism has served simultaneously to promote a gradualist new liberalism as against outright socialism *and* a propensity to suddenly swing to the populist right. This anti-elite stance was reinforced by the discovery of gold on Vancouver Island in 1864 and the subsequent influx of Americans who did not appreciate being dictated to by representatives of the British Crown.

The 1930s and 1940s saw a widespread desire to wrest power from monopolies in favour of small business owners, as well as popular support for welfare policies that would remove 'barriers to self-development' (McDonald 2009, 338). But in 1952 the right-wing populist Social Credit party was elected and would stay in power for all but four years out of the next 40. This was an act of defiance against *both* the consolidation of capital that was interrupting community life *and* the paternalistic socialist alternative offered by the Co-operative Commonwealth Foundation.

But the connections with Britain have their limits. One reason for this is that, as I have already hinted, for as long as Britons have been arriving in BC, Americans have too. From the goldrush of the mid 19th century to the back-to-the-landers and Vietnam draft evaders of the 1960s and 1970s, BC has served as a premier location for Americans seeking to build a new life.

Another reason to take the 'British' in British Columbia with a pinch of salt is that the period since the Second World War has seen large-scale immigration from the rest of Europe, the rest of Canada and South and East Asia (Resnick 2001, 8). BC's natural barriers have best shaped it not as a British outpost but as a place of escape, exploitation and nature-inspired fantasy. It is for this reason primarily that BC broadly, and Vancouver in particular, is able to harbour such extremes: from utopian dissidents (Rodgers 2014), to New Age spiritualists, to individualist resource extractors and free market capitalists (Resnick 2001, 9). BC is a utopia beyond the Rocky Mountains that people from the rest of Canada, the US, and the rest of the world, have escaped to in order to carve out their own idea of what the good life consists of. BC is thus brimming with intense contradictions, its people united more in their belief that utopia is achievable than in what it will look like when they finally get there.

Nor does the abundance of awe-inspiring nature create an underlying unity. British Columbians have long associated their environment with Eden and many cite this as a reason that they don't need church (Block 2016, 163). Indeed, what has variously been called earth-based spirituality, 'pantheism' or 'reverential naturalism' (Bramadat 2020) is seen as the 'majority religion'

in BC (Shibley 2008). And even for those less spiritually inclined, it has been noted that

> [i]n BC there is no place free from [nature's] presence. Vancouver, an immensely modern city, can never become a wholly urban environment, for it is pinned down between the mountains and the sea, and the mountains are always visible and the sea is always near. ... Thus, even the most urban of BC poets cannot avoid themes and images of the wilderness. (Skelton quoted in Resnick 2001, 5)

And yet notwithstanding the importance of this shared backdrop for Vancouverites' imaginaries, it cannot on its own predict their behaviours. For some it has inspired a radical environmentalism. For others it has inspired an ethic of limitless plunder: the assumption that there are always more trees over the next hill. For still others it means little more than that Vancouver provides the perfect setting for outdoor sports, as its hosting of the 2010 Winter Olympics attested.

This divergence of ends, however, should not be taken as indicating that there is no core to BC's culture. Whereas those on the left are concerned about being dominated by capitalists, those on the right are strongly resistant to the domination of the state. And left and right alike have historically resisted both the authority of the church (Block 2016; Marks 2017) and the authority of Ottawa (Resnick 2001). The core of BC political culture is thus individualism, anti-authority, unchurchedness and social liberalism – though the latter two vary from town to town.

Like most of the Western and Western-dominated world, BC has also seen its share of neoliberalism. In the mid 1980s BC experienced a variety of neoliberalism 'more extreme than that practiced by US President Ronald Reagan or Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher', defined by 'deregulation, privatization and contracting out' (Aguiar 2004, 106–7). And subsequently, much as with Bill Clinton's reign in the US and Tony Blair's in the UK, successive governments of the centre-left New Democratic Party in the 1990s were widely accused of representing 'neoliberalism light'.

Today in BC, a strong socially democratic surface remains, even as it is being eaten away by neoliberal logics. British Columbians take pride in and expect much from their public healthcare, schools and transit, and the provincial political landscape is shaped by the competition between the socially democratic NDP and the Liberals, as opposed to the Liberal–Conservative competition defining federal elections.

Lurking beneath these many issues is the most distinctive feature of all: the question of the territory on which the many struggles for utopia are played out. I have deliberately left this to the end of my discussion despite its central role to mimic its historic and ongoing marginalization, and the

way in which it is consequently seen as suddenly 're-emerging' – as if it had some point been forgotten. When BC was formed in 1871 it did not recognize Aboriginal Title. Although this has changed today, 'the number of modern treaties that have yet to be negotiated is greater in British Columbia than in the rest of Canada combined' (Crawford 2012, 102). How these treaties specifically, and Indigenous claims to sovereignty more broadly, are negotiated will serve as a defining feature of BC political culture in the coming years. Every major political question I encountered in Vancouver, from the building of the Kinder Morgan oil pipeline to the building of the Site C dam, to housing and drug addiction, were all inflected with questions of Indigenous title. Indeed, almost any question discussed without reference to indigeneity seems wilfully naive. Indigenous people, and in particular the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh, have had and continue to have their land robbed from them and their culture demonized. Stolen from and demoralized, they are over-represented in the homeless and drug-addicted population. As people seek to drop out of mainstream society and go to build new communities out in the countryside, they are also necessarily dropping into and reproducing a system that carves up and colonizes indigenous land in the name of Western freedom.

Notwithstanding these ongoing threats to indigenous ways of life, Indigenous people are not merely the original sin of Canadian culture. They are not simply a shameful but ultimately marginal character in the unfolding British Columbian story. Indigenous people are also central to projects to resist resource extraction. As a consequence, they continue to be marginalized and romanticized, both by those who wish to discredit them and those desiring their support. As grants increase Indigenous access to higher education, new leaders are emerging. Some are seeking to sign treaties, while others see doing so as a capitulation to colonialism. Some encourage resource extraction, while others see it as a violation of their sacred land and water. The choices these new leaders make in the coming years will shape BC's future. As shall be seen in Chapter 7 in particular, the questions of how to reckon with the colonial past and how to learn from Indigenous leaders in resisting the liberal logic, play an important role in shaping my friends' approach to politics.

Elective cities: liberalism in Vancouver

In smaller cities and towns, individualist values and neoliberal policies may well go hand in hand with the self-governance and face-to-face contact that define popular liberalism. But Vancouver conforms to type as a global city. Large swathes of the city have seen town houses replaced by freeways and high-rises. So widespread is this urban renewal that in Strathcona, one of the few central neighbourhoods where low-rise, wooden houses still dominate,

there is a plaque outside the Chan family home to commemorate its being saved from demolition in the 1960s and 1970s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Strathcona is also a hub of citizens' initiatives, and the ongoing project to save 105 Keefer Street from redevelopment is shared across activist circles and across national media as an exemplar of what ordinary people can achieve when they take action together.

The urge for redevelopment doesn't come from nowhere. As already stressed, Vancouver is literally surrounded by breathtaking nature: the Salish Sea, and beyond it the Pacific Ocean to the west; the North Shore Mountains to the north; and, albeit further, the Rocky Mountains to the east and the Cascades to the south. This simultaneously makes Vancouver one of the most attractive cities to move to globally and forms a natural border beyond which the city cannot grow. As a result, Vancouver has the most expensive residential properties in the world outside of Asia. In 2016, 41 per cent of the population was born outside of Canada – 5 per cent more than both London and New York (Government of Canada 2017). Just like the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh people they have displaced, the settler middle class are slowly being forced further and further out of the city, away from the scenic coastlines that played a part in attracting them and their forbears. Far from the BC ideal of face-to-face contact, one of Vancouver's biggest problems today, as identified by residents, is loneliness and isolation (Vancouver Foundation 2017). Indigenous people themselves, meanwhile, serve as a constant reminder of Vancouver's original and ongoing sin. If remaining within the West End and Downtown areas of Vancouver, apart from a few token totem poles, one's most frequent encounter with Indigenous culture and people will be among the homeless in the Downtown Eastside. The issue is of course more complex but seeing people whose land is still being stolen from them sat on the streets of this now global metropolis is haunting.

As far as global cities are concerned, economic and social liberalism have long been complexly intertwined. This has become especially so since the dawn of the 21st century, when urbanists like Richard Florida and David Brooks argued that cities with lots of 'gays and bohemians' were more likely to thrive economically (Brooks 2001; Florida 2019). The presence of a thriving LGBTQ+ community and cultural scene supposedly appeals to the values of the creative elite that are now so vital to economic development. Florida, in particular, has since been flown around the world by municipal governments seeking his expertise. And he has created supply and demand simultaneously, writing self-help pieces to convince the creative elite that their happiness depends on finding and moving to the city that best suits their personality (Florida 2009). Pitching his work as a counter to the 'anywheres' aspersion outlined in Chapter 2, Florida argues that cities are not interchangeable and that choosing *your* city is in fact exceedingly important for happiness. Yet

the point of the anywheres critique is not that place matters, but that one's belonging to a place should be generative, relational and established over time through embeddedness in a shared culture and a network of mutual indebtedness. Conversely, Florida's belonging is characterized by a transient individual preference. He encourages disaffiliation. There is no obligation to country or community. Bonds developed over time are sacrificed in the name of choice. His city is an elective city.

Vancouver is a paradigm case of this trend, seeing heavy investment in luxury apartments, urban galleries and arts venues, alongside the development of Davie Village, the city's historic LGBTQ+ area (Doan 2011). A Creative City Task Force was developed in 2004. Its *The Culture Plan for Vancouver 2008–2018* states that '[b]ecause culture is the cornerstone upon which vibrant resilient, competitive and creative industries are built, the City is committed to supporting the growth and diversity of cultural activities and offerings in Vancouver' (Creative City Task Force 2008). And they succeeded. According to Florida himself,

> [Vancouver's] affluent knowledge workers, professionals, and creatives are clustered in and around its core and form a huge, self-contained wedge to the west and the north around natural amenities like parks and mountains. Its service class is pushed to the more disadvantaged and less well-served areas of the south and east. Again there is just one small working class neighbourhood that remains. (Florida 2014)

This inequality is stark at surface level. Both conspicuous consumption and conspicuous poverty abound. Walking on Vancouver's main streets, one feels surrounded by big cars, little dogs, the snobby rich and the disgruntled poor. An abundance of empty homes taunt the homeless.

As well as being divided economically, Vancouver is host to large cultural enclaves. In 1981, 86 per cent of Vancouver's population was European. By 2031 it is predicted to be 37 per cent (Hiebert 2012). Forty-three per cent of the city's residents have an Asian background – the highest of any city in the world outside Asia. One does not have to live in Vancouver long to understand how these communities are geographically segmented. Whites live in the historic part of the city touching the Salish Sea. With the exception of China Town, Chinese live mainly in Richmond to the south; Filipinos live to the east; most Iranians live in the north; and South Asians live primarily in Surrey to the south-east. Standing alongside these ethnic enclaves is Davie Village, which acts as a safe haven for the LGBTQ+ community – at least for those that can afford it.

Inhabitants of Vancouver's multiple enclaves rarely interact (Hiebert 2015; CIC 2016). The majority of the literature regarding Vancouver's immigrant communities is concerned with questioning the success of assimilation. It

has rightly been pointed out that whether or not immigration has been successful depends in part on the assumption that people must assimilate to Euro-Canadian culture (Hiebert 2015). Yet this perspective excludes a class analysis. Cross-community interaction is not simply a matter of avoiding race wars or promoting harmony; as argued in Chapters 1 and 2, it is also a matter of building sufficient solidarity in society to stand up to the forces of common oppression.

Resisting liberalism from within: the Industrial Areas Foundation

It was in the context of so much fragmentation that MVA was born. As an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), MVA is steeped in a tradition of community organizing that prioritizes 'relationships over issues' (Putnam and Feldstein 2009, 14–20). The basic aim of the IAF is simple. As a lead organizer in my previous research with an IAF organization in London put it,

> 'if you want to look at society in three sectors, or three cultures, private, public and civil society, it's the civil society which is under-organized, less powerful, missed out in terms of big decisions, so our primary purpose is to organize in the civil society sector, especially in areas that are disengaged and disadvantaged from political and economic success, and to allow that sector to have greater political influence as the other sectors.'

What this means in practice is that IAF organizations bring together a vast array of civil society actors in a local area to work towards a common good: faith groups, trade unions, community groups and educational institutions. Coalitions are always built around relational meetings between an organizer and a leader within an organization, where a leader is understood as anyone able to influence a following. Relational meetings are no mere impromptu chats. As will be explained in Chapter 6, relational meetings are ritualized interactions designed to elicit an answer to the question: what do you care about deeply enough to act on and why? Though the strategies vary from organization to organization and leader to leader, relational meetings are supposed to leave people 'wanting more', as so many leaders have explained to me over the years.

Next, the various leaders with whom an organizer has built a personal relationship are invited to a group meeting in which they get to know one another and learn IAF organizing techniques. They then form the board of the organization, and in their capacity as chairs, are sent into their own institutions to carry out their own series of relational meetings,

slowly learning about the issues that most concern their members. Their findings from these meetings are then brought to the next board meeting, where common ground between the many institutions is found: usually better conditions for workers, cleaner streets, access to housing, and affordable healthcare.

Somewhere along the way, leaders are asked to contribute 'dues'. IAF institutions are funded through a combination of what they call 'hard money' and 'soft money'. Hard money is the money that comes from dues-paying members. The amount paid depends on the size of the organization. Soft money comes from public funding and grants. Hard money is so called because it is free from the influence either of governments or big donors. "It doesn't come with strings attached," as one organizer explained. By sourcing money from dues, IAF organizations force themselves to focus on the issues negotiated between their members.

The IAF was founded in Chicago in 1940 by Saul Alinsky and is steeped in his life experiences. From the Jewish community in which he was raised, Alinsky learnt 'self-organisation and mutual care' (Bretherton 2015, 21–2). He thus instinctively saw community not as something 'static or inherited' and thus 'subject to inevitable dissolution through processes of modernisation', but rather as 'an ongoing project' that people have to commit themselves to and work at, building 'meaningful relationships with each other' and developing 'a collective sense of identity and place' ((Bretherton 2015, 23). From his doctoral studies in sociology at the University of Chicago, he learnt a communitarian social ontology that said '[e]ach person becomes human through interaction with others' (George Herbert Mead quoted in Bretherton 2015, 26). This philosophy demanded ethnographic research methods and Alinsky employed these in his study of criminal gangs in poverty-stricken neighbourhoods. It was from these gangs that Alinsky learnt the dual importance of trust and threats of pressure. Trust was seen as crucial because 'for those without power and who cannot deploy either the resources of the state or the power of money to achieve their ends, relational power is the only means available through which they can act' (Bretherton 2015, 27). Threats of pressure were seen as essential because those in power do not act out of benevolence but out of self-interest.

A core theme that I will be developing in the following chapters is how Alinsky's approach allows people to be simultaneously individualist and radically community oriented. This is for two reasons: first, there is little point in being nominally free if you do not have the power to act; second, there is little point in having the freedom to express your values if no one is willing to listen. It is thus only by building community that we can fully realize the yearnings underlying the drive for individualism: self-actualization, empowerment, expression. Alinsky beautifully illustrates this point in his

moving discussion of the power of organizing to transform individual self-worth.

> People hunger for drama and adventure, for a breath of life in a dreary, drab existence. ... But it's more than that. It is a desperate search *for personal identity – to let other people know that at least you are alive*. Let's take a common case in the ghetto. A man is living in a slum tenement. He doesn't know anybody and nobody knows him. He doesn't care for anyone because no one cares for him. On the corner newsstand are newspapers with pictures of people like Mayor Daley and other people from a different world – a world that he doesn't know, a world that doesn't know that he is even alive. *When the organizer approaches him part of what begins to be communicated is that through the organization and its power he will get his birth certificate for life, that he will become known*, that things will change from the drabness of a life where all that changes is the calendar. This same man, in a demonstration at City Hall, might find himself confronting the mayor and saying, 'Mr. Mayor, we have had it up to here and we are not going to take it any more [*sic*].' Television cameramen put their microphones in front of him and ask, 'What is your name, sir?' 'John Smith.' Nobody ever asked him what his name was before. And then, 'What do you think about this, Mr. Smith?' Nobody ever asked him what he thought about anything before. Suddenly he's alive! This is part of the adventure, part of what is so important to people in getting involved in organizational activities and what the organizer has to communicate to him. Not that every member will be giving his name on television – that's a bonus – but *for once, because he is working together with a group, what he works for will mean something*. (Alinsky 1989, 126–7, emphasis added)

In Alinsky's imaginary, at least among those without positional power, individualism and community are inseparable because only as part of a group can we have an impact and feel really listened to as individuals. IAF organizations allow people to complexly navigate between their need to find a story of their own that has existential weight, and their need to belong to a community that will listen to their story, give them the courage and strength to act, and help them to leave a mark in the world.

The balance between the individual and the community is cultivated in the way that IAF organizations operate. The ability to put aside differences and work towards a common good is the crucial prerequisite of joining as a dues-paying member. The focus is on collaboration above all else. Again, this carves out a middle way between the individual and the community. The community must give up its claim to orthodoxy whenever this stands in the way of working together. While this stance may seem obvious, in

the polarized political culture pervading the globe at present, it is radical. As explained in Chapter 2, increasingly groups demand complete loyalty to their entire ideological platform as a condition of engagement. The result is that discussions across the divide are foreclosed and coalitions cannot be built (Duyvendak 2018). IAF institutions do the vital work of unbuilding these walls at ground level. They do so by embedding people within a pre-contractual 'we' of place. The clue is in the name. IAF organizations are always named after the place in which they operate. They create a sense of connectedness and mutual obligation on the basis of the sheer fact of happening to be together in the same place. We do not owe things to one another by virtue of us each being Christian, Canadian, ethnically Chinese or gay, and nor because we are committed to the same ideology, but simply because we live in the same city and thus are implicated in its achievements and shortcomings.

The community one enters into as a member of an IAF organization is neither purely elective nor all-encompassing. Although a person is not born into but rather chooses to join an IAF organization, one can only do so as a member of an existing institution, such as a church, gurdwara, trade union or activist network. We must first identify ourselves as already embedded within one institution before we can seek to join another.

This same principle means that IAF institutions do not seek to simply tear down the old to replace it with the new. As such, they provide an alternative to the suppress-and-replace model of civil religion introduced in Chapter 3. Already existing institutions are reified as the fabric of civil society. But there is a crucial twist. Traditional institutions are only valued insofar as they command a loyal membership. To the IAF, it matters very little whether its member institutions are gurdwaras, trade unions or environmental campaign groups – so long as they are willing to work towards the common good. What this means is that although in order to join an IAF organization one must already be a member of an institution, institutions themselves are legitimized on the basis that they are chosen by individual members. Alinsky's own institutional analysis reflects this respect for fragmented loyalties. He conveyed animosity towards fascism and communism on the grounds that they demand 'unqualified political loyalty', do not 'allow for self-government' and do not 'uphold the dignity of the individual' (Bretherton 2015, 33). He stressed that 'all normal individuals have a whole series of loyalties – loyalties to their churches, their labour unions, their fraternal organizations, their social groups, their nationality groups, their athletic groups, their political parties, and many other' (Alinsky in Bretherton 2015, 33).

It is the balance between the individual and the community that most fundamentally forms the basis of all of the myths, rituals, magical feelings and traditions discussed in this book. The myths of liberally oriented community organizers, discussed in Chapter 5, are full of paradox. They start off classically

liberal, with individuals being liberated from oppressive relationships and communities, but end with those same individuals finding themselves again in a new community of action. The rituals discussed in Chapter 6 are no less paradoxical. In Chapter 2 I explained that the freedom that liberalism gives people to have a story of their own actually leads many to experience meaning fatigue. They have had to spin a new story after every setback, and often without anyone to really listen to or stand up for them. IAF rituals help individuals to formulate their own story, *as well as* embedding them within a community of people who are willing to listen and stand in solidarity. In so doing, I show, they help those engaged to see that self-expression is empty without an active listener, and pointless without a group that can provide support. Magic, discussed in Chapter 7, is in a sense an intensely personal feeling between an individual and the external world, but it comes with the recognition that meaning is not being generated solely from the narratives we create but also is inherent in the people and things we have contact with. Magic thus penetrates us from the outside, breaking through the veneer of the interior self. Taken together, I will argue in Chapter 8, these elements constitute a tradition. Rather than tradition only ever being a source of oppression, I claim that finding one's place in a tradition can be a source of liberation from the cynical selves we feel compelled to be in order to keep afloat in a selfish world.

Saving liberalism in Vancouver

IAF institutions seem deeply needed to cultivate solidarity across differences in contemporary Vancouver. What is more, they seem perfectly suited to BC's history of popular liberalism. This was the insight of the people that got MVA off the ground in the early 2000s. There are no contemporary records of these early conversations, so the following account relies on oral histories from those that were around at the time. According to one founding leader,

> 'the deeply felt need for serious, disciplined and long-term community organizing in Vancouver and, not merely in certain zones of Vancouver, arose out of a Downtown Eastside Residents Association [DERA] board meeting (circa: 2004). I had been sensing for some time … that despite the best, steadfast efforts to represent and lobby on the needs, concerns and issues of the urban core, it seldom if ever, got to be more than rallies, demonstrations, appearances before politicians or their committees, media coverage, occasional single-issue coalitions which dissolved when the issue did. It was clearly insufficient. What then?'

Like associations in scores of cities before them, DERA members soon stumbled across the IAF and spent years searching for experienced IAF

leaders who could train them in their methods. Slowly they tried to build a coalition that included churches, unions, community groups and educational institutions. In 2008 they found Deborah Littman and by 2011 had raised the money to hire her full time.

Under Deborah's guidance, this loose coalition had hundreds of relational meetings to find out who had 'the appetite to work together for the common good'. At the time of writing, MVA has 25 dues-paying member institutions, which they divide into three categories: faith, organized labour and community. Its most active members are from a handful of churches, trade unions and community groups. Following years of one-to-ones within these institutions, five core themes were identified: housing, healthcare, income, transit and social inclusion.

Holding this loose coalition together and growing it in a highly liberal city like Vancouver brings IAF principles to the fore.

A pre-contractual 'we' of place

As I have already explained in relation to the IAF as a whole, so MVA re-embeds people in a pre-contractual 'we' of place. Doing so is by no means uncontroversial. It means being willing to work with people whose attitudes greatly differ from your own. And it means painful conversations with people whose causes you care about. In 2017 Canada generally, and Vancouver in particular, were ahead of the curve in doing gender pronoun rounds in public meetings. For readers still unacquainted with the practice, it involves asking everyone in the room to identify the pronouns by which they would like to be referred so as not to assume that one's sexual characteristics determine one's gender identity. So in my case, I would say, "Tim, he/his/him." As readers with experience chairing meetings will automatically register, pronoun rounds can be quite an imposition on the schedule. Attending as I did a different meeting around town almost every night, I started to think it interesting that MVA did not open its meetings with pronoun rounds. I also noticed that in a city rich in LGBTQ+ organizations, none of these were involved in MVA. When I began to enquire as to why, I quickly discovered that MVA was not simply an institutional backwater that the new culture had not yet reached. Rather, it had felt the need to take a stance on the issue.

It turned out MVA had tried to involve an LGBTQ+ group in the past, but that that group had said that they would only attend a meeting if it began with pronoun rounds. MVA had considered this unfeasible. In private discussion, one organizer had stressed that identity politics was undermining class-based solidarity. Another, more sympathetic, had said that pragmatically speaking, this simply would not work. MVA included socially conservative Christians among their group, and just as the Christians could not demand

that proceedings open with a prayer, so LGBTQ+ groups could not insist on pronoun rounds. To be clear, many of those engaged in MVA identify as LGBTQ+ and they expect to be treated with equal dignity. It is just that for MVA, encouraging people to recognize their interdependency by virtue of occupying the same physical space must always take priority over other ideological stances. In order to achieve this, they welcome all institutions but cannot allow any one institution to impose its ideology on the others. This does not mean that MVA are neutral as regards conceptions of the good. Rather, they take a strong stance, emphasizing a relational ontology rooted in a place as taking precedence over any particular goal.

Relationships before issues

The key criterion of building this pre-contractual 'we' around place is putting relationships before issues. Vancouver has a proud history of building grand coalitions on shared issues. I myself was privileged to be involved in an anti-racism rally bringing together churches, LGBTQ+ groups, unions and Indigenous groups. But these coalitions quickly fall apart once the issue is resolved – in our case, we overshadowed an anti-immigration rally. Alternatively, as already outlined earlier, the IAF brings organizations together literally before an issue has been decided. This means that no individual member can force its issue above all else. And it means that people have to learn to stand up for one another even when an issue does not concern them. This came to the fore in the aftermath of an action that had failed. Gary, an ethnically European vicar in his 60s, stood up at the next meeting and made an impassioned speech:

> 'We did the listening [relational meetings]. We had committed 289 people. We booked space for 300 people because we knew we needed that to pressure the government. I tore myself away from something else because I knew it would be a significant day.
>
> But on May 12th, in a space for 300 we got 140. We lost our momentum, we lost our power before we even started [he is very emotional, very solemn]. MVA organizations need to show up for each other. We planned an action with the power of 300. Maybe this isn't your thing. But I bet there's someone on the table next to you who it really matters to. They felt let down. Every organization, every member has an impact. Where were you?'

Gary's emotional speech exemplifies the place of relationships at the heart of MVA. Members who had failed to show up or to bring enough people with them on 12 May felt guilty as they looked around the room. Often a speech of admonishment will turn people off. But Gary's speech spoke to

core MVA values. After the meeting, a number of members commented on how powerful the speech had been and how it had inspired them to act.

Reconstituting the self

Many friends have pointed out to me throughout the years that the IAF principle that one may only join as a member of an institution was problematic for them. As explained in Chapter 2, in a liberal society many people have learnt to define themselves specifically in terms of having liberated themselves from institutions. Or else they have moved cities a number of times and do not feel sufficiently embedded in an institution to influence its members. But as they found themselves wanting to be part of MVA, some of my friends had to learn to think of themselves as embedded within a range of institutions. For those who had some semblance of an institution around them, this meant reacquainting themselves with their church or their school as a whole of which they form a part, rather than as something entirely external to them from which they receive a service. And it meant organizing within their institutions, often for the first time, persuading colleagues that joining the IAF was worth their money and time.

This is just the first step. Once you are engaged in an IAF institution, you have to navigate the gauntlet of often conflicting ideologies and interests. This often means compromising on your values in order to work together towards a common goal. My friends regard self-expression as a fundamental value. They believe in equal rights for people regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability. They have a strong sense of solidarity with, and draw inspiration from, people living halfway across the world. And they are well educated. But through MVA, they also live their lives in ways that challenge the one-dimensional 'anywheres' aspersion outlined in Chapter 2. They are deeply concerned when local communities seem fragmented and unable to solve basic problems without government intervention. They do not think it is enough for either states or organizations to express solidarity through reforming laws or handing out money but instead think that states have a duty to empower individuals, and that individuals have a duty to act. And they regard relationships as more important than issues, since focusing on the latter alone is to already have given in to a way of thinking that treats other people as means to a political end. Reconciling the desires for freedom and belonging is full of conflict and compromise. They often have to put aside disgust in order to work with people whom they deeply disagree with. They have to give up on efficiency in order to value the person in front of them. What is more, they have to convince others that it is worth doing the same; that only by working in solidarity with those they deeply disagree with can people hope to claw back their dignity.

It is because they are caught between liberal ideals and the pragmatic reality of organizing in their community that my friends are so well positioned to save liberalism from itself. In the following chapters I explain the myths, rituals, magic and traditions through which they achieve a kind of balance. My argument throughout will be twofold: first, accepting the role of these elements is already to embed oneself in a community. The process of sharing myths, engaging in rituals, experiencing magic and passing on traditions is inherently social. But second, the content matters too. Each of these elements has to take a particular form if it is to achieve a balance between autonomy and community.

5

Myths that Might Save Liberalism: Emotional Supplements to Moral Logics

"*Why*?!?!" we find ourselves screaming out loud or whispering silently in times of great despair. "Why is this happening to *me*?" For humans, the world is story shaped (Ricoeur 2009). When life fails to make sense in terms of cause and effect, beginning, middle and end, it becomes unfathomable and we fall into a pit of despair (MacIntyre [1981] 2012, 217). Only the fervently faithful and outright nihilists are safe. But not all stories answer these weighty why questions. This is where myth comes in.

To speak of the myths of liberalism may seem oxymoronic. As I have been explaining in the previous chapters, liberal modernity is widely understood to be defined by its having consigned traditional and charismatic forms of legitimacy to the past in favour of rational-legal legitimacy. This Weberian thesis has achieved the status of a master narrative, taught across the humanities and social sciences in classrooms around the world. Liberal scholars warn against the urge to ground politics in something emotionally or metaphysically deeper since this is the root to totalitarianism (Habermas 2011, 24). The dominance of this perspective is evidenced in the numerous opinion pieces that treat the recent rise of populism as a dangerous *return* of non-rational forms of legitimacy – as if these could be left behind (Ioris and Pagliarini 2019).

Myths are thought of as things that fools believe in. The term myth has historically been used to separate 'primitive' religions from Christianity, and later religion generally from a rational worldview (Bell 2009). In the 19th century, myth implied stories of events that defy the laws of nature and which are believed in propositionally – an early science. Today the word myth is usually only used to refer to things long-dead Greek people told. When 'myth' *is* used in popular parlance, it is as an antonym to 'fact', such as in the recent *New York Times* headline 'The Myth of the Criminal

Immigrant' (Flagg 2018). Such myths are little more than tall tales that need to be debunked; lies that deluded and uneducated people believe. But to dismiss myths in this way is to ignore exactly why and how they influence people, as well as their potential for harnessing political engagement.

Among academics, already in the early 20th century, myth was treated less as an early science than as a non-literal way of interpreting the world (Segal 2003). Myths came to be seen as speaking to the human condition, rather than to the way the world literally is, and thus as requiring neither belief nor disbelief. This way of thinking about myth has enabled people to understand myth making as natural and potentially universal (Turner 1998; Harris 2000; Whitehouse 2004), and increasingly authors are seeing the importance of reviving a culture of myth making in liberal politics (Evans 2017). Still, despite this groundswell, precious little attention has been paid to the myths that already exist and how they shape people's thoughts and actions.

I think of myths as having four attributes that separate them from just any old story. The first is that myths seek to answer the existential or 'weighty why' questions we howl into a pillow. Some theorists would call this a cosmic function (Blumenberg 1988, 42; Hendy 2002, 38–40, 140, 321). I prefer not to because I want to resist the urge to assume that what matters most to people must always be understood in religious or astronomical terms. Others might think of the way that myths seek to answer weighty why questions as a naturalizing function. Myths make us think of as necessary things that are in fact contingent. I avoid this too because it seems to suggest either that people employ myths to delude us into thinking that something is natural that in fact isn't, or that the tellers of myths themselves are deluded. Instead, I think it is perfectly plausible that we can be complete constructivists who nonetheless like the way a certain story works. We can think of myths as 'necessary fictions' without assuming that either those telling them or those listening to and emulating them are deluded (Hendy 2002, 336; de Guevara 2016, 17).

The astute reader might have noticed that weighty why questions are not just existential but also normative – the why *me* part. Normativity, then, is the second feature that distinguishes myths from mere stories. Myths are rich with poetic justice – the idea that being good gets rewarded. We are protagonists within a moral story and when we spend our lives trying to be good, it feels unfair that bad things should happen to us (Gottschall 2013, 131–5). Philosophers (MacIntyre [1981] 2012; Nussbaum 2010) and anthropologists (Smith et al 2017) have both suggested that myths can *make* us more moral too. Although I have sympathy with this idea, a couple of disclaimers are required. First of all, some people may well be impervious to the emotional appeal of stories, either because they cannot, or do not *want* to be drawn in. Second, whether stories make us moral depends on what we consider moral and what kind of stories we're telling. Some stories, such

as those of Ayn Rand, celebrate individualism; while others, such as those told by Ken Loach, celebrate the collective.

The third feature of myths is that they are improbable and profound. They tell of extraordinary acts that seem very difficult to live up to or of characters that are profoundly good or evil. This doesn't mean that myths always involve muscular demigods cleaning out stables. As we shall see, particularly among those who dedicate themselves to their community, myths are often populated with very ordinary people. But in such cases the ordinariness is the point: both because an ordinary, downtrodden person has the potential to be profound, and because ordinary is already profound enough. This profundity, I will argue, ignites the imagination and stirs emotional energy.

The final feature of myths is that they have agentive force over people. By agentive force, I do not necessarily mean that the stories or their characters are in fact, or are interpreted as being, independent agents but rather that they seem to have a capacity to bypass calculation and present themselves in people's imaginaries and, in so doing, inspire action. A really good story can quite literally invade our imaginary and shape the way we perceive the world, with characters from novels and films popping into our heads when we are faced with tough moral decisions (Alderson-Day et al 2017). I again want to emphasize here, however, that just because a myth can invade our imaginaries, this doesn't mean that we have no choice in which myths we listen to and eventually adopt. As we shall see, myths arrive in our minds through a complex combination of unconscious and deliberate acts. I can choose whether I pay attention to stories about Rosa Parks, but I can't always choose the situations in which Rosa will present herself in my mind.

Notice that I avoid the common definition of myths as being held in the collective imagination (Cortois 2017, 412–15). I appreciate that the move to define myths in this way has been part of a project to show that even in purportedly individualist societies, our stories are drawn from common sources and conform to common types: we are less autonomous than we might think. But I do not think that this revelation in itself resolves the fact that some cultures valorize individuality more than others, even if this love of individuality is collectively held. I recognize that the power of a myth can be demonstrated through its collective resonance, and I further accept, and will show in Chapter 6, that collectives play important roles in sharing and creating a sense of plausibility around myths (Berger [1967] 1990, 43). But I worry that thinking of myths as inherently collective things might bias focus towards those myths that are already hegemonic, and distract us from myths' radical potential (Bottici 2007, 160; de Guevara 2016, 26).

Understood in this way, it becomes clear that despite its rational-legal ambitions, liberalism too emerges from and relies upon myths. This is so on three counts. First, as has been widely recognized, liberalism is rooted in principles of faith that are taken as self-evident. In the English-speaking

world, the most common example of this is the United States Declaration of Independence, which opens with 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal' ('Declaration of Independence: A Transcription' 2015; see also Wuthnow 2009; Parini 2010; 2012). Second, even where the arguments that legitimize liberal regimes are rational-legal, the teaching of these arguments is often steeped in stories of great figures who have valiantly championed them against vested interests. It is, for example, hard to think of liberalism without thinking of Emmeline Pankhurst, Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King. Liberalism is imbued with grand myths of emerging from the Dark Ages. Third, and perhaps most importantly, even if we accept that the modern West is distinct in its *emphasis* on rational-legal legitimacy, it is dangerously negligent to suggest that modern Western citizens are distinct from people in the past and elsewhere.

Liberalism has myths, and liberal people – human beings like the rest of us – are inspired by myths. The problem is that liberal politicians and policymakers too often forget this. As the rise of populism across the Western world has demonstrated, our seemingly watertight rational-legal edifice is in fact deeply vulnerable and easily challenged by just any charismatic individual able to spin narratives of a lost past in which things were great. And yet rather than questioning how legitimacy is established, liberals emphasize, for example, the economic advantages of Scotland remaining part of the UK; the UK remaining part of Europe; or for electing this or that 'moderate' politician. They treat grassroots community organizations with suspicion (Stacey 2018b, 12). They think of the voting public as individualist, rational actors and question the sanity of those who fail to conform to type.

This way of thinking is not confined to those in positional power. Some of my interlocutors too see themselves as above myths. This was neatly revealed when I accidentally used the word 'myth' in summing up Betty's motivations. Betty is a well-educated, ethnically East Asian community organizer in her late 20s.

Me: So, it sounds to me that you have these kinds of myths or stories that you live by. For you it's not grand narratives but those small wins that make up the idea that humans can change. Would that be fair?

Betty: [Laughing incredulously] I wanna hear all about these myths because I don't know what they are. Do I have something to be *debunked* that I don't know about?

We were talking just a year after Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 43rd President of the United States. Betty sounded offended. She used the word "debunked", a term often employed by those seeking to disprove the stories

spun by Trump's election machine. The next week I bumped into her at an event where she had sat on the stage and told the story, increasingly itself a myth shared across Vancouver and even Canada as a whole, of how a group of concerned citizens, of which she was one, had saved 105 Kiefer Street from redevelopment. Betty brought up our prior conversation. She said that she had realized that what was upsetting her was the idea that she was "operating under an illusion". She felt uncomfortable having her motivations and stories associated with the same foolhardiness of Trump supporters. It was as if I thought that epistemologically speaking, she was no better than them.

Similarly, liberal readers may fear that to turn to myth is to legitimize the very groundings that they have spent the last 400 years seeking to escape.[1] Yet this 'incredulity towards metanarratives' is problematic because it alienates liberals from important sources of meaning and motivation (Lyotard 1984, xxiv). In this chapter I hope to convince Betty and sceptical readers alike that myths are a crucial element of the ethical imaginary. This does not mean that everything is myth and the notion of right action a farce. Instead, I conceive of myths as supplements to normative theories of action and ethics. I propose a way of thinking about what anthropologists have called the ethical imaginary (Lambek 2011; Laidlaw 2014; Keane 2015) as a constellation of myths that beholders pick at as needs require. These stories need to be constantly updated, refurbished, thickened or replaced lest stories emerge that challenge the overall family of resemblances. Ethical constellations do not replace but rather stand in for and supplement more systematically conceived moral systems. I show how my friends develop a culture of online and offline myth sharing as a form of what Hirschkind calls a 'portable, self-administered, technology of moral selfhood' (Hirschkind 2006). These technologies are crucial in mobilizing the emotions necessary for extending sympathy beyond people's immediate sphere of interest to people of other ethnicities and creeds.

This line of argument, however, will only get us so far. Demonstrating the power of myths in our lives is a crucial step in saving liberalism from itself because it opens us up to the role of the imagination in stirring emotions and mobilizing action. But recognizing this point is only half the battle. The next step is to understand which myths in particular will work. I thus turn to the key plots and characters that might save liberalism from itself, focusing on how they embed individuals within a collective. Later, in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 I show how these myths are put into practice.

Why people turn to myths

My journey into myth really began following a conversation I had with the leader of an IAF organization in London. Pushing against my line of

questioning around his values, Aaron, a white British community organizer in his late 20s, explained to me:

> 'I've never been one for values as they exist in particular words ... The experiences I've had which are meaningful to me growing up … the massive gulf between the environments, the chances and the choices, the quality of life that different friends of mine had from different sides of the divide. So, some of those friends were growing up in a council estate in Clapham Junction, on the 15th floor, with a single-parent mum who worked all the time, and a younger sister that they cared for. And they went to a school where sometimes the classes were so disrupted that you couldn't really learn. But they really wanted to learn, you know, he was a conscientious student, good footballer, but, you know, for him to make a success of himself in academia was taking a superhuman effort on his part, to balance all the things that he had to balance. And then, I think of other friends I had, who were growing up in a 2 million-pound mansion house in Dulwich Village, and they went to a private school, and when they turned 17, they got bought a car, and if they were selling weed, they were doing it out of that car to kids with very little risk to themselves. So, I guess you could say, yeah that's equality, I believe in equality, I believe in equality of opportunity, you know, those things. But those words aren't particularly . . . I don't hold them up, it's more the experiences.'

Aaron was educated at an elite university. It was not for want of philosophical awareness that he was resisting my attempt to systematize his thinking. Rather, what Aaron was trying to show me was that regardless of the tradition into which his moral logic fits, or indeed whether it fits into one at all, the *experience* of ethical thinking is not an abstract logic at all but a set of stories and images that have built up over time.

This need for something more than merely rationally construed rules is confirmed by Trevor, an ethnically European trade unionist in his early 50s. Reflecting on what he feels is lacking from trade union activism, Trevor tells me:

> 'In unions, people learn their solidarity in a kind of rules way. "Don't cross a picket line", "never cross a picket line", it's drilled into you, right? And we don't spend enough time talking about why. Why don't we? Or why would we boycott this company or not buy that beer? So, a lot of times the solidarity, as important as it is, in the union movement is a bit … it lacks a kind of emotional quality or heart-felt quality that … human touch in a lot of ways.'

Rules-based approaches to ethics neglect the emotional quality that makes ethical actions feel rewarding. They offer the 'letter' of ethics but not the spirit. Aaron and Trevor feel they need something more than rationality alone in order to act. They are pushing beyond a Kantian or Rawlsian (Tampio 2007; Sandel 2010) morality based on laws (see Chapter 2) and towards an ethics rooted in something more emotional.

The fault, Dear Brutus, *is* in our stars: the ethical imaginary as a constellation of myths

I found the same thing time and again in Vancouver. As I asked them to explain to me why they did the work they did, one well-educated, liberally oriented person after another referred not to the rational-legal philosophies that they no doubt could appreciate on reflection, not to the rational advantages of collective action, but always to stories. Joey, in particular, helped me to understand how this works. Joey is an ethnically East Asian trade union representative in his early 40s. I asked him how we might inspire others to become active in their communities.

Joey: How long does it take to brainwash a person to think in a particular way? I got very brainwashed. When I was maybe in high school, I listened to my young uncle who talked to his contemporary university classmates about this individual, this man in Taiwan, who got sent to jail. They talked about him with such respect that it sort of planted a seed in my head about respect. I learnt that those kinds of actions deserve our respect. Another person is Bertrand Russell – your countryman – who got arrested twice, and once for – I think, I'm not sure if this is the right term but – draft dodging. During the First World War. He refused to join the army and consequently he had a hard time at the university – I think he was a lecturer there already – and later on *when he was in his 90s*, he got put into jail for nuclear disarmament protest I believe. …

So gradually you line up those individuals in your little universe. And you start to see those people as representative of worthwhile causes, right? So, you just keep on lining them up. And people just start showing up in the universe. And you tell yourself: those are the people – not Mr Trump. Mr Trump doesn't get to stand in that universe. So, it becomes easier and easier. …

Shoulders of the giants, right? We do what we can. When I was heavily into reading as a youngster, I recognized the transformative power of ideas in writing. This is a brilliant thought by Confucius – or I think it was Confucius. He said: [he says

something in a Chinese dialect and then giggles at my ignorance]. That means, 'if you find a truth in the morning, you might as well die at night … (because you've got the truth already).'
So that process of a worthwhile thought; a thought that speaks of truth is so important, so mighty, that you can feel your life as being changed. And that's your new life. Your life starts today because of those thoughts …

Me: So, I'm imagining a picture of you now, and [depicting an orbit around my own head] floating in the air here is Bertrand Russell, and here's your uncle … and

Joey: [Jumping in, excitedly laughing] Yeah!

Me: … and here's the guy who was put in jail

Joey: Yeah!

Me: … and

Joey: And Li Ao.

From this moment on, I started to think of the ethical imaginary as a constellation of myths. Joey has a host of myths of great events and characters in his head. These are stories that were told to him or that he encountered over time. The characters are giants on whose shoulders he stands when making political and ethical choices.

Joey's describing himself as brainwashed simultaneously displays an impressive level of reflexivity regarding the constructed nature of his imaginary *and* an admission that his agency in the construction process is limited. This is so in two ways. First, he heard some of the stories in a context in which he was eager to gain the respect of the storytellers. Their heroes thus became his. Second, other stories seemed to leap out of the page towards him. He found the truths within them so profound that they were transformative. The truths are "so mighty … that you can feel your life as being changed. … Your life starts today because of those thoughts." And from then, "people just start showing up in the universe". One's agency is not completely destroyed, however, because the individual is actively 'lining up' the stories in their own imaginary.

Ostensibly the selection process does not require much reflection. It is just obvious to Joey that someone like Mr Trump does not fit in his constellation. But the ease with which Joey selects his stars should be read in the context of his long-standing and ongoing work of fixing up and replenishing his constellation.

Now, the stars that populate people's imaginaries might not always emerge as fully formed stories. More often, perhaps, it is images that first occur. For example, Luke, an ethnically European graphic designer in his late 20s, tells me one day that

> 'sometimes I just mentally think about people's faces or how that mentally made a difference for them. Or if I hear something that somebody says about something I was involved in then, yeah, that always comes back to me. Every time I'm working on something, that'll pop into my head, and I'll think about "yeah that really made a difference that one time; I wanna do it again".'

Luke's example provides a third manner in which one's agency is limited. The stars in one's imaginary simply appear uninvited in the moment of acting. They present themselves, rather than being deliberately conjured.

For readers of Proust, it won't be strange to hear that stars in one's constellation can be unexpectedly lit up when we interact with mundane things. Proust (1992, 60–4) beautifully explains how everyday objects can act as enchanted containers of a past which, but for an encounter with those objects, we would forget. Betty, whom I introduced earlier, finds something similar in the faces of elderly women she works with. Asked what motivates her to keep going in her work, she tells me that "[f]or me seeing the seniors who work at the forefront of a lot of our Chinatown organizing and the residents … I can see my own great grandmother reflected in them and can identify with their struggle and their reality. So that's kind of my … where that comes from."

When interacting with elderly residents, Betty sees her grandmother. Her grandmother's face, and with it her struggle, pop into Betty's head and thus create a sense of identification. The importance of everyday encounters like these further speaks to how stars are not just far away, like Donald Trump, but very near too. Many readers will be familiar with the theory of broken windows: when windows are already broken in a neighbourhood, there is more likely to be crime (Wilson and Kelling 1982). The theory goes that your surroundings act as pointers to the kind of behaviour that is expected of you. The windows that surround us are stars within our imaginary. They tell a story about the kind of neighbourhood this is and how much and in what ways people care. Following a well-tried organizer's trick, I ask Betty what makes her angry.

> 'What doesn't? Locally things that make me angry are the wealth gap that exists even within our very small city. Just to see … sometimes I'm driving, and I see a really fancy car – maybe it's an SUV – but it's like a really fancy SUV, and then a really run-down car, or even a shopping cart that someone's pushing. And just this juxtaposition of having like a Porsche drive down the Downtown Eastside, along hundreds of folks who don't have mental healthcare or adequate housing or services. … That's a local rage that I carry.'

Near stars punch well above their geographical weight. Dave is an ethnically European neighbourhood café owner in his early 50s whom I tried my best to get to know while sitting in his café on an almost daily basis for a year. He repeatedly lamented the fact that there was no 'stop sign' at the crossing closest to his café. One day I asked him what bothered him so much. "I mean it starts off with your home. When you can't solve your own problems, and you can't solve your community problems, how are we going to solve the big ones like global warming?" For Dave, the block forming one's neighbourhood is a microcosm of all that we can be as a community. When the community fails, Dave's expectations for global politics fail to.

Seemingly small and fleeting aspects of people's everyday lives seem to play a crucial role in the narrative they form about the future of politics as a whole. Just as some stars are far away and others very near, so too are there both permanent fixtures and shooting stars. For Joey, Bertrand Russell has clearly become a permanent fixture in his constellation, having been with him since his early teens and into his middle age. On the other hand, the fancy cars that Betty sees, like shooting stars, will quickly flash across her imaginary field, briefly reigniting her reason for engaging in community work, only to pass with time. Ultimately, however, any and all stars may fade and so one's constellation requires constant updating.

How myths are used: portable, self-administered technologies

Thus far I have been making out that myths somehow invade the mind like a parasite and control us from within. In this section, I want to give some control back to the people using myths. My friends are deeply reflective and at least as much as myths influence them, they use myths to make ethical action meaningful and to push themselves further. In search of a more emotionally rooted solidarity, for example, Trevor regularly shares news stories on social media.

> 'I'm a sucker for, you know, well … I don't know if you, well do you remember those stories about refugees in Syria and North Africa?
>
> A lot of times the images are more powerful than the stories. There was a train rolling into a train station in Germany, full of Syrian migrants, and all these Germans had come out and were *welcoming* them. You know, not throwing things at them, not assuming they're terrorists. And thinking of Germans not only as having a lot of historical baggage but also as being personally quite reticent, I thought "well this is such a beautiful display of a very human response to this crisis". There were so many stories of that refugee crisis as it was happening that were just very, very truthful moments that illustrated solidarity.'

Trevor immerses himself in stories and bombards himself with videos and pictures that confirm his view of the world. These audio-visual interventions bypass his rationality and appeal to his emotions. One might rightly guess that Trevor's online world is somewhat of an echo chamber, a term used to question the quality of online debate. Secular, liberal rationality tells us that a healthy public sphere is one characterized by dispassionate discussion regarding public policy, and moral autonomy regarding one's private life. The spread of emotive political stories and symbols on social media threatens this balance. Yet it needs to be made clear that Trevor *chooses* to step into this echo chamber, knowing exactly what he is doing. Trevor isn't some vulnerable, uneducated fool; he's a highly educated trade union employee who spends his days formulating policy frameworks, his evenings reading more books and articles than I do, and his weekends volunteering to organize community actions for a living wage. Engaging with this online media is not a process of learning for him. But nor is that the point – it is an exercise in moral reinforcement. It makes him feel that he is not alone in his sentiments, makes him believe that another world is possible, and encourages him to go beyond policy formulation alone to undertake personal acts that bring his politics to life.

He acknowledges this when he says, "I'm a sucker for …". In North American parlance, being a sucker for something does not simply mean 'I am attracted to' but 'I am fooled by'. It's an acknowledgement that one is being lured in by something without necessarily considering all of the rational parameters.

He knows it is hitting him emotionally rather than rationally, but that is exactly what he wants: he wants to elicit an emotional response in order to inspire himself to move beyond a model of ethics as rule following and towards an ethics based on personal solidarity.

This, I suggest, is further demonstrated in the sense in which Trevor is using the term truth. When Trevor calls his story "very truthful" he does not mean that it corresponds to reality, or even that the behaviours of those Germans at the train station are statistically reflective of Germans as a whole. In fact, the improbability may be the point. Instead, he means that they ring true with him and that they are reflective of his faith in how humans *really* are. The stories are not statistical evidence but glimmers of hope that reinforce his faith.

In 2018 mass migration was asking big moral questions of a lot of people. Elsa, an ethnically European campaigner and teacher in her early 30s, also finds that art can "reconnect [her] heart" to current events, and she deliberately engages with it for that reason.

> 'I was watching *Human Flow* about a week ago. It's Ai Wei Wei's – the Chinese artist's – new film about the migration crisis over the last few years. It's incredible; you should go see it. I usually go see

> documentaries when I need to reconnect my heart to something that's happening. I get back from this kind of abstract, I can't do anything about it so maybe I shouldn't even think about it, or like +/- policy wonk kind of place and just like bring it back down, which I definitely did because it was kind of like a witnessing of all the refugee flows that have happened in the last few years. And just a lot of like witnessing. ... And what occurred to me during this is, I think that when I see the Macedonian border being closed and the huge amount of fencing being put up, there's a degree to which, I think people can connect. It's like, "oh my God, what if the refugees don't stop coming? What if they completely change our society; take all the things; we run out of money; there's no social services; they eat all the food and bring all the houses and there's nothing left for you?" So, there's this fear of not having enough. But then there's also I think, in everyone in the film and everyone watching the film, including me, there's this desire to like meet the challenge. Yeah, which is very exciting. Like we want to see, we want to see ourselves as like, heroes. And not in like a saviour way but just a … like any human can be a hero way. Like we want to recognize that every human can be a hero and that we have enough. We can figure it out. We can figure out how to share. And just wanting that is enough of the first step.'

What we are seeing in both Trevor and Elsa, again two highly educated individuals with no shortage of access to complex philosophical ideas, is a deliberate use of myths to conjure in themselves a visceral response to ethical situations. I stress their access to rational argumentation to emphasize that myths are not the 'poor' person's data. Trevor and Elsa are not using myths for want of more representative information. Instead, following Charles Hirschkind in his discussion of the use of audio sermons in Cairo, Trevor and Elsa are using myths as a 'portable, self-administered technology of moral health and … virtue' (Hirschkind 2006, 73). They use myths to strengthen their faith in human kindness and their moral resolve.

It is significant what an important role the body is playing here. Even if the mind is crucial in deciding right from wrong, the body is the thing that must be acted upon to elicit virtue. The fact that watching the documentary makes Elsa want to see herself as a hero is further significant. What myths do is inspire audiences to emulate heroes.

Myths that stick: the structure and content of myths that might save liberalism

Thus far I have been talking about the power of myths to mobilize people, focusing on how important they are in igniting emotional energy.

Recognizing this point alone is a crucial step towards saving liberalism from its uninspiring emphasis on rationality. But it is not the case that just any myth will do. This is for two reasons. First, not just any myth will stick. We need to know more about the kinds of plots that seem to appeal to people. But second, some myths stick that we would prefer didn't. In this section I try to elaborate on the structure of myths that stick among those seeking to save liberalism from itself.

The most influential discussion of the structure of myth stems from Joseph Campbell, whose work famously inspired George Lukas in the writing of *Star Wars*. Campbell argues that all of the great myths in history ultimately follow a single thread: the hero's journey of separation, initiation and return: 'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder ... fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won ... the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man' (Campbell 2008, 23). We might conclude that this so-called monomyth is really nothing more than the reification of the American Dream. It has rightly been pointed out that the monomyth excludes women or else renders them as trophies (Murdock 1990). The monomyth also neglects those myths that emphasize the role of a collective. As Simon, an East Asian-origin community organizer in his early 50s, points out,

> 'In the US culture, if you look at the Hollywood movie, they always have a hero. A single man. Like … I forget that guy's name … Superman. He's got that internal power. They stand for justice; they stand for power. But in Chinese culture it's more on the side of … we're not just focused on one person. You focus on the group, on the community. If everybody is good, if the community can achieve something then that's good.'

Simon may well be right that in its traditional form, the US myth, which he clearly thinks applies to Vancouver too, valorizes the – usually male – individual. In my interlocutor's myths, however, the difference is that the power they discover *is* the power of being embedded in a community. They are stories of individuals finding themselves *in* the collective. It is such myths that I am interested in. One backdrop and three plots are particularly prevalent among my friends, and among IAF organizers more broadly.

The backdrop: tales of two cities

If you go to a pantomime or the opera, there is often a backdrop depicting gardens or castles that gives some context to the events that unfold. When we read or are told a story, our minds do part of the work of filling that

backdrop in. For a story to inspire people, it matters what kind of backdrop they're imagining. I opened this chapter by telling Aaron's story of his two sets of friends, one privileged, the other deprived. His was a tale of two cities: one city in which people live in mansions, receive the best education and dabble in recreational drugs; another, living within the shadow of the first, in which people struggle to concentrate at school because they haven't got enough food in their stomachs, are worried about how they'll help their single mother pay the bills, and struggle with addiction. These tales of two cities are ubiquitous among organizers. Perhaps this is because binary thinking is a recurring feature of both human sensemaking as a whole (Lévi-Strauss [1964] 1983; Dundes 1997), and Western political culture in particular (Schmitt [1922] 2010; Mouffe 2013; Latour 2017, 240–1). Certainly, the language of 'us and them' has proved a central feature of populism in all its forms (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Obradović et al 2020).

Betty similarly brought these two cities to life for us when she spoke of the rage she feels whenever she sees "a really fancy" car driving past homeless people in the Downtown Eastside. Jen, an ethnically European geographer-turned-activist in her 50s, puts it more simply still: "right side of the tracks, wrong side of the tracks".

This backdrop provides a context in which my friends' stories make sense. Fede, a 20-something organizer of Central American descent, recounts:

Fede: One of the most formative experiences I had, is that … growing up we had house cleaners in our home. Like, in Latin America it's pretty common. And I remember one time when we were in Honduras, and I was – I dunno – pre-teen? One of our cleaners would always … so me and my sister we had the same uniform, but she was bigger than me, so I think that I would have a small and she a medium or something like that. And [our cleaner] would never put the right shirts in my room. I would often find her shirts in my room and vice versa. So, one day I went, and I tried to tell her 'oh so she's medium and I'm small so, like, when you're putting the clothes away can you like, make sure that you put it in the right closet'. And then she looks at me with like a look of shame, and then she tells me that … she can't read [he starts crying].

Me: [Handing him some rough café napkins] These aren't particularly nice but …

Fede: [Laughs amidst tears and takes the napkins. Begins speaking again, voice obviously broken] Yeah so uhh … yeah it just made me feel so shitty [pausing to hold back tears. And I think it's from ergh … empathy. And so … like [voice audibly breaking again] maybe that's what explains like that

guy [I mentioned before] gets his morality from God; I think I get my morality from [descending into a revelation-induced burst of tears] empathy [composing himself]. Because like for me seeing them, I internalize a lot of that shame and that pain that people experience. And so, I don't need a God to tell me that … that I can strive towards that everyone is literate or that everyone has the opportunity to be literate. For me emotionally it just makes sense because I see the way that it's affecting their life. She doesn't even know how to read enough to read one letter and be able to classify that shirt into the proper place. And then just like this 11-year-old brat … it just. … Like I just felt so ashamed at that time.

Me: Because you've dehumanized somebody?

Fede: You know it wasn't even that cos like I always spoke to her respectfully and since I'm very shy I always like 'oh could you maybe please try to'. Like I think I'm very respectful. It's more the … that's where I really saw my privilege. And uuhhh [getting teary again] me feeling like I had because she didn't [pause for crying again].

Me: Thank you for sharing.

Fede: [Smiling through tears] now there's something that made me cry

Esther, a European-descent teacher and activist in her early 40s, offers a similarly heart-wrenching story about her father's struggle:

Me: So, you sound so incredibly passionate. I'm wondering where that comes from …

Esther: It comes from having seen the impact [of the world as it currently is] on my father. My father struggled with depression and anxiety and alcoholism through a good portion of his life. And what I found so ironic in his story is … we're French settlers from both sides of my family from the 1800s. So, we're a long-time part of that colonial history, and my parents eventually settled in Saskatchewan in a rural farm there and he loved farming. He lost … they lost the family farm when he was 16 and so they were forced to the city, and he was forced into working as a mechanic in a job that he hated. He was good at it. He was really, really good at it, but it wasn't his passion. He wanted to be a farmer. He wanted to carry on the family farm. So that was huge loss that I don't think he ever got over. And then he ends up in the health system and they're labelling him with anxiety,

depression, alcoholism, all these things and they're not really looking. And he was also a very sensitive man in a very patriarchal world, and I think that also had a huge impact on his life.

Later, she brings him up again.

> 'Marxist thought has really influenced my thinking. It still blows my mind that my father, as a labourer … we think that people who invest in a company … Marx maps that all out, exploitation in the labour process. … At a certain point of time the initial investment in a business ends. The person who invested the money makes that money back and then after that, any profits are a form of exploitation, that's going to the owner and the worker is investing their life. And they don't share that. And when I look at the impact on my dad's life; he worked as a heavy-duty mechanic through the cold winters and the hot heat of the summers. His hands were like sausages when he died – he ended up ending his life. But he spent many years working that job and profits were not shared with him. He invested his life into that work. So, what's more important, investing your life or your money?'

When I ask Darna, a 30-something trade unionist of Filipino descent, where her motivation comes from, she stresses the contrast between the lives of the people she saw in the Philippines and the life she has now, thanks to her parents' choice to move to Canada.

Darna: I guess just knowing that there are a few individuals who have *a lot* and then there's like a majority that don't have much and it's just like, well why do these certain individuals get to have billions of dollars and access to whatever they want? Why can't they share some of that with the others?
… I feel teary-eyed when I think … [stopping. Beginning to cry]. When I [struggling. Crying] … when I talk [still struggling] about my … trip to the Philippines that usually gets me [voice breaking] emotional. And I think it's because of what I saw there. Just … it takes a while to process that and … [the phone rings, mercifully]
[Long pause]

Darna: I'm just going to grab a Kleenex

Me: Yeah, I just wanted to give you time. … So why do you think it makes you emotional?

Darna: Maybe part of it is also feeling … like with my parents I guess being appreciative of them making that sacrifice to leave their family behind to come to Canada and start a new life here. I guess making those sacrifices. Wanting to find a better life for their kids. And I know they were fortunate enough to get unionized jobs. And if they didn't have those good union jobs, myself and my siblings would not have been able to go to university and … so I guess part of it is thinking … if they hadn't left the Philippines, my life would have been completely different.

A famous story circulates in both London and Vancouver of how tales of two cities can be dramatized to great effect. In 2003 London Citizens had been trying to convince HSBC to pay all of its staff a living wage. At first, like many other companies, HSBC refused to take responsibility for staff that were not on its payroll. Beth, in her words, a "secular Jewish" organizer in her early 70s, recounts the story: "At first, we tied up a branch of HSBC three days before Christmas. This didn't work. Then we bought a share, attended the AGM, and had a cleaner stand up and say 'we work in the same building, but we live in different worlds'." Eventually, HSBC agreed to pay all of its staff a living wage. While appearing to demonstrate a division between two worlds, tales of two cities draw on the recognition that those worlds are in reality interconnected. The advantaged are confronted with feelings of shame as they recognize that their individual talents alone are not the sole cause of their wealth; that the person in front of them has worked hard their whole life but is still suffering; and that the two of them are interconnected in an economy in which the wealth of the one is reliant on the exploitation of the other.

Plot I: Empowerment in the movement

Tales of two cities thus form a vital backdrop against which myths play out. The most common organizing stories zoom in on either side of the divide and show how the two cities can become one. Myths of empowerment in the movement tell the story of someone who has, through no fault of their own, been left destitute by the world as it is, but who subsequently finds a new sense of purpose and power through their role in the movement. The following passage is from my fieldnotes.

> It's a Monday evening in early September 2017. MVA is organizing a Research Action Team event in the training hall of one of Vancouver's larger unions. The room is divided up into tables; each representing one of MVA's core issues: social inclusion, economic

> justice, transit, housing, health. There are around five people to a table and 30 people in the room in total. The lead organizers, Beth and Jessica, are explaining the importance of developing leadership when they call on Gill, a 50-something organiser of European descent, to tell her story. Gill tells us that when she joined MVA, she preferred to work behind the scenes. She had never been placed centre stage and she didn't want to be. But then one day Beth asked her to speak in front of a group of 80 people. She was petrified. But they sat together and wrote the script. Eventually, with Beth's support, she was able to do it.

On a Tuesday evening in early April 2018, Jessica, a 30-something organizer of European descent, tells a similar story at a smaller training event of exclusively women and me. By now I am her friend – and she my closest in the city. She is trying to explain that MVA's key role is empowerment. To illustrate this, she tells her story.

> 'When I was 28, I had sat behind a computer in tech marketing for 10 years. I was overlooked by my male superiors. Men inappropriately flirted with me. One time, for the Christmas party, they ordered strippers. I was so concerned about the state of the world. I knew I had no power to act in the world. And the only people doing anything seemed really angry. Then I got an email asking me to come to a two-day training [with MVA]. At the training they asked me to introduce myself to the person next to me. I freaked out and ran to the toilet. I started crying. I looked at myself in the mirror. I talked to myself. I told myself to go back in there and do it. I turned around and went back in. I left that day convinced that there were so many people like me who wanted to act but didn't know how.'

As can be seen in both cases:

- *The hero is failed by and disillusioned with the world as it is*. In both cases, the story is to do with being raised into a world that fails to support and empower people.
- *In their hour of need, the community swoops in*. Both are given a new lease of life with the invitation to join MVA.
- *They are called to undertake a seemingly impossible task*. In Gill's case, it is public speaking; in Jessica's case, so downtrodden is she, it is merely introducing herself.
- *At first, they resist*. In both cases, fear was the issue. In Gill's case, she protests to Beth. In Jessica's, she runs off to the bathroom.

- *By undertaking the task, and others like it, they are initiated into the community*. Both have become influential organizers within MVA.
- *Finally, they stand before us, transformed, heroes*.

Again, these stories seem to rely on a belief that all people have talents but that some, through repeated acts of devaluation, have lost sight of their own talents, as well as being bereft of opportunities to exercise them. There is a strong desire to hear stories of the hidden talents of forgotten people. As Jen explains in relation to her experience hearing the story of an orphaned child who grew up to be a talented organizer: "it is from the most vulnerable members of society that we're going to learn really significant things that are going to change society as a whole, in new and important directions. It's from the excluded, the marginalized. I was so emotional that my brain turned off." Upon finding a community that believes in them, these individuals once again feel as if their contribution matters. I believe it was this sense of someone seemingly hopeless who nonetheless finds hope in the collective that led Emma, an ethnically Jewish activist in her late 60s, and I both to break down when she told the following story:

> 'There's a young woman who is ergh … I've known her for years and years, she's in her 30s now, and her spine is like this [drawing an "S" in the air], she's got very, very severe scoliosis and she is in pain 100 per cent of the time. And she was born in Trinidad. She was diagnosed with scoliosis when she was 13, and that's as much money as her parents could afford to spend on her health was to get a diagnosis, right? And so, her parents split up, her mum moved to Canada with her. And she was 19 when she and her mum moved here. And by that time, it was too late to have any early intervention to straighten her spine. And so that's why now she's about 33 and she's in pain 100 per cent of the time. And yet she has hope that she is going to be able to do something about this. And I believe her. I believe that she will be able to do something about this. And she can hardly do anything. She's a beautiful artist. She's a really fine artist. And she's a beautiful young woman in every way. And she told me – she was in an artist co-op in East Vancouver – and she told me that they have echo depression – I don't know if you've ever heard that term. And what she meant was that they are afraid that the world is not going to survive, and it makes them depressed. Her age group, her cohort. Her friends and fellow artists and stuff like that. That they're depressed about it. And so even though she's not able to be an activist in the same way that her peers are because of her physical reality, she invests so much hope [starts crying, takes a deep breath] she's so [struggling] hopeful [crying] I'm

sorry … that they're going to change the world. [Long pause] And they will. [We both cry.]'

Plot II: Sacrifice for the movement

If myths of empowerment in the movement bring the marginalized upwards, myths of sacrifice for the movement act as social levellers in the opposite direction. As already stated, a number of organizers are themselves from quite privileged backgrounds. It is therefore perhaps inevitable that the next most commonly occurring myth is of the hero who sacrifices themselves for the movement.

I'm having a coffee with Fede in the cheap chain store across from his house on the Italian side of Commercial Drive when he tells me:

'Like one of my heroes is Che Guevara. I think he's someone who … he could have been a doctor like my dad and grown up to have a comfortable middle-class family and instil his socialist values from within the comfort of his home, but he decided to give it all up and go fight someone else's revolution and he improved their lives greatly. But I don't always feel that you always have to make those … essentially you don't have to sacrifice yourself and go to fight in Syria. The sacrifice can be like, even what my dad did. He could have set up his own private clinic. Rather than being middle class he could have been part of the elite. He could have been one of the best doctors in Guatemala and we could have lived a way more comfortable life than we did. But instead, he decided to go into the public health sector. And he still made a great wage, but he was able to use his skills for the betterment of society as a whole and not just the rich individuals who can pay for his services as a surgeon. I mean I think it's the same with a lot of the activists I work with on a daily basis. A lot of the people I work with are some of the most capable and smartest people I've ever known, and they didn't go to work for Telus [a Canadian national telecommunications company]. Even the web developer who built a lot of LeadNow [a Canadian advocacy organization] tools. You say you "need a web tool that can do X and Y, and can you build it?" And two days from now he'll be like, have given you that tool and much more. Like, he could have gone to Silicon Valley and be earning easily six figures by now. Instead, he decided to work at a small non-profit working 60-hour weeks making probably less than $50,000 a year. And he did it because he cares about the benefit of society.'

Although hero stories are widespread among my interlocutors, I particularly appreciate Fede's discussion because it demonstrates the echo effect of a

myth whereby the almost unfathomable sacrifice of the hero need not be matched in order for its structure to be read into or emulated in other narratives. Indeed, Fede first uses his father's lifestyle as an example of what Guevara sacrificed, only to subsequently read Guevara's sacrifice into his father's decision to forego the luxuries that come with private practice. The structure of these overlapping myths is as follows:

1. The hero is born with or acquires power that could be used for great private gain.
2. The hero feels called to serve the collective.
3. The hero sacrifices their luxury, and even puts their life at risk, for the sake of the collective.

Individuals are central to these myths. They are not simply diluted into stories of collective triumph. Despite its having taken a long time, I have stressed in Chapter 2 that liberal ideals are finally settling into the lived experiences of many people in many Western settings; and in Chapter 4 that individualism is particularly important in Vancouver. People see themselves as individuals and find the stories of other individuals inspiring. By honouring individuals *because* they have given themselves over to the movement, the stories are working with the present social reality while inspiring the belief that an alternative reality is possible.

Plot III: Small wins against the odds

Our key myths thus far have been about the power individuals gain by entering into the collective. The final myths towards which these point are those of the wins made by the collective itself. As I will detail in Chapters 6 and 7, moments when the collective stand together against seemingly insurmountable forces can prove transformative for those involved.

In MVA there are a few stories that get told time and again. One such story is the one of how MVA pressured a care home to pay its carers. The home would flip the contracts every few years to make sure carers could not claim rights based on the longevity of their contracts. They were underpaid and struggling to get by and yet they had learnt to adapt to their circumstances since the situation seemed impossible to change. But then MVA learnt that some of their members in the churches had relatives in that home. Suddenly they had a self-interested reason for the community to stand in solidarity with the carers. Not only did MVA secure permanent contracts but the carers received health benefits and were paid a living wage. Every time this story is told, an energy builds in the room as people come to see that working collectively really can reverse the seemingly insurmountable forces of neoliberalism.

Similarly, as already mentioned, the story of 105 Kiefer has become a crucial win in Vancouver that keeps people motivated. At CanRoots West in 2017, an annual event designed to help organizers 'learn from each other's victories', Chinatown Action were asked to give the closing keynote. They told their story to a packed auditorium. The room was full of whooping, booing and cheering, laughing, scowling and crying, as all of those present relived the story. At the end there was a standing ovation.

Actions need not be game changing to become myths. For many people it is simply small moments of being present with others that builds what Collins (2005, 102–40) calls 'emotional energy' (see Chapter 7). Betty stresses that what inspires her most are

> '[s]mall wins. The roll call [in which each of those present at an action states their name and the number of people they represent]. Collective action. Solidarity (whatever that means). Giving the middle finger to people in power is also very exciting. And it's like a nice alternative. They're not visions of a utopia. But I think I see the next steps that could take us to an alternative. I definitely struggle to know what that alternative would be, but I also haven't spent a lot of time researching and learning about alternatives.'

Betty thus does not necessarily require some grand vision that she is working towards. It is enough for her to see that small advances can be made. The little wins become stars in her constellation, allowing her to move forwards.

Conclusion

Our myths are not just anecdotes that we tell in order to point to an overall pattern. Telling the stories that fill us with rage or make us cry is a way of telling people who we are: "I am someone who cries at this." They are also a way of reminding ourselves that we are alive. To challenge Descartes' revelation (see Chapter 2), "I cry at this, therefore I am". I understand my own existence in relation to the stories that elicit certain emotions.

Thinking of ethical imaginaries as being a constellation of myths need not be read, as virtue ethics approaches often are (MacIntyre [1981] 2012; Sandel 2010; Laidlaw 2014; Keane 2015), as a denunciation of more rational-legal systems such as deontology or consequentialism. In a sense, mythology just *is* virtue ethics because we're following characters rather than rules. The worship of certain heroes may be conducive to the admiration of particular character traits rather than to particular rules. But to use virtue ethics as a reason to attack rational-legal accounts stems in part from a failure to distinguish between how ethical decisions are made and the grounds on which they are justified. What I am interested in here is what is going on

in people's minds and with their emotions when they are making ethical decisions. Both deontology and consequentialism, on the other hand, are more interested in whether those decisions can be judged as good ones. Either may be compatible with the picture I am painting. The point is merely that neither system very accurately depicts how people *experience* their own ethical quandaries.

To put this another way for those less interested in theory than its implications for practice, these systems aim to tell you what a person ought to do; I am trying to tell you how to make them do it. To this end, it is important to think about the kinds of stories that already matter to people and to see if new stories can be told in a way that resonates. The same can be said of law- and policymaking. Both are realms well suited to an ethical system. But the problem is that neither law nor policy is all that good at inspiring people to act.

I am offering a normative point here too. A system such as Nussbaum's outlined in Chapter 3 would have us first work out those characteristics that are most desirable and then find a way of encouraging people to adopt them. According to this model, deontology, consequentialism, or whatever system, provides a framework from which one's ethical constellation hangs as do the stars from a baby's mobile. What I encourage, on the other hand, and what I have been trying to do, is to start instead with the myths being circulated by admirable people. Only afterwards can we build a system upwards from these stories. The stars are shone from the ground upwards: more like a baby's projector.

6

Rituals for Radicals

Life is experienced dramatically; poetically. This appears to be a phenomenological truth (Heidegger [1975] 2013, 226). But *because of this truth*, life is most frequently experienced as *lacking* in drama and poetry. If all the world is indeed a stage (Shakespeare [1599] 1996, 2.7.139–40), then for most of us, in terms of the big decisions that impact our lives, we are more often the audience than the actors. Our lives remain in the mundane scenes with which myths only begin. As the previous chapter explained, we carry such myths around in our heads. They shape who we are and our ethical and political choices. But rarely do we get the chance to ourselves be significant characters. This chapter is about the important role that institutions can play in helping us to share the myths that make up our own lives and, if we're lucky, become key characters within them.

I think of these processes of sharing and acting out myths as rituals. Now talking of rituals among the non-religious may conjure images as varied as Scouts singing 'kumbaya' around a campfire, hipsters taking ayahuasca or schoolkids pledging allegiance to the flag. All of these examples may be equally alien and off-putting, reproducing an idea of rituals as 'special activities inherently different from daily routine action and closely linked to the sacralities of tradition and organised religion' (Bell 2009, 138). From this perspective, rituals seem not to fit with modern, non-religious life. They are things that people in the past or elsewhere engage in – or perhaps that odd family friend. But not 'us'.

Such rituals are not what I am talking about here. Yet all of these examples do share a key feature that I do want to highlight: they performatively realize a world as it should or could be by subverting the everyday world: a world in which gods don't seem to listen, in which life has no meaning or purpose, and in which a nation's people are interminably divided.

Notice there are three elements to my observation: (1) performativity, (2) normativity and (3) subversion. The performative aspect can further be broken into two points: (a) intentionality and (b) theatrics. In order to be intentional, an action need not be easily articulated. Indeed, the point

of rituals is that they may do something words alone can't. What I mean instead is that the action is engaged in consciously with the aim of eliciting a response, whether from the actor, their audience or both. While many intentional actions require no theatrics, a flourish or two can be an important means of creating a specialness around one's actions, and of conveying one's intention. Equally, theatrics can be used to hide one's intentions. I may, for example, try to create the illusion of naturalness around an action as if I am always this way, rather than being so only now, with you, for instrumental purposes. Children play this routine well when trying to get money from their parents. "No Mummy, I always love you this much." Normativity is the second crucial characteristic because, as with the money-seeking child, ritualized behaviour is a realization of how one should or could behave. Finally, subversion of the everyday is what makes ritualized behaviour distinctive (see Bloch 2010, 8–9). Ritual performatively refutes the world of everyday interactions, enacting instead an idealized alternative. As such, rituals can serve as the locus of resistance. Now one might argue that a ritual need not always overturn reality. We can imagine, for example, a farmer who always works alone and who decides one day that she will always carry out her actions slowly and deliberately, like a Kabuki theatre actor, in order to be mindful of her body and of the beauty by which she is surrounded and in which she participates. After many years of behaving so, such actions might seem to come naturally to her. Would this still be ritualized behaviour? In my view, the answer is simple: so long as she is still performing, realizing a normative vision and subverting some other way of living – even if only, in this case, a more productive way – then she is participating in ritual.

In my view, what makes ritual so special, and why I want to talk about it in this chapter, is that it is a performance that nonetheless changes reality. When my partner comes home and we senselessly argue, it can feel as though the whole evening will be tainted with anger (we are both a little dramatic like this – me especially). What we do in this situation is to play a game. She leaves the room backwards as if in rewind (and if it's a particularly bad argument even the house), returns and we start our interaction again as if we hadn't yet seen one another. If it's me who is coming home, the roles reverse. Now, do we think that when she exits the room, we are actually erasing time? No! But the enactment of those five minutes of unpleasantness being erased *does the work* of erasing it. We are able to believe that it didn't matter; we have performatively constructed it as senseless, as not part of our narrative, and thus not really existing. We smile and joke, very knowingly participating in a quite silly as-if act. We know time is not erased. And yet because we participate in the game, time *is* erased in reality. The real past has been rendered insignificant by a performed present. It is this power of ritual to transform reality that I have become fascinated with.

For scholars of religion, I want to be clear that I am not making a claim about what *all* rituals *are*. I am aware that rituals are also employed to reinforce and normalize traditional sources of authority. Instead of trying to develop a new theory of what all ritual *is* (an aim which anyway I think is intimately linked with the Sisyphean task of seeking to rid the world of ritual), my focus is on drawing on, dialoguing with and developing understandings of ritual that can be of use to my friends and others like them as they work to transform themselves, their community and the world around them. I see my job as one of slowing down time and understanding the implications of what my friends are doing. Many of them are more able than I am but all are short of the time that I am fortunate enough to be able to give.

In Chapter 4 I suggested that while myths may often seem to reify people as individuals, the myths of my friends are primarily about how individuals find themselves in the collective. Here, I will explain how telling one's story *to* a collective is also a process of embedding oneself within that collective.

Far more than with myth, and perhaps more than the wider public, scholars have unharnessed ritual from religion and long since claimed its universal elixir qualities. Yet there is much confusion about what role ritual plays, both in general and in modern, liberal societies in particular. It has been suggested that the real power of ritual comes from embodied and emotional elements. The feeling of being in rhythm with another person creates a sense of unity. I too have felt this intense, almost sexual bond that forms in these moments and have found myself more willing to go into action as a result (Gill 2012; Fischer et al 2013). Yet were embodiment all there is to it, then ideas of how the world should be would be nothing but illusions. Rituals have also been seen as maps or non-verbal languages for both describing beliefs about how the world is and ought to be *and* conjuring that belief (Geertz 1973, 114). I will go a step further than this, stressing that they also have the social effect of making participants feel that that belief is shared between them. It is this *feeling* of sharedness that develops trust and loyalty and, with these, the willingness to go into action together. But it is also significant to note that I am exploring rituals for radicals. They are not seeking to accept the world as it is but to transform it.

There is much dispute over the function of rituals of resistance. They can be seen as a means of resistance in themselves (Worsley 1968). But they may also be taken as a way of *relieving* pressure by representing rather than *really acting* on one's anger (Gluckman 1963, 110–36; Bell 2009, 38). This point will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter, when I focus on the tension between authenticity and efficacy. For our purposes here, I want to suggest that the rituals I describe are serving both functions at once. They make people *feel* less downtrodden and as such have a therapeutic function.

But this new-found confidence is also crucial to my friends' standing together against the forces of their oppression.

Now, as with myths, I am claiming that liberals have paid insufficient attention to the role of rituals in mobilizing people. For some, this will sound quite contentious. Although a number of authors have suggested that the decline of ritual in modern society has been a key cause of social fragmentation (Huxley 1966; Bell 2009, 31; Driver 2019, 3–4), for others ritual is alive and well in secular societies. For some of these people ritual is to be found in the nationalist civil religions of the American presidency or the British monarchy (Bellah 1967; Davie 2001; 2014; Angrosino 2002; Williams 2013). For others, ritual is to be found in actions as mundane as handshakes and smoking circles (Collins 2005; Goffman 2008). For these scholars, we don't need to invent rituals since rituals are always there, weaving people together beneath the discursive surface. In this chapter I decide to treat rituals as morally neutral and just as crucial to the development of an individualist culture as they are to a collectivist culture. It may well be that rituals seem to break down and form anew of their own volition, but the rituals we adopt are not just representations of our identity; they are constitutive performances of that identity. It matters what *kinds* of rituals we perform. I will suggest that the rituals I describe are able to save liberalism from itself by simultaneously honouring the individual while demonstrating that one only achieves full individuality in relation to a community.

I divide the rituals that are important for saving liberalism into subtle gestures, solidarity games and public dramas. In subtle gestures, the intention is to build solidarity from the bottom up by learning to tell one's personal story and listening to the stories of others. This aspect, I will suggest, helps people to find strength and comfort in a story of their own. In this sense, they might be seen as enabling liberal self-expression needs. But these needs are met within relationships of mutual commitment. As such, subtle gestures serve to institutionalize those involved. In solidarity games the aim is to dramatically display the important role that communities and institutions play in protecting individuals. In public dramas the aim is to plot a myth in dramatic form, drawing the audience into the story and allowing them to experience moral transformation (Alexander 2004). Public dramas seek to change people from the top down by literally *staging* an intervention.

Subtle gestures: personal stories in political spaces

In Chapter 2 I introduced readers to what I considered the key contradiction of liberalism: the sacralization of the abstract Individual leads to an overall loss of meaning and dignity for actually existing individuals. On the one hand, this is because an ever more individualized culture increasingly alienates people from the individuals and institutions that will support them in finding

a life of their own. Not only does our sense of our own uniqueness give us a kind of Goldilocks syndrome that makes it hard for us to settle for any given institution – this one's too hot, that one's too cold – but any given institution expects a level of conformity from us. On the other hand, in order to protect the abstract Individual, institutions develop impersonal policies and bureaucratic systems that disregard individual stories and circumstances. This then triggers pre-contractual groups to gather and claim special exemptions from impersonal policies. And where these groups succeed, other groups form and follow, facilitating fragmentation along identity lines. In Chapter 4 I introduced relational meetings: a method of building alliances through telling and listening to personal stories. One or two organizers seek to build a relationship with a member of the community by sitting down with them over coffee, telling their own personal stories and, in turn, listening to the story of the person in front of them. Here I will argue that relational meetings, while no elixir, are able to subvert the central contradiction of liberalism and as such serve as little rituals for saving liberalism from itself. Rather than sacralizing the abstract Individual and developing systems *for* them, relational meetings honour the *practice* of making personal connections *with* actual individuals. Liberal fairness and social scientific rigour are threatened in the process. By choosing to engage with individuals we lose representativeness; there are only so many conversations one can have in a week, as exhausted organizers will attest. Moreover, relational meetings are highly emotive and thus threaten the notion that political decision making must be dispassionate. But for IAF organizations, the particular policy is not the target; rather, the aim is to engage and empower people in the search for a common good.

This process of empowerment relies on three elements. First, relational meetings make the political personal. They encourage people to link their political commitments to stories of personal suffering. The second element is learning to really listen. Outside of therapy and intense personal friendship, one cannot easily find active listening in the modern world. Taken together, this process of telling one's story and listening produces a third element: the telling of one's story turns into a moment of telling oneself into allegiance with one's listener.

The political is personal: becoming characters in the drama of life

'The personal is political' is a famous rallying slogan of second-wave feminism. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, women formed groups in which they were able to hear one another's stories, identify common points of suffering and explore the ways in which that suffering was the product of political choices. At IAF organizations the emphasis seems to go the other way: the aim of effective organizing is to make the political personal. The shift in emphasis would seem well suited to a liberal culture

in which people are good at seeing the big picture but less good at seeing the immediate. I closed Chapter 5 by focusing on how organizations can mobilize new myths by encouraging members to look beyond abstractions to the personal stories that motivate people to act. What I did not say there is that this process of developing one's own mythic narrative is also a process of *inventing* an identity.

One's first relational meetings will often come as a shock. Mine took place in London, UK in the spring of 2010. I was trying to find people to recruit for my doctoral research. I arranged a meeting with the lead organizer of South London Citizens. What happened has stayed with me emotionally. Research recruitment meetings often follow a pretty standard procedure: I lead the conversation; I explain my research and its potential benefits; the person sitting across from me tells me if they have time or space to let me into their lives. Though not all readers will be researchers, many will recognize the transactional nature of these meetings: you have something, I want it, let's see if we can come to an arrangement. Instead, as I sat down opposite Chris, a young organizer of Caribbean descent in a café in New Cross, the sheer intensity of his posture threw me off guard: the straightness of his back, the focus in his gaze. Before I'd had time to gather my thoughts, he jumped in and proceeded to very confidently tell me of the difficult neighbourhood in which he grew up; how this had driven him to engage in political mobilization; and how he was now working with South London Citizens to help kids in London to find safe havens in times of danger. I was taken aback and left feeling empty. "What am I doing here?" I thought to myself. "I have been so well trained in public reasoning that I have lost touch with the stories that got me here." I felt a profound sense of disconnection between my political stances and my personal story. And I felt the need to go back to the people that had made me feel this way.

One aim of IAF trainings is to provide a means of overcoming this sense of disconnection. This was expertly conveyed to me one Sunday in early October 2017. It's sunny outside and as so often, we're sat in a stale room for an MVA training session. Patty, a minister with a local church, stands up to introduce the concept of relational meetings. She begins by telling her story:

> 'When I was in my teens, my dad left my mum. We were living in a house full of bed bugs, with cockroaches all over the walls. I now work with people facing these same issues. There was no real safety net back then. What we're here to do now is hear stories like this from you. It's not therapy: it's about bringing out those stories that inform us and sustain us. Otherwise, we find we can float from thing to thing.'

Telling one's personal story is thus understood as a way of thickening one's identity and strengthening one's resolve. Patty's explanation finds support in

psychological research, where it has been suggested that telling one's personal story can provide one's life with a sense of unity and purpose (McAdams and McLean 2013).

Patty continues:

> 'How *I* like to think of it is, what's your self-interest? Now, people worry that this seems selfish. Especially if you're raised in a religious context and you're often told that everything you do has to be selfless. But the thing is, the things we're interested in are the things we'll stay with. Too often we think of things as zero-sum. In reality, it's not I win, you lose; it's how can we negotiate something that suits us all?'

Once she has introduced the approach, Patty encourages us to turn to one another and tell our stories.

I turn to the person sat next to me: Francois, a former refugee from East Africa. Francois tells me the shocking story of how his family was murdered while he was away at school, and how he lived in hiding with his uncle until he was given refugee status. Once again, I was incapacitated. How could my story possibly compare with his?

Some recruits, particularly well-educated ones like me, are used to speaking in abstractions. "I realized that the world is highly unequal and therefore … " But what IAF organizers are trained to elicit is *personal* stories of powerlessness. Searching for some way of overcoming my stiltedness, I recalled a meeting I had attended in a café a few months earlier. Beth and Jessica were sat with a newer organizer, Sue, an ethnically European former teacher in her early 70s, helping her to develop a training session. They were selecting games to play. Beth suggests starting with "public/private":

> 'Sometimes that can be really shocking. You do a public side and a private side. And then overlapping parts. All of your public history: schoolteacher etc. Then your private: my brother has mental health issues. Then the overlaps: what is it about your private self that propelled you into public action?

Sue looks enthused. "For me it was all about working in a food bank, seeing people of other beliefs and realizing at that moment that we don't have a monopoly on being good. I wanted to go out and help." There is an awkward silence. "It needs to be even more basic," explains Beth. "Another way of thinking about it," says Jessica, "is an iceberg: the part people know and the underneath bit. There are also bits we allow to be on the surface. What do you want above the water, what do you want below?"

Sue tries again:

> 'I suppose this makes me think about when my husband left me with the kids. I had nothing. I didn't know where to turn. But then a community gathered around me. My neighbours came to my door offering me pots and pans. I know there are so many people out there who don't have that same community and I want to offer it to them.'

There is a pause as everyone sits smiling and nodding. 'Perfect' is the obvious sentiment.

What Beth and Jessica did here was to strip away abstractions to leave behind the bare human beneath. Sue's story has become so intensely personal that it becomes phenomenological. She is no longer telling *her* story but that of all people: a common struggle to find meaning, power, respect and belonging. A good story unleashes the emotions involved in this struggle.

Having remembered their power to draw a story out of people, in the break I go to Beth and Jessica to discuss the difficulty I am having sharing. "How am I supposed to tell my middle-class sob story to someone like that?" I asked. "The only authentic story I have is about the anger I get when I hear other people's stories. About realizing that *someone* has to do *something*." Beth screws up her eyes. "Well, what about your *personal* feelings of powerlessness?" she asks. I pause for a while. "Well, I guess I have come to realize that, even with all my privilege, I may never find a permanent position in academia; may never have the security to have a child; will never have the power to change this except as part of a group." Jessica smiled. "Well, that sounds pretty convincing to me." In helping me come to my story, Beth and Jessica also helped me to understand the defining feature of IAF stories. Instead of mere empathy for others, they were trying to teach me to reveal my raw feelings of powerlessness, despair and anger. In the short time I spent with them, my friends drew out many other such stories from me that I hadn't known were inside of me.

Instead of deifying the abstract Individual, IAF organizations focus on personal encounter. When we push hard into personal encounter, something strange happens. When we get so deeply personal as to access raw pain, what we uncover is not just this one person but *all* people. Behind every individual person is the story of all people: a common struggle to find meaning, power, respect and belonging. Fred, a European-descent, 50-something unionist, muses, "What I've noticed with relational meetings is that there are people that I've never been able to connect with before, from very different backgrounds, and then instantly, when we have a relational meeting, I feel that connection." A good story unleashes the emotions involved in the human struggle for meaning. Once having heard it, we seem to instinctively bypass years of shared mundane experiences: sitting in cafes together, consoling one another over lost partners or opportunities. I spoke repeatedly in the previous chapter of how people felt a good story could speak straight through their rational barriers

to their feelings about how the world is and ought to be. This happens most intensely when we are sitting face to face. In this way, relational meetings reverse the process associated with liberalism. In Chapter 2 I explained that liberal political philosophy, and with it bureaucratic systems, begin with a thought experiment involving the stripping away of all personal elements to uncover an abstract Individual who then stands in for all individuals. Conversely, relational meetings take actual individuals and tear away at the façade of abstractions to uncover the raw, emotional being.

It is worth noting that Beth and Jessica are only too willing to participate in constructing my story. In so doing, they demonstrate a lack of interest in stories as representative of an already existing identity. After all, how can we really know that this or that story is *the* decisive factor, the reason we are now in this room? Human action remains a mystery and perhaps most of all to actors themselves. Instead, telling one's story is a performative act; a way of writing one's character into the drama of life. It is not so much a representation of one's identity as it is the construction of identity.

In societies dominated by, on the one hand, a Protestant culture that distinguishes between selfish and selfless acts (Rousselot 2002), and, on the other, a rational proceduralism that says public reason must be dispassionate and rooted in facts (see Chapter 2), we can fool ourselves into thinking that our personal stories are neither appreciated nor admissible. Learning to tell one's personal struggles in political situations, no matter how mundane, reverses this logic, helping us to see that our personal struggles are inextricably intertwined with a human struggle for justice. Rather than charitably minded, rational agents fighting causes for faceless crowds, we become characters in a shared story.

Really listening: "No story lives unless someone wants to listen"

As my experiences with Chris and Francois suggest, part of the power of telling one's story is that it leaves the person sitting across from us with the feeling that they must reciprocate. As Brigid, a 20-something organizer of European descent, asks in one meeting, "Did anyone find themselves sharing something they wouldn't normally share in a public setting?" She knows that this will be the case for most people in the room and, indeed, a number of hands shoot up. There is an economy to conversation and opening up puts both the speaker and the listener in a debt that can only be repaid by the reversal of roles. When one's debt cannot be paid, when we cannot open up, we walk away, as I did all those years ago in London, wondering what our story is. Either way, the organization wins. They were our first, or they were the one that got away.

If this makes relational meetings sound instrumental, it is important to remember that the power of relational meetings is in their authenticity. As

Beth explains, "One of the things that feels awkward about a relational meeting is that it's *not* transactional. You're not there to get anything from them." Jessica tries to resolve this paradox: "They have a purpose," she says, "but they're not calculated." Following my earlier definition, it might be better to say that relational meetings are performative. But just as with the game I play with my partner, being performative doesn't make relational meetings fake or manipulative. In fact, those who are best at relational meetings are genuine in their desire to relate to another person. "Relating," explains Jessica, "is a verb, not a noun – it's something we *do*."

IAF organizers are acutely aware that relational meetings offer them an element of surprise. But what they are doing is modelling a different way of relating to people politically: one characterized by care and curiosity. Jessica again: "We're trying to find curious people; people who seem excited to work together, rather than people who think they have all the answers. We all know who those people are right? Everyone's got one at Thanksgiving." Relational meetings are thus intensely normative. It is because people are not used to this way of relating to others, particularly politicians who are used to demands being made of them, that relational meetings are so powerful. Organizers will all have a story of someone sat on the other side of a relational meeting who, like me, has frozen up or become emotional. Relational meetings are ritual interventions that demonstrate a different way of relating to others. By behaving very personably in a political setting, organizers disarm their conversant and draw them into the movement. As Beth puts it, relational meetings are "the most radical thing you can do as an organizer".

Relational meetings are radical because they subvert the relational basis of liberalism. Rather than being cagey, closed and competitive, organizers are asked to be curious, open and cooperative. We live in a society in which people increasingly focus on one another's worth in terms of their positional, relational and financial power. As a result, we become used to comporting ourselves in public as talking CVs. Relational meetings are designed to cut through this transactional way of relating to people, providing us with an opportunity to surface our deepest motivations. Because of this, they have a profound power over us. I experienced this first hand and several of my friends have told me that they can trace their own involvement in the IAF back to a relational meeting. In London, relational meetings tend to be called one-to-ones. One day, turning the device into a kind of spell, a participant from London told me, "It was only when I came to learn what a one-to-one was that I realized *I* had been one-to-oned." We are providing people with an opportunity to re-present themselves as relational and as morally motivated. In the process, we draw them into our cause. A fan of Huey Lewis and the News, I call this the power of love. The power of love is characterized by paradox: love is the most effective means of changing people; but in order to

be effective, it has to be genuine. I put this point to Vicky one day. "Exactly," she says. "For us, acting is a way of building relationships."

Telling oneself into the movement: the power of an unfinished ritual

The context in which one's story is told is just as important as the story itself. In the previous chapter I explained how activists' individual stories act as powerful myths that can inspire others to take action. What I had not explained there is that the arc of the myth is always incomplete by virtue of the context in which it is told. Here it is useful to turn to the renowned interpretation of ritual introduced by Van Gennep (1961) and developed by Turner (1970). According to this interpretation, a ritual takes place in three stages: alienation, liminality and reintegration. In IAF trainings we are taught to expose the pain and suffering, the alienation that brought us into public life. In the process, we are simultaneously surfacing that suffering and stripping away the former self with which it is associated. And here in the group, surrounded by people we do not yet know but whom we may go into action with, we are simultaneously no longer that isolated former self and not yet an empowered member of a collective. Caught betwixt and between, we are ready to be reshaped by our new group identity.

This unfinishedness, this being continuously caught betwixt and between, has the power to resolve tensions. Perhaps one of the most effective aspects of IAF training days is that they happen in mutually set-apart spaces. As I explained in Chapter 4, there is a great concern in Vancouver, and particularly among MVA members, that even politically aligned citizens seem to operate in silos, rarely engaging with even those who agree with them. There is intense rivalry between organizations focused on similar issues because they are vying for both the same funding and the same members. Training sessions help to overcome these tensions by bringing people into a shared space that is mutually unfamiliar to them. People do not have their colleagues around them and are less likely to slip into cliquey behaviour or groupthink. They are removed from their tribe and thus lose both emotional support and confidence and, more complexly, they lose the linguistic, symbolic and political context, the shorthand and the shared history, that allow them to identify some people as enemies without the need for explanation. They find themselves having to articulate their grievances to people who are not from their tribe. Doing so can be embarrassing and isolating, particularly among people whose key purpose is to fight for a common good.

I notice this one day as we are preparing for a public assembly to be held at the First Lutheran Church on Wales Street in East Vancouver, with the intention of pressuring politicians to commit to working with us to make public transit more affordable. Developing public leaders is core to MVA's

work and I see that today, Kat, a 30-something trade unionist, has been asked to take on a lead organizing role. So meek and quiet when she first joined, Kat is a shining example of how people find their confidence in the movement. Even in the course of the day I observe her growing in confidence, standing up straight and annunciating more clearly. At one moment, I leave the main room of the church to discuss a procedural matter with the programme team. I return to find a group of about 10 people amidst a tense discussion about Unify, one of Canada's biggest unions and a member of MVA. Public assemblies stand or fall on the pressure in the room, and they need bums on seats. It is vital that member organizations commit to bringing delegates. This event will thus involve delegates from both Unify and its rival, the Vancouver Public Sector Workers union (VPSW). In Canada, unions increasingly run like insurance schemes and Unify has allegedly been deliberately poaching members from other unions, including VPSW. As I walk in, I hear Fred of VPSW saying, "I won't be rude to them, but I don't feel the need to be particularly polite. I'm disgusted by them. I'll put differences aside, but I'm not going to try to be nice." Fred is a militant trade unionist who knows how to shout people down and in other circumstances, people might be scared to get involved. But not of his union, Kat steps in: "Fred, you can't bring your dirty laundry in here. It's the bosses in Ottawa doing that stuff; not the rank and file; they're still our brothers and sisters." Forced to articulate himself to outsiders and bereft of his colleagues egging him on, Fred relinquishes. Caught in a liminal space, he leaves his militant identity behind and adopts, albeit reluctantly, a new, conciliatory identity.

'Silos' is a common theme among my interlocutors, conjured to suggest a widespread feeling of being disconnected across differences of religion, race, gender, age, economic status, and even issue and organization. By bringing people together in mutually set-apart spaces and inviting them to listen to one another's stories, MVA provides a way of interrupting the everyday practice of communicating only with like-minded people from similar institutions, and instead connecting with people across differences. As Trevor reflected at one event after an interlude for a relational meeting, "Where else can you sit down with a fellow unionist and a Catholic nun and have a really good conversation about transit?"

Solidarity games

Although they are able to bring individuals into interpersonal relationships, on their own relational meetings are not enough to bridge the many differences people feel from one another; there is simply not the time to have a relational meeting with all the people with whom we go into action. This gap is filled by solidarity games. First among these is identifying participants on the basis of institutional membership rather than as individuals or

according to belief or issue. When one enters into an IAF space, they are no longer Francois or Elsa; no longer accountant or cleaner; no longer even socialist, environmentalist or Christian. Instead, they are 'with' the VPSW union, with NatureProtectors or with St Mary's church. While the latter distinction in particular may seem subtle, this approach reifies participants as embodied and relational rather than cognitive and individual – an institutional self as opposed to a privately believing or -doing self. Every training session (and indeed every public meeting) opens with rounds. Participants are asked to sit in a circle and introduce 'yourself and your institution' – not your job, not your personal beliefs or motivation. "I'm Serina with West Van Community Hub," for example. Rounds are vital and when a meeting accidentally starts without them, even if everyone in the room is acquainted, we have to go back and start again. Rounds are also policed to ensure that nobody is indulgently reifying themselves as an individual with an agenda. People are quickly cut off if they seek to run beyond their remit.

With this groundwork laid, the next step in trainings is normally to move on to 'world as it is/world as it should be'. At a training event in early October 2017 we are seated in set places around tables, with a space left at the front of the room for a speaker. Following a range of introductions, Vicky comes to the front of the room. "We're here today to move from the world as it is to the world as it should be." She projects a PowerPoint slide onto the wall showing a page divided into two sections. At the top of one section it says, 'the world as it is', and at the top of the other, 'the world as it should be'. She explains: "The world as it is, is the world as we currently experience it. Can anyone give some ideas?" "Money grabbers," shouts an ethnically European, middle-aged trade union worker. "Hard," says a younger, ethnically Chinese woman from a neighbourhood house. "Non-compassionate," says an elderly ethnically European woman from a church. "Unsafe," says another elderly woman. "Fractured, climate change, poverty, digital" – "right, because it's so impersonal," interjects Beth. "Confused," says an ethnically East African man.

We move on to the world as it should be: "Civil society is civil," says an ethnically Latin American union worker. "Generous to strangers," says an ethnically European church leader. "Slow-paced," says a community worker. "Clean water, environment, equality, cohesions, support, listening, secure," shouts another.

By playing this game, participants are not only cognitively developing ideas of what a good life might consist of; they are also performatively assenting to the proposition that there is just one good life, even if we cannot agree on it in this room now. Having stripped our old selves down in relational meetings, we are now collectively constructing a new identity rooted in a shared vision of how the world should be. Of course, like the

many stories we tell of who we are and where we come from, these visions are flimsy. The way the world should be is never fleshed out rationally. It is not built up from first principles. And materially speaking, it can't be. The people in the room are a mixture of various organizations, ethnicities and positionalities. Instead, as these people from very different backgrounds begin to describe some words they associate with the world as it should be, they are deliberately presenting notions that they assume everyone will agree with. They are performing a sharedness of vision. We cultivate a *feeling* of navigating together towards an alternative on the horizon. World as it is/world as it should be is thus about performatively conjuring a feeling of sharedness.

One final game solidifies the proposition that we stand or fall as a group. Beth turns to the room and asks, "So what are the pressures that make you want to act?" As tables we discuss the pressures facing us and our families, that is, the barriers between the world as it is and the world as it should be. An elderly, ethnically European woman affiliated with a local church named Dierdre is then asked to stand in the middle of the room. The people on my table are asked to write their worries onto a piece of paper, screw up that piece of paper, and throw it at Dierdre. "This," says Beth, "is what happens when we stand alone." Then the group at my table, representing various institutions, is asked to stand in a circle around Dierdre. Now everyone else in the room is asked to write their problems onto a piece of paper and to throw the paper at Dierdre. The wall of institutions protects her. Then Beth explains again: "Though everyone has different issues, they are all interconnected. When we're on our own, we're vulnerable; but together we're strong. A big thing about the world as people experience it is a lack of connection, and cohesion is a strong feature of the world as it should be."

Our discussion as a table is a microcosm of the larger MVA and IAF project. As the months go by and more and more stories are heard across numerous institutions representing a diverse array of religious groups, community groups and unions, organizers find common points on which all can agree. Once these pressure points have been voted on in an assembly, a plan of action can be conceived.

Through solidarity games, IAF members transition from individual selves to institutional selves, and from there to coalitional selves. IAF organizations recognize that this shift is not permanent. To think that one meeting could do this would be foolishly idealistic. This is why they have to return to these games at every meeting. Still, by ritually subverting the individualized idea that they have of themselves; by performatively conveying a vision that is shared between people of very different backgrounds; and by learning to stand together against external pressures, slowly the ideal is performed into reality.

Public dramas

Beyond all else, what IAF organizations do is to bring people out of the audience and onto the stage. For most of us labouring as cogs in a machine, subject to the dictates of mass bureaucracies, having our individual circumstances ignored by everything from the tax authority to the parking meter, individualism is something we carve out in the way we take our coffee or style our hair. Rarely do we get the chance to distinguish ourselves in public. IAF organizations offer people the chance to do just this: to play a part in a public drama.

Subtle gestures and solidarity games are ultimately aiming towards public assemblies. The ostensible objective of these assemblies is to pin down politicians and business executives, and exact demands. But in reality, there is a higher aim at work. As Saul Alinsky explains with his allegory of John Smith in the passage quoted at length in Chapter 4, public assemblies give people who feel their stories are worthless, and who have been long ignored, a chance to participate in a public drama. Alinsky speaks with the kind of salvific tones about the role of the organizer and the power of public dramas that may be off-putting for some readers. But a number of organizers attest to having seen someone transformed by this process. When I ask Brigid one day if anything makes her cry, she tells me that "[i]t's about how the IAF provides an opportunity for people to be seen in public, which allows them to come and embody their fuller person. It almost always makes me well up." I too have experienced this on many occasions.

The public transit assembly at First Lutheran provides a good example. Every IAF assembly involves testimony: in which an individual tells their personal story of suffering that led them to join the campaign. Organizers always make sure to choose a speaker who, at least at first, seems vulnerable. As Milly, a 30-something trade unionist of East European descent, put it when trying to recruit a nervous young woman who protested that "surely there are others more qualified" than her: "It's way more genuine when it comes from someone who is not polished." At First Lutheran, MVA had chosen Assana for this task: a former refugee from East Africa whose annual transit costs for her and her family ($4,140) are the same as her daughter's projected college tuition fees. When she first stands up to speak, Assana seems very nervous. She shares a stage with Shayne Simpson, a prominent Member of Parliament, but she looks straight out to the audience. She has a French African accent, which further underscores her vulnerability. She presents herself as alienated and, in so doing, turns the church hall into a liminal space between her vulnerable past and an as yet uncertain future.

But the scene is set to demonstrate to Assana, as well as to Simpson, that the audience is in this together as one. Prior to the event we have spent hours putting up banners across the room that demonstrate our solidarity

across differences: a few from different unions; others from community groups and churches. As her story unfolds, the audience boos and cheers at key moments. And in response to their booing and cheering, Assana looks increasingly confident. She starts to make eye contact with Simpson. Slowly she is being transformed from a powerless individual into a powerful member of the group. As Fred put this: "When they see there are people around that care and are connected more than they thought, it gives them strength; they stand up straight. It gives them hope."

As Assana feels herself transforming, something else happens too. The audience itself realizes that it is imputing her with this power and, as a result, comes to see itself as a group. They are feeding off one another. A secret power has been discovered: the energy that comes from being committed in common cause. In this way, public dramas are myths on stage. A week after the event, Jessica explains the power of public dramas to a new group of trainees.

> 'We always call our actions "public dramas". Why is this? There is always a protagonist and an antagonist, a hero and a villain, or a target. Or else, you have someone who could be either of these, and you present them with a choice. The next point is horror stories. I think of Shayne Simpson. We had relational meetings and we learnt the kinds of things that concern him. And we tailored our stories to appeal to him. But these stories aren't just about display. They are also about giving people a connection between their personal story and public accountability. The next point is having a pinning strategy: forcing people to say yes or no. In order to do this, you need a good floor team. They're essential. The floor team has to create a feeling of suspense and tension – cheering at the right times, keeping silent at others.'

Stood in front of a politician, Assana is not merely telling the story of her problems with public transit but the whole room's story of powerlessness. The air is thick with unresolved tension. And this is where the politician comes in. The effect of the public drama is for them to recognize their role in a play that is still unfolding and in which everyone in the room is involved. They are the antagonist, and they are forced to choose what kind of character they will be, hero or villain, and what kind of story this will be, triumph or tragedy.

In this way, public dramas are designed to subvert the world people are used to seeing: in which marginalized ethnic minority women have no confidence to stand up to white, male politicians on a public stage; in which a weak and divided civil society has no power to transform the world around them; and in which the only way to take public action is to read the news and vote. This process of subversion is performed, but the performance has

the effect of transforming reality. By playing the protagonist in front of a supportive crowd, Assana is transformed. By playing the jeering crowd, the crowd too is transformed from a multitude of powerless individuals into a powerful collective able to make demands of a politician. And the political reality itself is transformed as the politician on stage recognizes that MVA are a force to be reckoned with.

Conclusion

In its aim to enshrine the autonomy of the abstract Individual, liberalism develops procedures and performances that dehumanize really existing individuals. In this chapter I have been trying to stress that the process of inventing and sharing myths can serve to overturn this contradiction, empowering people to participate in public life and energizing them to engage with those who are different from them. Jealousy and suspicion are slowly replaced by solidarity. I find it useful to think of these as ritual processes because it speaks to their strange power to performatively transform reality.

The stories people tell in relational meetings are partly invented for the purpose of telling oneself into action. Just as when I play 'let's start again' with my partner, each individual telling their story is aware that it is not the whole story of their identity. But through the telling of the story, they make it into their identity and a basis on which to act.

Learning to really listen to the other with care and curiosity, all the time knowing it serves a political purpose, is awkward because it dramatizes the tension between the world as it should be, in which we listen to one another purely to know one another more deeply, and the world as it is, in which we want to gain something from the person sat across from us. Together the telling of one's own story and the listening to that of the other form a mutually reinforcing ritual process: both parties expose their alienation and, in so doing, turn the room into a liminal space in which they are ready to lose some of their individuality and open themselves up to an alliance. These interpersonal moments are supplemented with solidarity games, whereby participants perform the sharedness of their aims and their reliance on another person in the challenge to stay afloat. Public dramas involve the performance of personal stories on stage, putting a weak protagonist up against a powerful antagonist, strengthening the former through the emotional encouragement of the group, and allowing all those present to play a part in the drama of life.

All the world may well be a stage, but not all men and women are players. Most of us are merely the alienated audience, waiting for the conclusion to be delivered to us. We are sitting behind digital screens, counting the votes as they come in. We act in our home, and we may even act in our institutions, but there is a profound disconnect from the decisions that really impact on our lives. IAF organizations allow a few more of us to feel like players.

If all this talk of play makes this sound like a game that doesn't really impact on the political world, it is worth reflecting on where we are at politically. As the liberal world continues to erupt in often violent protests, from the RSS in India to Brexit to Anti-Maskers globally, the sense of powerlessness has never been more palpable. John Smith, and Assana too, have long been neglected and they're looking for a place in which their story can be heard.

7

Magical Feelings as the Source and Aim of Myths and Rituals

Chapter 5 introduced readers to myths that might save liberalism by valorizing individuals who give themselves to a collective. Chapter 6 then explored the ritualized contexts in which those stories are told. In this chapter I want to explore the magical feelings that serve as the source of myths and which are weaved into, and brought to life through, ritual encounters. Magic, I will argue, is crucial to activating people because it opens a small crack in the veneer of there is no alternative, revealing another world that runs in parallel to our own and which, in that moment, feels almost within reach.

More so even than myth and ritual, magic is a term that has historically been used to delegitimize certain ways of understanding the world. Early colonial theorists of magic like Edward Tylor saw it as a competitor to science; a backwards way of thinking that would pass away or else be consigned to the 'peripheries' of the world once most of the global population had been educated (see also Gosden 2020).

Yet not only is magic not dead but it seems to be more alive than ever at present, from sub-Saharan Africa, to China, to North America. In sub-Saharan Africa, as the economy rapidly modernizes and peasants begin to sell their labour, claims abound that witch managers must have put a spell on workers (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 1998; Federici 2013, 170, 239). In China, burning money remains an important means of communicating with the dead (Zhang 2015). In the US, during the presidency of Donald Trump, both pro- and anti-Trump groups turned to casting spells in order to protect him and rid themselves of him respectively (Asprem 2020). If we expand the frame to include conspiracy theories, suddenly it feels as if we're drowning in magical thinking (Ward and Voas 2011). The QAnon conspiracy, for example, which says that the world is run by an elite ring of satanic paedophiles, became almost as popular as some world religions in the US (Russonello 2021), as well as quickly spreading to a number of European countries.

Nor is this just about a lack of education. Exploring magical thinking among the non-religious in Scotland and Cyprus, Irvine and Kyriakides suggest that rather than acting as a competitor to science, magical thinking is something that people resort to in turbulent environmental and economic contexts when all rational resources are expended (Irvine and Kyriakides 2018). People might turn to magic for good luck in an exam or in finding a job. From this perspective, the groundswell of magical thinking across the world at present might be taken as a sign that amidst an unimaginably complex political reality and unfathomably unfair economic circumstances, people are seeking out simpler explanations as to the sources of their suffering and salvation.

Still, at this point magic sounds little more than the heart of a heartless world – a flight of fancy that will evaporate once poor people are raised out of poverty, and anyway nothing that sensible, wealthy people ought to indulge in. Alternatively, for Evans-Pritchard (1976) and, more recently, Stroeken (2012) and Gosden (2020), magic is a way of attributing moral weight or meaning to a situation. Magic doesn't compete with science but complements it. The case of magic in the contemporary US is particularly pertinent since it brings people together not only across the political spectrum but across very different understandings of what is real, true and verifiable. Whereas some see magic as having a causal efficacy, others regard it as 'indistinguishable from art', with any 'supernatural aid that might result from its spells' being an 'added bonus' (Asprem 2020, 32).

Yet even as authors demonstrate that magic is commonplace in Western settings (Magliocco 2020), the emphasis is on esotericism and witchcraft, and less attention has been paid to uncovering magic in places and among people where magically connotative language is rarely used. The result is that even if magic has infiltrated our ranks, we can still think of it as something weird that can and must be stamped out. We can label it all as 'conspirituality' (Ward and Voas 2011) and ignore the ways in which magic is woven through our encounters with the world, enthralling us with logics that undermine our dignity and closing us off to alternatives.

I will be offering a broader reading whereby magic is a *feeling* that an extraordinary power resides within an object, person, way of being, or political process such that it is especially meaningful and, as such, especially able to transform reality in ways that would otherwise seem impossible. Magical feelings can be benign or malign. We might feel that certain objects or moments are miraculous, are gifts, or represent life as it is *meant* to be – as if all other ways are somehow empty or perverse. Or we might feel the opposite – that certain things are deeply evil and corrupting. This power often resides outside of those enchanted by it, beyond their control. I emphasize magic as a feeling about the quality of certain objects or moments, rather than a belief in their efficacy to avoid what I consider

over-reified dichotomies between religious and non-religious (Fitzgerald 2011), literal and metaphorical (Ward 2007, 13), authentic and performative (Seligman 2008, 9), as if these correspond to significant and insignificant. In fact, these categories are not only far more fluid within both a society and the life of an individual than we like to think, but also may make little difference to the transformative potential of the object, action or idea that is inspiring people (Stacey 2020).

Understood in this less religiously connotative way, it has become increasingly common to understand encounters between Western people and trees, rivers and animals as laced with magical feelings and enchantment (Strengers 2012; Suddaby et al 2017; Beaman 2021). But it has been strangely far less common to think of inter-human encounters as enchanted. This is problematic, in my view, because it risks romanticizing nature, reifying human–nature distinctions, and condemning all that is human to an iron cage. It's as if we can't feel enchanted unless we have the chance to spend time among trees or in the water, often away from other people. By way of an alternative, I seek to uncover the magic already lingering in social encounters. In so doing, I hope to help people expand their imagination, overcome the instrumental lens through which they perceive their own lives, and revivify the spirit of political participation.

Readers living in liberal cultures might regard even my broader take on magic as alien to their world, in which humans project meaning onto events and objects that are otherwise meaningless, in which legitimacy is secured through rational arguments, and in which value is created through the development of goods that serve naturally occurring desires. But this is a naive reading of the forces that shape liberal societies.

Too often magic invokes images of witches conjuring spells. This is a sign of the success of centuries of campaigns to denounce certain groups as ridiculous. In fact, we are surrounded by something very like magic in the modern world. A country's flag is a powerful case in point. Recent events in Britain suggest that simply by publicly associating themselves with the British flag, politicians can dramatically improve their approval ratings, and that those who question such politicians' motives will themselves be verbally attacked (Landler 2021). Similarly, when a flag is desecrated, people behave as if the nation itself is under threat. People confuse, explains Jaskulowski (2016), the flag's representative function as a symbol of the nation, with a metonymic-causal function whereby the flag *is* the nation. By making use of the flag, modern sorcerers have been able to turn into '*the* people' what was merely a multitude; to turn into enemies those who were our friends; and to turn into soldiers those who were our children. In just a few centuries, symbols like the national flag have been imbued with such a power that anyone who wields them well can enjoy an almost automatic legitimacy.

In some sense, then, we might say that magic never went away but was taken in-house by states. From this perspective, what we are seeing now is not the return of magical feelings but the loss of control over where they bubble up. But this is too simplistic. Instead, I want to suggest that magic had to be invented as a distinctive category in order for the magical feelings with which it was associated to be removed from just any old sorcerer with a wand and made into the monopoly of an elite. In order to take back power, we need to attend to where magical feelings arise in the cultures and causes that we want to sustain. But doing so isn't all that easy. The problem is that many of us have imbibed the liberal logic that says magic is ridiculous, and magical feelings are only worthwhile when they are put to work for political purposes. In this chapter, I will begin by further elaborating on this logic. I will explain that rather than being considered problematic per se, magic is discredited when it presents a threat to the liberal imaginary. And at the same time, magic, or something very like it, is mobilized to bolster liberal ideas and institutions such as individualism, the state and the market. I then explain my method for uncovering magical feelings in cultures where they have long been ignored.

Employing these tools, I reveal where my friends get their fix of magical feelings: in encounters with other people that are non-instrumental, personal, trust based and empowering. But even once these feelings have been found, we hit a snag: my friends are not hippies or anarchist drop-outs. They feel called to change the systems that govern them. Even though they might get a lot out of non-instrumental encounters, they remain quite convinced that magic must be put to work for political purposes. They are thus navigating their way through equally strong desires for authenticity and efficacy. When it comes to selecting between, say, a rave and a political protest, this tension is easily resolved. From their perspective, the feeling one gets from a rave, though perhaps seemingly more spontaneous than a protest, just isn't the real deal. What seem like magical feelings in a rave are really inferior experiences that need to be enhanced by drugs. Real magic comes from participation in a political project. But the bow binding authenticity and efficacy becomes somewhat more twisted when it comes to differentiating between a spontaneous uprising and participation in a long-term political project. In these circumstances, although my friends enjoy a good protest, they tend to prefer to conserve their energy for fights that can be won.

Taking magic in-house

Denouncing magic was never merely a matter of suddenly seeing reality for what it was and finding it a shame that others had not yet seen the light. It was not simply about the emergence of science or the 'white man's burden' to educate the world. Nor was it ever simply a matter of making

people resistant to spells in general – even if, and I believe this to be the case, many of those engaged in this project thought that this was what they were doing. (It is hard, for example, to read something like Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* (2009) or Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (2009) as if these were disingenuous). Instead, liberation from one spell always goes hand in hand with being captured by another. The development of scientific thinking was coterminous with industrialization. The notion being taken for granted when denouncing certain imaginaries and practices as magical was not merely that ideas must be empirically tested but that wealth, power and, in their service, productivity must increase. What came to be called magic stood in the way of all this.

The best-known attempt to label as 'magic', and subsequently ridicule and outlaw, ways of being that made life meaningful for large swathes of the population is the witch hunts of the early modern period, in which tens of thousands of people, mainly women, were tortured and executed (Federici 2004, 143). The notion that a significant proportion of people were engaged in witchcraft was not pure fantasy on the part of the accusers. Even as church and state together tried to stamp out witchcraft, it 'continued to prevail on a popular level through the Middle Ages' (Federici 2004). Two aspects seem to distinguish the magical imaginary in this period. The first is 'an animistic conception of nature' wherein the cosmos is seen as 'a living organism' (Federici 2004, 141). The second, which will prove most important in this chapter, is that rather than meaning being projected onto the outside world by the beholder,

> meaning is already there in the object/agent, it is there quite independently of us; it would be there even if we didn't exist. And this means that the object/agent can communicate this meaning to us, impose it on us … by bringing us as it were into its field of force. It can in this way even impose quite alien meanings on us, ones that we would not normally have, given our nature. (Taylor 2007, 33)

To church, state, and the emerging capitalist class of the time, 'this anarchic, molecular conception of the diffusion of power in the world was anathema' (Federici 2004, 173). To those in positions of power, it was they that must decide where meaning lies – not the masses and certainly not the objects themselves. Indeed, it has been suggested that the secretive meetings of rebellious peasants were deliberately mislabelled as witches' sabbats in order to persecute the ringleaders (Federici 2004, 165–6, 176).

Yet it was not merely the threat of rebellion that troubled the church-state-capitalist triad. They were equally troubled by practices that made a mockery of order or else enacted an egalitarian or unproductive ethos. Contrary to Hollywood movies that depict medieval peasant life as always

and purely joyless, those who study the history suggest that following the labour shortage after the Black Death of the 14th century at least, people had money to invest. And they invested it in rowdy festivities, which often involved mocking the established order (Davis 1975; Taylor 2007, 45–6; Bakhtin 2009; Graeber 2009, 503; Schielke 2012, 73). While some authors focus on the role of these festivals for letting off steam (Davis 1975; Bakhtin 2009), others are more interested to point to them as performances of an alternative way of living (Graeber 2009; Schielke 2012). Still others see them as complexly both (Turner 1977; Taylor 2007). From this perspective, festivals are a time-out-of-times that instil a feeling of radical equality and solidarity. Yet in being understood as an exception, festivals also legitimize the rule. Whatever their aim, whether reinforcing or revolting against the world as it is, there is a consensus regarding why these festivities were and still are problematic to religious, political and business leaders: they are 'unconducive to the maintenance of labour discipline' (Graeber 2009, 503). Rulers often quash and control festivals in a bid 'to increase productivity, and to inculcate a more rational, hard-working, industrious and production-oriented outlook in their subjects' (Taylor 2007, 111).

The colonial period saw similar attempts to denounce alternative imaginaries and control public festivities across the world. Participants were seen as backward, superstitious, wasteful and unruly. From Russian incursions into Siberia from the late 17th century onwards (Gosden 2020, 398); to British and French denunciations of magic in Africa and North America; to Spanish attempts to quash magic in what became known as Latin America. And in postcolonial settings, as religious leaders and states alike push for modernization, they reproduce this denigrating attitude towards the purportedly backwards practices of their own people. In China, for example, the 20th century saw a hierarchy develop, with practices deemed magical placed at the bottom, salvation religions somewhere in the middle, and an atheist Confucian communism at the top (Yang 2006; Yang 2008). In Lebanon, a younger, more educated generation seeks to direct the activities around *Ashura* festivals towards more politically productive ends (Deeb 2005, 241). In Cairo, *Mawlid* festivals are often in danger of being stamped out, as elites seek to assert that public life 'should be structured by norms, boundaries and hierarchies that are valid at all times' (Schielke 2012, 7).

To be clear, I am not claiming sinister motives or intention. To do so is to give too much credit to the people and institutions that drove us to our current situation, as if they had extraordinary historical oversight. But nor do we need conspiracy to make the connection. Instead, I am suggesting that when one has an authoritarian and accumulative mindset, enchantment can be irritating. Let's say I am working on your farm, and you need me to be as swift as possible in herding sheep so as to get on to the next task. You might not appreciate it all that much if you look out of the window to see

me lying on the ground by the sheep trying to understand what sheepiness is all about. Or let's say you're my boss in a telemarketing company and even when I get someone who has no desire to buy what we're selling, I nonetheless find myself being carried away in the beauty of getting to know another human. You'll quickly try to find ways of stamping it out. If the whole group is doing it, you might find yourself having to make examples of ringleaders. And if the whole of society is doing it, well then you might need an inquisition.

Given this history of suppression, it would seem that, perhaps even from their own perspective, proponents of the modern, liberal state are against magic. But in fact, modern, rationalist leaders do like magic. It's just that they prefer the kind that serves their purposes. I have been emphasizing throughout this book that liberalism places a strong emphasis on self-autonomy, underscored by a powerful state and a capitalist economy. As with all ideologies, these ideas and institutions are not self-evident but rather rely on an unsubstantiated belief in what kind of beings humans are. In the case of liberalism, as explained in Chapter 2, the belief is that humans autonomously arrive at meaning through introspective inquiry and interactions with a world that is always other. For this same reason, humans are prone to violence, exploitation and free riding and thus must be protected from one another by institutions that channel these urges towards productive ends (see also Negri 1991, xxi). Although it is in the definition of faith that it requires no evidence, it does require the occasional sign.

Because magical thinking is normally associated with the notion of meaning being inherent in external objects, it is rarely noticed how magical Western ideas of self-autonomy can be. For the Western, and increasingly global interiorized self (Pool 2020, 7), meaning is ideally arrived at *ex nihilo* – that is, as if from nowhere – without reference to the human and other-than-human relationships in which one is always already embedded. Meaning emerges from within us as the unravelling of a deeply personal conviction, or it is intuited by pure reason. The less external the influence, the purer the decision. According to this imaginary, all external inputs become suspicious. This way of thinking seems exemplified in the contemporary obsession with temporarily cutting all ties to 'find oneself' – as if the self cannot be found when drowned out by a set of obligations to other beings.

In order to gain protection from the menace of external influence, the autonomous individual enters into a contract with a state with a monopoly of violence. And in order to solidify its legitimacy as the sole protector of the people, the state must also have a monopoly on magic. Thus even as early state makers were denouncing the magic of peasants and conquered peoples, they were always also conjuring magical feelings in the service of citizen making (Hobsbawm 2012a; Anderson 2016). They were inventing symbols

and rituals around the unity of a nation; the crowning of kings; the swearing in of presidents; the power of a military; and the wisdom of courts. In the colonial context, we even see explicit competition between state makers and magicians (Ciekawy 1998). One particularly revealing example, which would be comical were it not so entwined with violent oppression, was the decision by the French regime in Algeria to ship in France's most famous stage magician, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, to compete with Muslim holy men for the awe of the people (Jones 2010). The ostensible aim was to show the local population that what they thought was magic was in fact trickery. But this aim was in service of a grander one: for the French state to gain a monopoly on magical feelings.

The best example of states' control of magic today is the requirement in countries across the world that people gain permits from the police in order to hold public events, including protests, which are often denied, while taxpayers' money is used to generate state-sponsored emotional outbursts such as those around the birth, liberation and victories of the nation. So intuitively plausible is the notion of the nation as a primary unit of political identity today that many of us rarely question this wielding of power, so long as it is not used for party political purposes. Again, the measures governments take to drown out the magic of opponents is almost comical. In 2019 the Moscow government practically air-dropped *Shashlik Live* and *Meat&Beat*, two 'musical-gastronomical festivals', onto the city's streets to distract young people from ongoing opposition party protests against the disqualification of independent candidates for the municipal elections.

It has long been understood that capitalism too does this double work. On the one hand, the very idea of seeking to extract profit from objects or processes robs them of their magical qualities because they are no longer meaningful in themselves but only in service of an end decided by the purchaser. On the other hand, much magic goes into the service of making people into capitalists (Taussig 1997) and objects into commodities (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007; Hornborg 2013). Capitalism cultivates a belief that certain objects are uniquely able to make us more attractive or wealthy, and both those purchasing the items and those jealously or erotically observing them, are beholden to the spell. Some, of course, see through the spell. But such people get their magic elsewhere, which is precisely what makes *their* magic suspect.

What we are seeing today, then, is not the return of magic but the democratization of the practices that the term 'magic' came to denote. I am not by any means suggesting that the widespread rise in conspiracy theories is a good thing. Science is important. And so is truth. But I am suggesting that this eruption of uncontrollable magical feelings is as much a product of alienation from an excessively centralized state and a radically unfair economics as it is a low IQ or a lost penchant for rationality.

One answer to all this messy magic might be to press for a yet more perfect liberation; a still more critical individual that sees through all forms of mystification. What I have learnt from my friends is that this is neither possible nor desirable. When so much of reality is socially constructed, we are caught in a war of casting spells. Rediscovering magical feelings in political participation is crucial to reclaiming the capability to imagine alternative worlds (Graeber 2009, 526).

Doing so should not be difficult. Magical feelings are woven into activism, which often involves taking on causes that all the evidence suggests are impossible to win or else already lost. Magic convinces us that another world is possible. My friends do not dispute scientific explanations for moments that inspire them. Indeed, they rarely use terms like magic at all. Why would they in a culture that has made magic ridiculous? Rather, they imbue events with a richness that causal explanations alone seem *aesthetically*, rather than scientifically, insufficient to explain. Unlocking these magical moments is crucial to those seeking to mobilize people because they serve as an ongoing source of inspiration, morphing over time into myths and ritual performances.

Searching for magic in unexpected places

So how to unlock magical moments among people that don't talk about magic? I focus on what I call 'substantive poetry' and 'enchanted speech'. By substantive poetry, I mean those metaphors and similes that push the boundaries of likeness while nonetheless being recognizable as literary devices. Jessica demonstrates this well when she tells me:

> 'That to me is the most addicting part of this work: watching people reclaim the power that has been taken from them a little bit each day over many years until they don't realize what they can do anymore. It's what I call the organizer alchemy: when you bring people together to become more than the sum of their parts.'

'Organizer alchemy' is recognizable as a literary device. Alchemy refers to the mystical practice of turning lead into gold. Clearly Jessica has not got herself confused between the substance lead and the species human. Nor does Jessica think the humans she is working with have literally mutated into altogether new beings like X-Men. Yet at the same time, Jessica is not merely playfully conjuring a likeness, as when one says, "you're hot shit". In the case of Jessica's metaphor, "alchemy" is the best term available to her to describe the experience. Now perhaps the reader will insist that in a socially constructed world, all poetry is substantive. Language, after all, constitutes reality. Or perhaps you'll be thinking any *good* poetry is substantive. Indeed,

being substantive is what makes poetry good: it captures the world more accurately than does rational discourse alone. I am fine with these rebuttals and my need to stress the substantive element may itself stem from living in an age dominated by logical positivism. All that matters to me is that we are talking about turns of phrase that are not just literary flourishes but really mean something to those using them.

Enchanted speech refers to the sound of wonder in a person's voice when they recount an experience. Lori Beaman (2021, 5–6) explains that in order to get in touch with enchantment in unexpected places, a few steps are required: (1) Eschewing the notion that people in the West ever became disenchanted. (2) '[R]elocating the occurrence of enchantment as a possibility linked to multiple frequencies, none of which has exclusive licence' (Beaman 2021, 11). For Beaman, these frequencies include music, and encounter with water and whales; for my friends, as I will show, they are found in non-instrumental encounters with other humans. (3) Recognizing these multiple frequencies as having equal power and validity to religious experiences. Enchanted speech is the means by which those who eschew religiously connotative language invite us to recognize the power of their experiences. It refers to when people's pitch, pace, tone, volume or body language alter as if to reckon with the profundity of what they are describing. How the voice shifts depends on the person, the mood they are in, and the thing they are referring to. For this reason, knowing when a person's speech has become enchanted often, though not always, requires enjoying a certain level of intimacy with the person who is speaking.

In the following, drawing on these techniques, I will elaborate on the moments that my friends find magical, and the struggle that they face in seeking to integrate these moments into their practice. I will show that it is not only states and cynics that prefer their magic to be serving a purpose. Rather, the struggle between authenticity and efficacy plagues all those that seek to wield magic for political purposes. As I explained in Chapters 1 to 4, liberalism has become deeply embedded in people's imaginaries. This includes the imaginaries of the people trying to perform the impossible, perhaps even contradictory, task of moving beyond liberalism's shortcomings while holding on to its victories. My friends find themselves feeling deeply ambivalent about magical feelings. On the one hand, they want them to be spontaneously generated by chance encounters with people. On the other, they consider magical feelings a waste of time when they are not being put to political use.

Power to the people, magic in the movement

As might be expected amongst people resisting the dual dominance of the state and capitalism (see Chapter 2) the most prominent source of magic amongst my friends is encounter with people driven by the belief that they

can influence meaningful political change. I could feel the magic emanating from Elsa as she told me, her eyes twinkling: 'What inspired me is that they believed they could win. They truly believed they could. With the power of global oil, the support of the government, these few humans really believed that they could stand up like a wall holding back the tide.'

Four centuries deep in the dual dominance of the state and capitalism (see Chapter 2), three decades after the collapse of Soviet Russia, long schooled in the philosophy of individualism and the assumption that people cannot cooperate in the absence of hierarchy, many of us feel much of the time consigned to a life of blissful impotence. But the magic of a group of people standing together, "like a wall holding back the tide" opens a crack in the veneer of 'there is no alternative'. Like many activists, my friends feel that when each individual earnestly gives themself over to a group, an extraordinary power emerges that is 'more than the sum of its parts', which can overcome great opposition and transform each individual involved. From what I gather, in order to count as magical in my friends' eyes, a moment must consist of five qualities: it has to be non-instrumental; it has to be more than a party; it has to be radically democratic; it has to be productive; and it has to transform those involved. Given how deeply liberal logics have influenced their imaginaries, any one of these qualities is on its own hard to achieve, and the tension between authenticity and efficacy not only runs through each one but also brings them into conflict with one another.

It has to be non-instrumental

Just about everyone who gets involved in activist work wants something in the world to change. But there are some who feel that anything not directly contributing to the target is a waste of time. Janey, a 20-something organizer of East Asian descent, was like this once.

> 'When I started working with *Chinatown Together*, I was frustrated by how slowly everything developed. I'd be sitting down and having long conversations with elderly women, and half the time I was, and still am, bringing them huge jugs of milk. We end up in conversations about their lives and rarely get to discussing politics or action.'

Janey was feeling increasingly demoralized. But after many frustrating days and long conversations with a mentor, something clicked.

> 'I came to realize that having strong non-instrumental relationships *is* an antithesis to capitalism. Not just forcing people to sign petitions. We should be building the microcosm of the kind of society we want to live in. That's why I think it's important not to be issue based. In

> that process you can forget why you are fighting against a particular policy: because it interrupts social life. Now I feel like I'm constantly making new grandmas.'

Janey realized that her frantic rush to fight capitalism might actually be reproducing capitalism's logic of maximizing output at the expense of human relationships. As she seeks to overcome this logic, Janey gives up a little of her interior autonomy and opens herself up to a more magical imaginary whereby people and objects on the outside have a meaning of their own that can draw us in. She was closed off, deriving meaning only from the achievement of goals that she had deemed worthwhile. But she learnt that opening herself up to others and slowing down time brings its own charm, turning what were human obstacles to the success of a campaign into sources of alternative meaning. In this small way, just by "making new grandmas", Janey is reversing the liberal process of becoming closed off to external meaning, and systematically rationalizing one's time and encounters. In these moments, time is not money, as Benjamin Franklin espoused (Weber [1905] 2010). Time is not a unit that must be measured, divided up and converted into success (Bauman 2020). Instead, time is something that we give, let go of or even value in itself as we honour the human in front of us.

One of the key points I want to emphasize in this chapter is that even if your political approach is strictly instrumental, time and space must be allowed for these moments of opening up to and finding meaning in unexpected places and among the people we might ordinarily overlook. This is not only because, as Janey says, "having strong non-instrumental relationships *is* an antithesis to capitalism". As I shall explain in the next section, it's also because these moments engender an affective belief in the power of the collective. My friends talk about the feeling they get from recognizing they are part of a group that is working towards a shared goal as if it is essential to leading a fulfilling life. "It's like a church for people who don't go to church," explains Elsa. Or more simply in the words of Martha, an ethnically Jewish organizer in her 50s, if it's the issues that draw people in, "it's the people that keep people coming". A life without experiencing the magic of the group is like a life without love: empty.

Yet were bringing jugs of milk to her new grandmas Janey's only task, her group would never get anything done. The struggle then is how to hold on to, even regenerate social life while making real gains against the forces undermining it.

It has to be more than a party

If being issues and systems based risks killing magical feelings, the opposite risk is that they get wasted on unworthy moments. My friends worry that

in modern, consumer society, most people are making do with Platonic shadows, or cheap knock-off versions of magic. Johnny, an ethnically East European trade union employee in his 20s, tells me:

> 'The best thing that I've thought about on this is the rise of Woodstock-ish, Burning Man style music festivals all across, especially the West Coast. You have these groups of, like, young people coming together so they can, like, "feel like a family" and they're together and they're sharing things and it's like beautiful and they love it. And the reason is, like, they wish that they could do that most of the time and so there's this deep sense of, like, loss of connection to others and community that they can, like, come together and have through taking psychoactive drugs [laughing] and smoking too much pot. But really what it is, like … and it almost harks back to … if you think about, like, primitive society and you would come together and you would have this big solstice festival and everyone would get together and you eat lots, you drink lots and you decide together what the great undertaking would be. And that's how we got the pyramids. Not built by slave labour … that's, like, a Western colonialist interpretation, like "how could you build something this big, you'd have to enslave all these people". And it's actually people coming together to decide their own fate as a society.'

Notice how Johnny begins by ridiculing festival-goers but then sympathizes with them. He reads their need to feel like a family with strangers into the human condition. He compares it with ancient solstice festivals, which he imagines as moments in which people were "coming together to decide their own fate as a society". And he asserts that it was through events like this that the pyramids were built. Modern festivals themselves are thus imperfect realizations of something humans truly need.

In a similar vein, Brigid sees booze-fuelled merriment as indicating the best of human intentions but as ultimately falling short. She recollects a time studying in London, when she felt sorry that her friends might never feel what she calls "a kind of enchanted belonging":

> 'I remember thinking at the time, amongst the few friends I was making, the sense of community came for us from going out drinking, singing drunk songs and dancing. That was us feeling solidarity and community. And I remember thinking "oh this is great but … it could be so much richer". And I was almost, like, sad that all these wonderful people of my generation didn't have … didn't that year in London at least … probably did back in their hometown … didn't have that outlet for a richer kind of relationship with something bigger than just our friendship circle … as friends singing being

> drunk, we would just … it wasn't for anything that was bigger than ourselves … it wasn't coming from a sense of trying to make the world a better place. And so, at the same time as that was happening, I got involved with London Citizens. And it made me more than ever, than I'd ever felt before think, "organizations are so important". And had my group of friends had an organization that could have taken all that great energy and brilliance of mind that they had to put towards a more … to put it out there, then it would have been great. But they didn't.'

Johnny and Brigid are hinting at a clear distinction between a sense of belonging rooted in entertainment alone, and which only feels magical with the aid of drugs and alcohol, and a more politically oriented belonging that oozes magic. Yet as anarchist theorists are at pains to stress, there is a fine line between these. Street parties and raves, for example, can serve as momentary microcosms of the utopia people are searching for; ways of awakening the imagination to the magic of the group and, with this, the possibility of alternatives (Graeber 2009, 392; Bey 2011). In this sense, even as they seek to resist liberal instrumentalism, Johnny and Brigid may be reproducing the idea discussed earlier that festivals are disorderly and must be replaced with more productive activities.

It has to be radically democratic

As could already be gleaned from Johnny's understanding of how the pyramids were built, it is the democratic nature of the coming together, in his mind, that produces that seemingly supernatural energy associated with the group. When I am asking him about what inspires him in his work, Johnny tells me:

> 'I'm deeply, deeply interested in the Kurdish autonomous project in Rojava and the work they're doing to … it's Western Kurdistan in the Northeast corner of Syria. It was originally an offshoot of the very early days of the Kurdistan Workers' Party that was avowedly Marxist and Communist and wanted a nation state for the Kurds. And in jail, their leader had a conversion over to anarchism and anarchist models. So, when ISIS came and started attacking these individuals, they started forming the people's protection units and the women's protection units to start to fight, you know, first it was just to liberate Syria – to stop ISIS from taking Rojava. And then when they stopped them, they started taking more territory and liberating places and they'd set up a workers' council and a women's council and it would bring suffrage and equal rights that were backed up by military forces. And you

> started to take a look at some of the links between that and Catalonia and the Spanish Civil War. It's deeply, deeply interesting because it's an autonomous project that's being led by those individuals in what is in maybe like, one of the areas of the world that has the least amount of democracy, the least amount of freedom, and they're directly fighting the Syrian state, the Turkish state, ISIS … not so much the Syrian state anymore but like … massively recruiting people to the cause because of the way they're approaching these ideals.'

I know by now that Johnny is not the kind of person to use words with magical, spiritual or religious connotations. When he tells me he is "deeply, deeply interested", this is as enchanted as his voice gets without mentioning his Yugoslav origins or football. By juxtaposing the anarchism of the Kurds against fascist, authoritarian and fundamentalist regimes, he is emphasizing the profundity of the power that democratic processes can exude (Graeber 2009, 43–6). Most of us can't imagine organizing with our neighbours to do something as simple as sourcing our own energy. Meanwhile, across the world, a self-organized group is not only resisting but withstanding the personification of absolute power. It is because of this possibility that seeking magical feelings at a festival seems second best.

One of the reasons that these moments are so magical for my friends is that they feel almost impossible to achieve. As I have been suggesting throughout this book, all politics is rooted in a faith, and though they are inspired by anarchism, my friends have not found faith in it – at least not a faith that translates into recognizably anarchist action. Trevor tells me that

> 'when I hit the UK and I was at Ruskin I started to think about anarchism and I had an attraction because – so I have a real interest in the Spanish Civil War – there was a strong anarchist movement in Spain, and still is to some extent. So, I love the idea of a kind of, not a stateless society but sort of the idea of errr … citizens doing the right thing not because of rules. To have a kind of educated, engaged, compassionate citizenship. I've always wondered [pause. His voice tremors] "is it possible?" Because every experience I have of being in a collective or a group of people, there's an enormous range of experiences. So sometimes I think, you know, I appreciate that anarchists have this belief and firmly believe it's possible, [but] I'm not sure it's achievable. And one of my favourite [books] – I think I probably read this when I was 13 or 14 – was *Utopia* and it actually had a very big impact on me because I was utopian in many ways. I was a utopian socialist. And I really did have this idea of "how do we build this – I didn't think of it as perfect but, you know – humane and virtuous or righteous society" and so … and then I started dabbling in

> … so I read like I think William Morris, I think *[News] from Nowhere*, sort of things like this. And then … and I guess I always felt cheated that there wasn't a movement towards trying to achieve that. And then that's the other thing I think that as I became a bit more active in actual electoral politics, I realized how really crappy it is. It's like, you know, the actual exercise of politics is very dehumanizing, it's very autocratic and brings out the worst in people. Even when you have your own team in power, they're always gonna disappoint you. So, I kind of like rejected electoral politics I think, at the same time and looked for something else. And that was one of the attractions of MVA. It has an ability to have an impact and it recognizes electoral politics but it's not *of* electoral politics.'

In this long monologue, Trevor is grappling with his sense of being squeezed between authenticity and efficacy, magic and purpose. On the one hand, he doesn't think an anarchist society based purely on people's goodwill is possible. On the other hand, he finds electoral politics dehumanizing. The beauty of the contract is that it safeguards us against abuse. But the magic of its absence is exactly the vulnerability; the need to have faith in our fellow humans.

One source of Trevor's problem may be that anarchism and liberalism are in one way antithetical. Anarchism is a faith in the potential of humans to self-organize without the use of violence (Graeber 2004, 4). Liberalism is rooted in the belief that without a state with a monopoly on violence, people will lie, cheat and enslave one another (Milbank [1991] 2013, 4, 14; see Chapter 2). We might therefore suggest that just as with romanticism to modernity (Blom Hansen 1997), anarchism is liberalism's idealized other. From a liberal perspective, anarchism seems like a beautiful dream, a beautiful respite from reality perhaps, but not a way of transforming reality. From an anarchist perspective, liberalism is authoritarianism in sheeps' clothing (Negri 1991, 139). Caught between these poles, Trevor was attracted to MVA. The aim of IAF organizations is ultimately not to undermine the state or the market but to build the strength of civil society to sit alongside these as an equal partner.

It has to be productive

One day Beth is in front of a group telling the story of how she ended up running MVA. "They brought me in to set up an IAF in Vancouver. They were angry and helpless that such a wealthy city could have so much homelessness and poverty. One of our biggest problems was patience. People wanted to act. Why not just have a rally outside the art gallery?" There are grins on the faces of core members. By this time, the art gallery is a

running joke of Beth's. As explained in Chapter 4, Vancouver is designed for individual interaction with nature and specifically not for collective resistance. Because the only public space that really accommodates protests is the square out the back of the art gallery, this is where various rallies begin and end. "What did the art gallery ever do to you?" Beth will often be heard asking. "Unfortunately, the people with power are not in the art gallery." In saying so, she is trying to send a clear message: generating so much euphoria without any pathway to impact is worse than pointless; it is a missed opportunity to be putting pressure on people in positions of power.

Like some anarchists (see Graeber 2009, 362), community organizers often see protests as pointless unless they have a clear target and a tangible outcome. Protests have a way of building what has variously been called collective effervescence; communitas or emotional energy. By virtue of their proximity to others, and their participation in shared dancing, singing and chanting, people begin to feel a sense of connectedness to those around them and become 'susceptible of acts and sentiments' of which they are 'incapable' when acting alone (Durkheim 1912, 212). It has been suggested that the strength of emotional energy can be increased when (1) bodily copresence, (2) mutual focus of attention, (3) barriers to outsiders, and (4) shared mood are increased (Draper 2014, 230). The feeling of chanting, marching and dancing in unison with hundreds of others 'provides the most immediate and powerful experience of sociality: it's that moment where society, normally an abstraction, is actually present to its members as an immediate concrete reality of which their body is a part' (Graeber 2009, 484).

The build-up of emotional energy has three social effects (Draper 2014, 230): (1) the energy is transferred from the group to a symbol or idea that becomes a container of that energy, capable of generating its own energy in the future; (2) it makes people feel that they are 'doing what is most important and most valuable' (Collins 2005, 39); and (3) it makes participants feel solidarity with one another.

I find this talk of emotional energy useful because it conjures an image of something that comes from the outside in, making people feel connected to something bigger than themselves (Asprem 2020, 30), and demonstrates how magical feelings might be artificially generated. It gives us a way of understanding how something as apolitical as a rave may have a political value after all because it awakens people to the possibility of group identity. What I find problematic, however, is that it disentangles the emotional response from the political consciousness of the individuals engaged. People are normally able to articulate why they are engaging in an activity. The why is crucial to what makes it powerful. The magical feelings derive from seeing that another world really might be possible.

Earlier, when distinguishing between festival-going and being part of a group with shared goals, Johnny and Brigid seemed to be suggesting

that one doesn't necessarily get much bang for one's emotional buck. You can feel emotional energy even when you are losing. You can feel it in a disco. Alternatively, the reason that Beth is against protests outside the art gallery is that people engaged in this kind of activism very quickly become disillusioned. For Beth, magical feeling is actually linked to political success, which requires planning. This would suggest, contra Turner (1977) that magical feelings do not decline but rather become richer when directed towards shared political ends. They are less like the kick of cocaine and more like the childish joy of taking pleasure in everyday events.

When Beth mocks art gallery actions, she is by no means suggesting that public drama is ineffective; it is one of the core tools in her arsenal. Beth has made clear at various times that we do sometimes experience inklings of the world as it should be.

> 'There are moments that mimic it. Such as the Reconciliation March. But the point of community organizing is to be always attending to the tension between the two. The opposite of this is something like BandAid, where people are just singing and imagining that they're in the world as it should be without really acting. The question for us is how do we experience the world as it is while keeping our heads aimed at the world as it should be?'

But what Beth wants to make clear is that we need to keep our eyes on utopia while focusing on being effective. Magic may open a crack in the wall of 'there is no alternative' but being able to see through to the other side isn't enough. As readers may already have intuited from my discussion of the 'world as it is/world as it should be' in Chapter 6, the art of the organizer is in learning to be comfortable with occupying a liminal space between the ideal and the real. I now want to return to this game to emphasize how, rather than merely resolving the tension between the ideal and the real, my friends learn to hold on to and make use of that tension. At one training event, the following exchange took place:

Beth: When we think of moving from the world as it is to the world as it should be, it's easy to get stuck on issues, to be negative and reactive. But it's important to be asking ourselves: what's the vision? What's the world we're trying to bring about? And then we ask, how do we get from here to there? Now,

	what happens if we're stuck in the world as it is?
Young, white female church leader:	We can become embittered, hopeless
Beth:	And if we're stuck in the world as it should be?
Older, Latino male trade unionist:	We're daydreamers
Beth:	Yes! And we can get bitter too because we wonder why people aren't behaving as they should. We need to go back and forth.

The IAF organizer's struggle is to suspend themself in an ongoing state of liminality between the world as it is and the world as it should be. The importance of occupying this uncertain space despite the pain of so doing is perfectly captured by the late Ed Chambers, the executive director of the IAF from 1972 to 2009:

> '[U]neasiness in the face of the disparity between the two worlds haunts us throughout our lives. It isn't a problem that can be fixed, or a temporary state of affairs that we can end by getting it right. … We can and do numb ourselves to the gap between the social reality we encounter and our best hopes and aspirations. When this numbness sets in, our humanity is diminished.'

Chambers' poetic words convey not only a faith, but with it a normative phenomenology: we must learn to live with this tension. If not, we are prone to either imposing unrealistic ideals on others regardless of the suffering that ensues or else to giving up altogether.

IAF organizers are by no means cynics. Like all activists, they feel a sense of pain when they see injustice. They thrive on events in which people have their dignity restored to them. But they are willing to settle for small wins at a time, all the while knowing that no single win serves as an end in itself. Rather than marching in the streets for affordable housing in general, they will target a developer and make them commit to including affordable homes in their plan. And if they are effective with one, they will do it with another. And once they have proved it can be done, they will pressure a politician to take a stand alongside them and turn their campaign into policy. This is when we can recognize a moment as magical: when it feels as if the force of our combined energy has made a small dent in the course of events. As Simon put it, referring to the 105 Kiefer project I introduced in Chapter 4:

> 'We've been working on the 105 Kiefer issue for quite some time. So, when I heard the local council rejected the re-zoning, that was a moment of "oh wow" for me. It's like "oh right, that was the right thing to do". Like so many people working behind the scenes towards this common goal and finally it gets achieved. It was like, everyone said the city council wouldn't listen to us. But because of the broad base we had in the community, they realized that either they had to listen, or they had to lose this huge number of voters. And so perhaps they just thought, "well finally we get to do something that's not too wrong"!'

It has to transform those involved

At the close of the last chapter, I was focusing on the power of a public drama to imbue those present with a sense of power and importance. Here, I want to focus on how these magical moments inspire new people to get involved and the old hands to keep pressing on. In every interview I had, I asked people to name the moments that make them cry. I did this to try to bypass virtue signalling and bring to the surface those moments that really hit them emotionally. Trevor tells the following story:

> 'We had an assembly. … And we had some testimony – you know the methodology that the IAF uses – and I was involved in the organizing. And it's a methodology, a technique and so … I don't think it's inauthentic, but it's meant to be … set up to have an impact. … [A]nd again I was very involved, co-chairing the event, and in a lot of ways I knew what was happening; there were no surprises, and I was part of some of the scripting and very occupied with the timing. But yet in the midst of it, and I knew what the gist of the testimony was, but it was a woman who, her issue – and we were highlighting this issue around that her pension that she'd earned as a worker was being counted against her disability benefits and so she was kind of double … the money that she earned that was rightfully hers was being clawed back because she was getting disability benefits. She wasn't verbal. She had – I think – Parkinson's. So, she's in a wheelchair; she couldn't verbalize, but she could … she had an interpreter with her who with certain sign language could interpret her voice. And she was with her mother as well. And her mother told some of her story. And her actual story wasn't a surprise to me. Cos I knew what she was going to be testifying about but just seeing her there with her mother and this interpreter. And the struggle she had in trying to get her story out, but also how … how validated she was … like she really, she goes up in front of a room of 800 people and was able to tell her truth and I think feel very, very supported by

> that larger group. That's a pretty amazing feeling. I'm sure that, you know, to feel the good wishes of 800 people.'

Trevor goes to a huge amount of work to emphasize not just how artificial the whole situation was, but his involvement in constructing the artifice. In part this is to demonstrate his deep ambivalence about contrived magic. But it is also a way of conveying just how remarkable the moment nonetheless is. The magical feelings generated are so intense that even one who knows the exact story being told, who has played a part in curating the setting in which it is told, is nonetheless taken aback by the power of the moment. Regardless of the moment's being fabricated, this woman is telling her truth. And she is validated through the "good wishes of 800 people". These good wishes seem to take on a magical quality, transforming her into a more confident version of herself. Every one of the 36 organizers I interviewed named a moment such as this.

There is a feeling among observers that the mere presence of people willing an individual on restores them to a state of pride and hope. It is here, then, that the magic of political participation can really be witnessed. "IAF provides an opportunity for people to be seen in public, which allows them to come and embody their fuller person," explains Brigid. It allows them to feel "whole," explains Fred.

Conclusion

The denunciation of magic has been a core component of liberal culture. The same philosophy that said political decisions must be logically or empirically justified rather than divinely ordained also, and as a result, placed global imaginaries in a hierarchy with Enlightenment rationality at the top and magic at the bottom. What this means is that the same people who, as a result of being dehumanized by religious institutions on account of their ethnicity, sexuality or gender – along with their allies, of which I consider myself one – find themselves rallying against the illegitimacy of 'irrational' arguments, are unintentionally contributing to the construction of an artifice whereby ostensibly magic in general is overcome, but in reality the individual-state-market holds a monopoly on magic. It has long been understood that states hold a monopoly on violence. Yet violence on its own is insufficient. States also require legitimacy. Even for liberal states, magic plays a crucial role here. Reclaiming magical feeling is thus a crucial element in resistance.

As we have seen, in liberal settings, the most obvious place to search for magic is amongst those seeking to reimbue people with the power to work together across differences. Yet reclaiming magic in places in which liberal ideas and practices are most dominant is no easy task. It often feels that

resisting the state and the market requires emulating their understandings of productivity. Thus my friends struggle to manoeuvre between actions that are authentically collective and magical and those that are immediately effective.

Before closing, I want to return to how magic feeds into myths and rituals. As might be clear already from my use of stories and my description of public actions in bringing magic to life, myths and rituals are the repositories that carry magic. As they turn to describe magical moments, my friends are already formulating them into myths. Elsa's story, for example, hinted at a group of people who as individuals had no power, but who together were able to stand up to the most powerful institutions in the modern world. Trevor began to tell the story of someone who was utterly marginalized but who gained a sense of power through a public drama. Evidence suggests that when people hear a story, they not only release oxytocin but react as if it's happening to them (Hess 2012; Zak 2015). In this way, through a good story, magic can be brought back to life in targeted settings.

As one of the key moments in which myths are told, rituals too play a crucial role in carrying magic forwards. What is more, as normative and subversive gestures, rituals bring a magic of their own. When we behave in unexpected ways that make people feel special, magical feelings are generated.

We have seen then how the three intertwining aspects of myth, ritual and magic can play their role in saving liberalism from itself. Yet taking these three as meaningful in themselves, even as a trio, is in my view to miss the part they play in a much larger story. What makes a moment magical, what makes a myth resonate and what makes a ritual meaningful is in part due to their role in inheriting, safeguarding and passing on elements of a grander narrative or tradition. It is to understanding this larger arc that we now turn.

8

Traditions at the End of History

Sal Paradise, the autobiographical character in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, sums up his journey with the legendary line '[m]y whole wretched life swam before my weary eyes, and I realised no matter what you do it's bound to be a waste of time in the end so you might as well go mad'. For Paradise, it is pointless trying to leave one's mark, since, in the end, all will be forgotten. Kerouac's musings have inspired young people across the Western and Western-influenced world for generations. Life is empty and meaningless so all we can do is seek meaningful experiences in the here and now.

The characters in this book beg to differ. For them it is this nihilist narrative itself that has reached the end of the road. They have found a different way. As Brian, a 60-something trade unionist of East European descent, put it:

> '[When I was younger] I was … very interested in the Beatniks: Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg. Because those people tried to live the American lifestyle but in a different way. And those people were experimenting with ergh … they called it mind-expansion. It wasn't all drugs. Many of them were Buddhists. … The Beatniks were trying to change the way they *felt*, hoping that'd bring about a change … I've read a lot of novelists and poets and what they do is they show you a different way to *perceive* things. And it changes your perception. I never found in them anything that would lead to action.
>
> Saul Alinsky, who's the founder of whatever the group that MVA comes out of … Alinsky was more practical than the Beatniks. … The reason I stick with MVA is, it's the closest thing. … They actually go to people, find out what they need and put it into a workable format.'

As with so many young adults in the Western-influenced world, many of my friends are inspired by the Beatniks. This is frontier country, and the memory of the Beatniks lingers as a possible alternative to modern life. Some of my friends have experimented with the same mind-altering drugs and philosophies as Kerouac himself. My friends are not merely 'squares'

or binary opposites to the beat generation. Yet despite being inspiring, the Beatniks fail to offer my friends a model for living well. My friends are morally complex, torn between individual acts of escape from a world that they struggle to identify with and collectively transforming that world. Brian's critique is echoed in that of Ron Dart, a theologian and avid hiker living just south of Vancouver, close to Kerouac's spiritual home in the North Cascade Mountains. According to Dart, the Beatniks 'used the same American notions of liberty and individualism in [their] anarchist and protest approach as did the power elites' (Dart 2016, 46). They reproduced a culture of individualist opting out that undermined the possibility of collective resistance. Unlike the Beatniks, my friends want to participate in something bigger than themselves, a project that precedes them and that will still be there when they are gone.

The grand arc of receiving from the past and passing on to the future provides a canopy in which my friends' present work sits. In this chapter I will argue that all of the activities that we have discussed thus far – how myths are formed and shared, the rituals through which they are told and listened to, and the moments of magic that form them – are best understood as aspects of this present tradition-making work. I will stress that in order for these elements to be meaningful, they need to find a place within an overarching narrative about where we have come from as a species, a nation or a movement, and how our generation will leave its mark in turn. There is an abiding desire for one's personal story to fit within a larger whole – to be inherited from past exemplars, reworked for present circumstances and passed on to future generations.

At first this assertion might seem strange. Because challenging exclusionary dogmas of the past is so central to the liberal project, it is popularly thought that liberals are irreverent towards tradition per se. This notion is in the definition of liberalism that university teachers across the world introduce to their students (O'Neil 2017, 36–8): modern societies have moved from traditional and charismatic to rational-legal forms of legitimacy. The same distinction is reified by anthropological works that cast traditional societies as 'intellectually and behaviourally conservative, bound by an unreflective and unquestioning adherence to traditional ways and submission to traditional authority, and slow to change, in contrast to 'modern society,' dynamic, impelled by the exercise of reason and rationally motivated innovation, and open to change' (Bauman 2001, 505; see also Graburn 2000, 7).

Now, as I have been arguing throughout the book, it is doubtful whether there really is any tradition-independent way of looking at the world. Reasoning always unfolds within a set of received parameters and, as Gödel's second incompleteness theorem states, even consistent mathematical systems cannot prove their own consistency (Raattkainen 2005). And so, what we call mathematical systems and scientific paradigms might equally be thought

of as traditions of what is counted as legitimate knowledge. For this reason, those that claim to have rid themselves of tradition are really just asserting that their tradition is the Truth – an offence of which fundamentalists and logical positivists might be considered equally guilty.

Yet notwithstanding that tradition independence is an illusion, one of the distinguishing features of the liberal tradition is that it *aims* to be free of tradition. This has both individual and institutional consequences. At the level of the individual, the liberal tradition treats as purest those insights that have been arrived at free from external influence. People steeped in the liberal tradition seek to cultivate in themselves, and in the next generation, an attitude of irreverence towards past wisdom and institutional containers of that wisdom. As I argued in Chapter 2, this alienates individuals from institutional sources of meaning and imposes on them a heavy burden of finding meaning for themselves. As they head off like Sal Paradise on the road to self-discovery without a guide, people find themselves confronted with the almost unassailable forces of state control, inequality and consumer desire. They swiftly learn that very few people actually get the chance to leave a mark, and they either spend their lives racing to be one of the few, or they decide, like Paradise, that they 'might as well go mad'.

In order to survive in the new market of infinite meanings, and in order to ensure that people belong regardless of their positionality, institutions shift the way that they frame themselves. Offering grand narratives about the human journey is increasingly regarded as inappropriately didactic and exclusionary. Instead, institutions become providers of services to abstract Individuals, whose loyalty cannot be taken for granted. So, as I detailed in Chapter 2, once fountains of moral knowledge, churches become sites of self-expression (McAlexander et al 2014); once the frontline in a class war, trade unions become little more than insurance companies; once offering broad visions of a common future, political parties tailor packages to meet consumer demands (Aberbach and Christensen 2005). As they interact with these arenas, people do not learn to engage in something beyond themselves but rather reify themselves as consumers within a marketplace of ideas. In these circumstances, it becomes ever harder to encourage people to connect across differences of religion, ethnicity, ideology, sexuality and class.

In this chapter I will claim that tradition is not merely a burden people carry but also a repository of moral reinforcement. Among those with the full freedoms bestowed upon them in Western societies, entering into a tradition can act as a liberating force because it makes them feel they are part of something bigger than themselves.

Now unfortunately it is not as simple as just stepping into a tradition. One of the appeals of escapism is that the task of entering into a tradition without creating new forms of exclusion can seem insurmountable. As I have

emphasized in Chapter 4 and elaborated throughout the book, Vancouver is, like many liberal cities, deeply divided along class and identity lines. Most of my friends identify on some level with groups whose history is characterized by liberation from the strictures of a bigoted, racist, patriarchal and heteronormative monocultural past: indigenous groups, LGBTQ+ groups and non-Christian groups more broadly. The question, then, is how to enter into a tradition when not only one's setting but one's own ideals seem to speak against it.

In diverse societies, which past we choose to work with is deeply contested. For this reason, I acknowledge the temptation to stand outside of tradition altogether in order to mediate between traditions fairly; that is, to seek what Spaemann (2005, 145) has called the 'divine standpoint' and Rawls (1999, section 20), the original position. But I suggest that not only is this not really possible, but that there is another way. People can be more magnanimous and multilingual than we think when they are empowered to be so.

Perhaps the key reason that so many liberally oriented people fear tradition, I will argue, is that they misunderstand it as something static and fixed that people receive from the past and seek to impose unaltered on the present. This misunderstanding is by no means the fault of liberals alone. Many purported authorities have and continue to claim the right to decide what is and is not 'true' tradition. Stories are compiled into a 'bible' and fixed. People use 'the past' and 'tradition' as ways of legitimizing their take on the world and denouncing others.

But first, tradition is anyway not only about the past but also about the future. Thinking in terms of tradition is to imagine oneself and one's generation as just one link within a chain extending *both* backwards into the past and forwards into the future. As people project themselves forwards, imagining themselves in the eyes of future generations, they are inspired to reach out across differences to collectively work towards political change.

And second, and this is my most important claim, as well as being an *object*, that is, something static or fixed that is received unaltered, like a bible, tradition is also a *process* of receiving, reworking and passing on (Graburn 2000, 6). Tradition is not only about the past and the future but also very much about the present in which people work out where they have come from and where they are heading. Others before me, and in particular scholars of Islam (Tarlo 2007; Mahmood 2011; Tayob 2017), have done important work in demonstrating that there is much room for reflection in ostensibly dogmatic traditions. I want to go a step further. Rather than it merely being the case that there is room for manoeuvre within a tradition, that we each have the freedom to rework a tradition for our own circumstances, I want to suggest that this reworking itself is a key part of tradition. It is this process that fundamentalists and liberals alike neglect. The result is to dig out great ditches between traditional and modern imaginaries that cannot be crossed.

Tradition as a liberating force

As my discussion of Janey in Chapter 7 suggested, for my friends, to act according to rational self-interest is to be enslaved by the logic of capital. Although entering into a tradition inevitably involves engaging, negotiating with and making compromises for others, it also offers the strength to say no to the logic of capital. This notion becomes much more obvious when we find people, such as my friends, who have at some time experienced an absence of this counterweight. Johnny, for example, feels that he has been robbed of the chance to engage in a rich tradition.

> 'Having been raised in the family I was raised in and hearing stories about Yugoslavia, and the high standard of living, the great pride in people taking part in a youth day, whatever the small achievements they made, whether in sports or arts or culture, there's always been a sense to me that an opportunity to live in a highly democratized, advanced social society was taken from me. So, I have a deep desire to live that life. And it's no use complaining about it or being sad about it or nostalgic about it. That's not gunna get you anywhere. You have to move forward to get there. It's not to say I get out of bed because I wanna recreate Yugoslavia [laughing] but I get really excited when I see the opportunity to recreate some of those successful, worker-controlled movements here.'

Although Johnny feels the past has been robbed from him, he at least feels embedded in a project that he has inherited, even if only in idea, and will try to pass on. This dual sense of loss and pride drives him forwards to enact his ideals in the present.

Others do not share Johnny's luxury and instead convey the power of tradition by talking of its absence in their lives. This sense of absence was most startling to me when I spoke with Trevor. He got to telling me one day of an argument he'd once had with a friend about Mother Theresa. His friend had been attacking Mother Theresa and, for some reason that he could not quite fathom, he had stood up for her.

> 'She was kind of saying how completely hypocritical Mother Theresa was and how unsaintly she was – all of which is true – but I was trying to get at: well, what motivates her to do what she did? And so again I was sort of touching on this faith. And maybe in a way I was thinking … I don't have that. I don't have a simple faith in something. And maybe I was a little bit envious of that. How that might be comforting. You know, an outlook or a worldview … I wonder what it would be like to have that: not always questioning.

> And I've returned to that theme again. What motivates me? If it isn't faith, which it's not, what is it? At times I thought it was ideology. I thought it was that, you know, I consider myself a socialist or maybe I'm an anarchist. I went through various phases of revolutionary socialism, democratic socialism – all that. And I don't know. … Certainly there are ideological tracts that I've been interested in and that I've found somewhat appealing, but it didn't quite resonate as well. Like I didn't think I was *really* motivated by ideology. So, I was curious when I heard you mention "solidarity" [earlier in the conversation] because in the end that's where I think I landed. My biggest motivator is a strong sense of solidarity with people and how powerful that can be. It works for me something like a religion might for other people. And I do find it very comforting. I'm a sucker for, you know, well … I don't know if you, well do you remember those stories about refugees in Syria and North Africa? And how they'd end up on the shores of a Greek Island. And impoverished Greek peasants would welcome them. And that was just such a beautiful thought.'

Trevor has deeply felt the absence of a kind of faith position in his life. He seems to think having such a position is somehow crucial to the strength he requires to keep fighting. And he has searched to fill that void with theoretical tracts. But none of them quite rang true. In the end, he doesn't feel motivated by a faith or by an ideology but by a word and the ways in which that word has been used and lived out in different contexts. Despite his education and the extensive reading I know him to do, solidarity is not encapsulated in a theoretical paradigm but in stories and memories of the good works of others.

Elsa too sees having a "belief system" as a vital tool for activists because it gives them the strength to withstand an approach to the world based on "market calculations".

> 'The thing I've always liked about religion, or morality, or spirituality is that it's not meant to be subject to market calculations. Or political calculations, really. I think there's this amazing power that comes from, say, communities that are standing in opposition to some kind of project – not on the grounds that it's not going to give us enough jobs or something but on the grounds that, they're like, "no – it doesn't fit with our belief system". It just comes from somewhere other than the market or political calculations.'

Yet notwithstanding this deeply held respect for belief , Elsa quite explicitly stresses (albeit with a giggle) that to even ask her what she believes 'flies in the face of postmodernism'. Instead of a belief system, she has found strength

in something more like a tradition. She tells me that "there's a literary way of looking at the world and it helps me profoundly". She stresses the value of

> 'constantly having conversations with people about what we're thinking about. Those kind of fun, ongoing literary conversations where you see something and you wanna like, bring it in, you read something, you bring it in, and this kind of sharing of information across ways, this kind of like dendritic thing that happens. For me that's like the best part of living in society. I'm like "oh I read this" and they're like "oh, I've been thinking about this" and I say "well I ran into her and I talked to her about it as well and this is what she said, and this is how she brought in her religious background" and then John was like "huh, because I was thinking about this thing that you told me before and …" so it's like this building up of ideas.'

It's as if my friends hold on to fragments of a tradition but feel as if they are missing some of the richness that a tradition can provide. Part of the problem, I will stress in the following sections, is that they are caught in a modern logic that distinguishes between a religion-like engagement with the world that is deeply powerful but also irrational, fixed and unobtainable, and their own postmodern identity that is rational, liquid (Bauman 2000) and ultimately incapable of withstanding the forces of individualism and capitalism.

Inheriting *which* past: cultural interweaving

One of the reasons for this binary way of thinking is that liberals tend to find the past problematic. They often see themselves as having broken free from antiquated ways and, for this reason, find it easier to refer to the future (Robinson et al 2015). When liberals do engage with the past, they tend to focus on deconstructing the myths under which people operate and demonstrating the suffering those myths have caused. This approach is seen as a means of including the marginalized and acknowledging their suffering. At the same time, however, simply critiquing the past can be problematic.

It has been argued, for example, that in modern societies, critical history has tended to replace tradition and memory, with the result that people have a knowledge of the past but no connection to it. This lost connection to the past creates an almost pathological nostalgia, whereby certain 'sites of memory' such as statues act as containers of a lost past while everywhere else moves forwards, devoid of historical meaning. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why the second decade of the new millennium has been witness simultaneously to deep and violent contestation around sites of memory in the form of Rhodes Must Fall, Black Lives Matter and the

conservative backlashes against these, *and* a kind of cultural amnesia whereby stories, events and objects formerly considered crucial to a nation's soul are no longer remembered (Bertman 2000; Hervieu-Léger 2006). As one part of the population rips down statues of historical figures and their enemies cry havoc, the rest of the world relies on Wikipedia to remind them of the history that is causing such a furore ("who exactly was that guy they're pulling down?").[1] Alongside critical history, positive memory work has to be done too.

Of course, plenty of liberals *do* have a past world towards which they're nostalgic. It's just that they're often so aware of its problems that they cannot speak about it with confidence. For liberals living in Western countries, any given past either comes with a lot of moral baggage or else comes from another place and thus does not feel authentically their own. Living amidst the return of nativism across the globe, one could be forgiven for thinking that it has always been the political right that conjures notions of a lost past, and the left that tries to bust them. But the left too has its images that the right likes to ridicule.

Perhaps one of the trendiest among these is the myth of the noble savage. Although it has been demonstrated that attributing this myth to Rousseau is unfounded (Ellingson 2001), it seems hard to deny that many of those on the left at present are enamoured of 'the indigenous peoples of the world' (Taylor 2018). Amidst the demise of socialism, the seeming impossibility of anarchism, and the severe moral baggage of Abrahamic faiths, indigenous groups are seen as somehow coming before, being outside of, standing against and showing an alternative to neoliberal capitalism.

This passion for indigenous ways of being is reinforced by anthropologists and artists whose mission, like my own, is often to find evidence of alternative visions and ways of living. One of the most influential among these is Karl Polanyi (2001, 47), who insists that pre-modern and non-Western societies are characterized by 'the absence of the motive of gain; the absence of the principle of labouring for remuneration; the absence of the principle of least effort; and, especially, the absence of any separate and distinct institution based on economic motives'. Romanticizing people in this way is not without negative consequences. Whenever we romanticize a group of people, we purify their image, filtering out any reprehensible traits. We assume the reprehensible aspects are extraneous and can be avoided. We assume that merely emulating their way of being will restore us to how a life ought to be lived, and how a society ought to behave. We imagine that we will be automatically freed of the moral and political rot that seem so deeply sunken into our own time and place. In other words, we risk not only failing to see the interconnectedness of those aspects we admire and despise in a given culture, but also failing to understand the complex ways in which culture and objective circumstances shape one another. The result

is a dichotomous understanding of the group being romanticized: they are good or evil; exemplary or backwards. Rather than resolving our present social ills, romanticization further reifies social divides between those who are simplistically for and against the ideal.

The myth of the noble indigenous person is particularly illuminating because indigenous people are still with us, even if any notion of there still being peoples untouched by Western-influenced lifestyles and products is long gone, and even if many indigenous groups have been forced to reinvent and borrow their traditions from elsewhere following cultural suppression. Because these cultures are still with us, we can see the ongoing impact of romanticization on relations between settlers and indigenous people. Still today in Vancouver, for example, visions of a pre-capitalist past are often projected onto Indigenous people. There is a dangerous assumption that Indigenous groups will hold the frontline against resource-extractive capitalism and consumerism and that when they fail to do so, they betray not only themselves, but also the hope that people have placed in them that another world is possible. There is still resentment among some settlers, for example, at the decision of the Tsawwassen nation to build a shopping mall on the fertile land that was restored to them by the BC government. Indigenous people are expected to hold an almost superhuman moral strength in the face of capitalism and, in so doing, to act as a beacon for others.

But it is not only in the living that this dichotomous logic comes to light. An equally common ideal of the past among the left, for example, is that of inheriting the *polis* of Ancient Greece. The *polis* is treated as a model of democratic participation in thinkers as varied as Rousseau and Arendt.

Other examples come from more recent history. It is common among those living in what might once have been described as the socially democratic world, for example, to invoke what Ken Loach called 'The Spirit of '45' (2013), that is, the spirit of collectivity that enabled nations to found welfare states. In Canada this theme is encapsulated in the story of Tommy Douglas. Having grown up in poverty, Douglas was offered free treatment for an infected leg that otherwise would have had to be amputated. The story goes that that moment was the spark for Douglas to fight for universal healthcare.

As we shall see, Ancient Greek and post-Second World War themes play strongly in community organizing, being used to conjure an image of a more active engagement among citizens. But others are quick to remind those that celebrate these cultures and moments that they are not what they seem. The Ancient Greeks, of course, kept slaves and barely considered that women might have something to contribute to politics, while it turns out Tommy Douglas supported eugenics. There is always something that taints the pure image.

This then is one of the key dilemmas for those who would wish to mobilize the past in their efforts to save liberalism: on the one hand, they

know that in order to carry people forwards into any kind of future, it is important to make change seem as if it is in continuity with what has come before (Lan 1985, 226–7; see also Zerubavel 1994; Schochet 2004, 300). On the other hand, any particular past is either exclusionary or in some other way problematic.

I often saw Jessica struggle with how to inherit the past and which past to inherit. As she put it to me once at a Christmas dinner party that my partner and I were hosting:

> 'I grew up in a very Christian household. So, Jesus was the "reason for the season". My family is super-evangelical, fundamentalist Christian. My parents aren't, but they were raised that way and it comes out at Christmas because they want to lock down that tradition. So recently I had a chat with my mum and suggested we might go to a church service that recognizes gay folks as legit. Because my brother is gay and so forcing him to go to a service where they don't recognize his humanity might be really horrible for him. But my mum was like: "don't you respect your elders?" But I do and I think a lot about how to translate legacy to the future, and what it means to inherit certain ideas and to fully embody those ideas as a living creature now and what it means to pass them forward. We think we have to choose what we inherit and so I've started trying to influence the process.'

The liberal left is aware of the power of the past. But they also recognize that the past is not given but rather is always constructed by those in the present, who are thus saddled with a duty to think carefully about the kind of past they are honouring: does it reproduce exclusions? Does it speak to their vision of a shared future? The struggle to latch an imagined future onto a collective past becomes infinitely more difficult in settings characterized by ideological, religious, sexual and ethnic diversity. Not only do people have objectively very different pasts but those with similar backgrounds have very different ideas about the same past. For the right, on the other hand, there is often only *the* past, and luckily for those not wanting to waste money on renewing school textbooks or replacing statues, it's the same version that has always been told.

As I have already said, the seeming incommensurability of different readings of the past makes it tempting to give up on tradition altogether, and this might partly contribute to understandings of why liberalism has become synonymous with the attempt at tradition-neutral understandings of who people are and what they owe to one another. We can see this temptation in ongoing debates regarding how to encourage reconciliation in post-conflict societies. Some suggest it might be easier to give up on the past altogether (McGrattan and Hopkins 2017, 489–90).

But the fact is that all societies, all movements, all organizations, even all families, whether they recognize it or not, are always already in a state of conflict and post-conflict in which memories are deeply contested. We cannot simply give up on the past. Rather, we need to focus on illustrating examples of good practice that are able to bring people together across differences.

Fortunately, one need not choose between exclusionary traditions and no tradition at all. MVA are lucky that organizers like Beth and Jessica are so aware of *both* the power of the past to mobilize people *and* the ways in which 'the' past is always in reality constructed by those in the present. When you choose the wrong past, you can leave many in the room feeling alienated. In the build-up to each training event, organizers will often discuss the efficacy of the different historical narratives they have employed. Here it's worth returning to the discussion of September 2017, in which Beth and Jessica are trying to help Sue:

Beth: So, we need to talk about how to do the history. What I haven't said before is that Steve is not particularly happy with what we've been doing because it doesn't involve aboriginal awareness. He really didn't like Janine's piece because it was too much about the church. He thinks that will cause problems given the residential schools history and accusations of cultural genocide.

Jessica: But the church part is about the power of institutions – it's not supposed to be a celebration of the church.

Beth: Exactly. Janine actually *used* to talk about Tocqueville, which didn't work because people didn't want to feel like they were doing an American thing. So, we said we needed something specifically Canadian. That is why she started talking about the church – which has a strong history of organizing in Canada: that's why we have healthcare. One way of bringing the two together is to say that today both the aboriginal and social institutional history is being destroyed by global capital. It's about taking the best from the past without washing over the worst.

Jessica: Yes. We have a troubled history but what are we going to do now? We are trying to strengthen those institutions that have had a problematic past.

Sue: Right, so we want to address that in the opening.

Jessica: When I first heard Deb's piece, as a Canadian, it was exactly what I'd been waiting for. I'd heard all the stories from the US. I wanted a real Canadian experience to reach to.

Beth: Actually, it was Steve himself who used to open with the *polis* of Ancient Greece – but then others stressed it started here about 10,000 years before that.

This vignette neatly encapsulates the many traditions and tensions that organizers have to consider. Their primary aim is to inspire a desire for engagement among their members. In this sense, they might simply draw on any story with the right structure, such as I have outlined in Chapter 5. Yet the past is highly emotionally charged and which past they choose has the power to engage or alienate their members. A past that neglects Indigenous culture reproduces colonial suppression. Yet the Indigenous past is not necessarily theirs to inherit. Focusing on the role of churches is equally alienating to both Indigenous and LGBTQ+ members. Yet churches were crucial to the history of social organizing in Canada and to leave them out seems to leave little story to tell. Jessica explicitly endorses, and all seem to assume, the intuitive plausibility of the nation as a crucial source of belonging. So, the national story has to stay. In addition, churches make up a large part of MVAs' membership. To leave church history out would alienate those members. When one understands the power of socially constructing the past and the myriad forms it may take, the burden of telling it well and in a way that will suit all parties seems impossible.

Beth and Jessica's solution is to weave the many elements together. At a training session on a Saturday morning in October 2017 a group of new recruits and old hands are sitting at their tables awaiting the opening session, when Trevor introduces two female Coast Salish elders who will begin proceedings with a ceremony to welcome those present. The younger of the two welcomes us and tells us, "All good people doing good work are welcome here." The older of the two starts in with a non-verbal chant. As she continues, the younger offers a prayer: "Thank you, Creator, for all people: the two legged, the four legged, the four sacred directions …" When the ceremony is over, Jessica gets up to tell MVA's history with the aid of a PowerPoint presentation: "Our style of organizing goes back to Ancient Greece: the foundations of our democracy. Aristotle had wanted us fully engaged as citizens: public participation in civic life." To explain this, she draws a distinction between the urbs and the *polis*. "The urbs," she says, "are primarily empty buildings, while the *polis* is the people." She shows two pictures side by side of a similar courtyard. One is empty, representing the urbs, the other is filled with a playground and garden and represents "what happens when people come together to change the narrative of their community". Then she puts up a map of Coast Salish territories. On top of this she digitally superimposes three rings: government, market, civil society. The circles are an even size, and they all interlink. "Is this the kind of balance

we have at the moment?" she asks. "No!" is the resounding answer. "So, who rules at the moment?" "The market!" someone shouts. "So, what's the result when the market dominates?" "There's a housing crisis," adds someone else.

Jessica is cautious. She explains that "there are plenty of examples of the darker side of civil society, such as when labour unions rioted in Chinatown in 1909, or with residential schools". The room is quiet. It is clear she has hit a point of tension. But she is the perfect person for this job: "Now the church was a great place for me: it's where I learnt leadership. But when we fail to work together, when we fail to be broad based, then certain groups become isolated, ignored or even oppressed."

It is then only on the second day of this training session that Janine, an ethnically European church member, gets up to introduce the role of the church. She explains that she wants to talk about "the role of institutions over time: the history, the core, the energy, the passion". She explains that although IAF started in the US, it didn't seem of much use to talk about the US. Janine cleverly conjures the notion that the history of the church must be told if MVA's practice is to be distinctly Canadian.

"So, what is the Canadian history?" She starts with a point that will unite everyone in the room: "How many people use healthcare?" she asks.

> 'When we're in the US, we have to pay. So where does this cheap access to healthcare come from? Well ultimately it comes from the CCF and Tommy Douglas, a pastor: like most of those who started the Co-operative Commonwealth Foundation in the depression era. People were starving. There was no safety net. So, what could they do? They *could* just pray. Didn't help. Or maybe a bit. Wheat-sellers started co-ops which controlled the price. Numerous people developed local support institutions.'

We were then asked to discuss in pairs the positive role that institutions had played in our lives. I spoke with Francois: for me, it was my school. For him, it was the legal aid he received when he arrived as a refugee. By turning the focus back to us and our own stories, the organizers are able to simultaneously alleviate any tension that might have built up during the didactic session *and* make us performatively identify as inheritors of the story they are telling. Those, like me as an unchurched Brit, that have sat through Janine's Canadian church history thinking "this isn't *my* history" now have the opportunity to tell their own much more personal history to an active listener. But we are not given a blank sheet to tell any history we like. We have to tell the story of an institution that has positively impacted us. And our understanding of what an institution is has been informed by, and is more meaningful in light of, the history we have just heard. What is more, without that history, we might not have arrived at this very personal

insight. We thus become beholden to the history we have heard. We are simultaneously telling ourselves into that history and reformulating it to make sense of our own story.

Jessica has to creatively weave different pasts together in order to suit her many varied interlocutors. Rather than standing outside of traditions and rationally arbitrating between them, as liberalism recommends, she stands between and among traditions and creatively weaves them together. I think of this as cultural interweaving (see also Stacey 2018a, 95). In order to seal together these interwoven threads, as Beth had recommended, Jessica emphasizes a common enemy that has undermined each of them: market forces. She then turns the focus to us as individuals, encouraging us to performatively identify with the story of the past she has told and thus making us into its inheritors. Following Beth and Jessica's logic, public life need not be tradition free, and the task of public intellectuals and activists need not be only pointing out which traditions are historically correct and which dangerous. In addition to this important work, their role could be to experiment with narratives that can bring people together across differences.

Some may think me an idealist. For Schochet, for example, it seems impossible to find 'integrating narratives' that can bring a diverse group of people together (Schochet 2004, 309). 'Tradition,' he argues, 'was never meant to serve the ends of cultural pluralism; traditions belong to cultures and are among the ways they maintain their distinct identities' (Schochet 2004, 299). Instead, drawing on Warnke, Schochet follows so many before him in suggesting a range of attitudes such as tolerance and confidence that can help people to better live alongside those from other traditions. As is so often the case, however, little thought is given to how these virtues can be cultivated and in particular how they can be cultivated *in the process of tradition making*. In my view, Schochet's defeatism stems partly from seeing tradition only as an object rather than as also being a process. As Beth and Jessica have shown, by carefully and creatively thinking through which stories to tell, and when and how stories are to be shared, it becomes possible to cultivate common identity in a room without ignoring or suppressing each group or individual's unique story. Drawing these threads together is a difficult art. Each past being conjured needs enough content to awaken people's collective memory. But it must also be vague enough to have wide appeal (McGrattan and Hopkins 2017, 492). Now one might contend that weaving together these vague threads does not wholly answer the problem of incommensurability because different traditions really do have deeply diverse stances on, for example, LGBTQ+ rights and abortion (Schochet 2004, 13). Yet the training sessions that I have been describing throughout this book host people with deeply divergent takes on these matters. This has been achieved by the procedural innovation of turning the gaze away from 'the greater truth' in the interests of the common good.

For Schochet, just as for Hobsbawm and Nora (see Phillips 2004, 7–10), *real* tradition is unconscious. Anything else is an invention. Hence it is so hard to simply build new, integrating traditions. But as Jessica's efforts show, the work of inheriting, refashioning and passing on tradition often requires intense ethical reflection. It does not become less authentic or less meaningful as a result. My friends are neither unconscious of the traditions they are drawing on nor outright inventing them. Moreover, to the extent that my friends *are* inventing traditions, this does not make them somehow inauthentic. This is because 'it is often the case that those who would persuade others are themselves the most persuaded of all' (Lincoln 2014, xv). My friends are seeking to frame a present practice that they regard as empowering in terms of a past that their listeners can understand and identify with. It's a bit like a doctor encouraging a male patient to use a cane by reminding him that it's what some of the most distinguished men in history have done. The story is serving a function but both teller and listener find it appealing. I will return to these points in the penultimate section when I critique the tendency to distinguish between traditional and modern societies.

Leaving a mark together: collective legacy making

My friends suggest that leaving a mark is just as important as inheriting a past. Jessica and I are walking through a wet forest after the rain one day in early December on one of 'the Islands' between the mainland and Vancouver Island, where we have been staying in her parents' log cabin. As we walk, I am feeling overwhelmed with the sounds of damp but crisp leaves scrunch-squelching beneath our feet; the sight of the winter sun's rays as they find their way through myriad pine trunks; and the feel of large droplets of rain belatedly released from leaves high above. Jessica explains to me the existential yearning that is answered in MVA. Its appeal, she says, is wrapped up in intense questions about belonging: "Will I make a change to this place; will I have an impact; will people notice when I'm not there; will I be remembered when I'm gone?"

These are fundamental questions about existence. They show that for Jessica, Descartes' revelation (see Chapter 2) is insufficient confirmation of being alive. It is not enough to perceive oneself as a thinking thing. We only know we exist when we see our impact in the social world: that we have left a mark; that we will be remembered and, if we're especially lucky, missed. Any existence that matters is not rationally confirmed to us but emotionally *felt*. It is a difference between an interior, propositional knowledge and exterior, relational knowledge.

The problem is that many people feel incapable of making a mark in this way. It is in this context, caught between his own interior narrative and a

world that he cannot control, that Sal Paradise decides "no matter what you do it's bound to be a waste of time in the end so you might as well go mad".

Alternatively, MVA, and many activist organizations and movements with it, answer these legacy questions by giving people the opportunity to identify with a group of people that can leave a mark together. In so doing, they provide a balance between the liberal ideal of self-actualization and the need to be embedded in a community. I want to call this collective legacy making. Seeking to reimbue what he perceived as an increasingly individualist civil society with a sense of solidarity, Hegel ([1821] 1991, 290–6) pushed for an enlightened self-interest such that individuals recognize that their own interests are best served by working towards the common interest. Milbank ([1991] 2013, 171) has criticized enlightened self-interest on the grounds that it ultimately refers back to the interests of the individual. As a result, people will free ride at any given opportunity (see Chapter 2). We saw this in the build-up to the 2008 financial crisis when rogue traders were willing to put even their own banks at risk in order to make some extra money. I wonder if this might be resolved when we think of collective legacy making.

Here, what is at stake is not one's self-preservation needs but one's desire to be remembered for having done something great. If one is aware of how difficult it is to leave something behind as an individual, as so many of us are who spend our lives trying and failing to improve ourselves in order to stand out, then the notion of being distinguished as part of a group or a generation may seem more appealing.

Taking this step requires an act of imagination. Already, when we are thinking of legacy, we are projecting ourselves forwards into an imagined future, looking back through the eyes of others upon our time on earth, and judging it as having contributed something. What changes with collective legacy is that we imagine those in the future as remembering not us, and not even our individual contribution to a collective, but only the work of the collective itself.

For this to be enough, to feel that one's legacy has been secured, one has to *really* identify with that collective. Free riding off of a group with which one really identifies and from which one will anyway not be distinguished seems counterintuitive. The quote with which I opened this chapter from Johnny seems to speak to this idea of collective legacy making. He continues, "People do want to build big things and leave a legacy and be a great generation because that's ultimately how society's gunna judge us."

We are not being judged by anybody in the present whose holding us in high esteem will, say, help us lure a sexual partner or get a job; we are being judged by an imagined future generation of people like us. I experience this pang often when, as a researcher, I ask myself: was I really there, contributing to that cause, or was I merely recording it? Can I truly say to myself *I* was there? *I* was part of that? By producing books with my name on them, I am

performatively realizing my personal legacy and, in a sense, unrealizing my collective identity. So, if I fail to become a distinguished academic and they succeed in their causes, the way round which, whatever my ego insists, I do ultimately hope for, then I will have lost out.

Now I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that all of those who engage in collectives are *really* in it for the self-interest. Instead, what I am saying is that for those for whom leaving a legacy is important, in a Wild West of a world that serves as home to 8 billion people, the collective may serve as the best means of achieving this. But in order for this to work, it becomes necessary to dissolve some of that ego into the collective. And so a struggle for identity ensues. For my friends, at least a little more than for me, it is the collective that is winning.

Tradition as both object and process

Thus far we have seen how my friends make their work meaningful by casting it as inherited from a distant past and as a means of being positively judged in the future. It is worth noting that even in themselves, these practices unpeel the layers surrounding the bounded individual. The self becomes socially constituted when people imagine themselves as inheriting their practice from people in the past and being judged by as-yet unborn people in the future. They take action in light of these imagined relations.

At this point the distinction I have been developing between tradition as an object and tradition as a process becomes crucial. Tradition can be thought of as referring to objects from the past, both material and immaterial, that are remembered, stored, safeguarded and handed down: objects like visions, stories, relics and practices. But tradition is also the process of selecting, sharing and embodying that past and handing it on slightly altered to future generations. In this section I want to focus on this process of tradition making. I will stress that all of the tools thus far discussed for embedding liberals within a community, that is, myths, rituals and magic, can only have full meaning when understood as processes for receiving, reworking and passing on a way of inhabiting the world. Because of this, I will stress that the process of becoming embedded in a tradition does not merely avoid excessively constraining my friends in their freedom but in fact is experienced as a liberating force that gives them the courage to act ethically. In so doing, I will contribute to the task of undoing the distinction between traditional and modern societies. As Rousseau saw, this distinction has long enabled unreflective Westerners to ignore the shortcomings of their own political culture by conjuring a false image of the primitive past they have supposedly left behind. In my case, however, rather than arguing that liberal societies, organizations and groups are less advanced than they think they are, I want to suggest that they are behind others in that they need to rediscover the power of tradition.

As I have already stressed, popular distinctions between traditional and modern societies were largely invented and continue to be reinforced by sociological and anthropological theorists. This distinction is reproduced in recent attempts to differentiate between repetitive and free actions. Whereas repetitive actions imply unconscious mimicking of 'the way things are done', free actions are those that have been intentionally entered into without coercion. While I recognize that those asserting these distinctions are primarily concerned with cultures where 'the rules are clear and the compulsion to follow them very strong' (Robbins 2007, 299), I nonetheless find it important to stress that the adoption of tradition into one's ethical imaginary is not inherently less free than making decisions based purely on 'rational' self-interest.

My discussion of ethics as a constellation of myths in Chapter 4 has already served to undo the traditional–modern dichotomy to some extent. I suggested that the process of adopting myths into our constellation had both unconscious and conscious elements involving emulation and invention. Here I want to go further and suggest that it is not only the process of selecting myths that has both conscious and unconscious elements, but also the process of enacting them. We don't need to choose between being traditional automata and freely choosing subjects because the process of emulation *is* a creative process. As soon as we ask, "what would so and so do in this situation?" or "how can that action be enacted here?" we are also asking, "how can *I* best channel that person or practice?" And this question has both objective and subjective elements. For this reason, some authors have started to talk of tradition as something lived (Tayob 2017, 20–6).

Myths, rituals and magic as both embedded in, and tools for making, traditions

As has already been hinted in the course of each chapter, myth, ritual and magic derive their meaning in large part from the fact that they are always already embedded in a chain of meaning. Meaning is like a matrushka doll, and stories, actions and events really only make sense because they are sat within successive layers of stories.

Let's return, for example, to the story of Sue, which had an obvious appeal to the organizers she was sat with as she told it. When her husband first left she felt destitute. But then, as her neighbours slowly rallied around her, she recovered her strength. Now she wants to build that strength in others. Many similar stories have been shared throughout the book. In order for these stories to make sense, we need to know that a patriarchal system enables men to use women to reproduce, take care of children, and offer comfort and reassurance, leaving no time to engage in public life, and then to walk away once their physical and emotional resilience have been used up.

It is only because we have all heard stories of female suffering so many times that Sue's story serves as such an inspiration. Traditions give us a shorthand, allowing us to easily read signals without the need for a long explanation. Similarly, I suggested that the rituals of listening outlined in Chapter 5 were only so radical because of the context in which they are enacted: like many Western cities, Vancouver is characterized by individualism and social isolation. It is only against this backdrop that authentically listening becomes so powerful. And likewise, events are only magical because they arise in the context of taken-for-granted patterns of behaviour. Suddenly, someone will do something, or something will happen, that forms a crack in the veneer and shows that another world is possible. They are radically different from the everyday world we have become used to, but there needs to be a world we have become used to in order for that difference to be experienced.

But myths, rituals and magic are not simply sat *within* traditions; they also *make* traditions. Every time we listen to or tell a story in a new context we are reproducing, reforming and passing on a tradition. As we valorize each new hero, we are building up what I called in Chapter 5 a constellation of myths.

At this point, it is worth recalling the care home story recounted towards the end of Chapter 5. I was told this same story by so many different activists within the organization. Each time the story is retold, its position in the constellation of myths is consolidated. Yet first of all, MVA does not send out messaging memos like a political party in campaign mode. That a myth takes its place in the constellation is not a top-down decision but emerges from the multifarious members. Each storyteller has had the same magical experience, either by being directly present or by having heard the story told well by someone else, such as with me. Secondly, as a myth's position is being consolidated, there is no orthodoxy to its telling. The story is always about collectively overcoming adversity. But the emphasis shifts depending on the storyteller. When Beth tells the story, it is about how important it is to intensely know the institutions in a given area and to know the sub-organizational connections between them; for Elsa, it is about the overwhelming emotions she experienced when she knew that change was happening at their hands.

The same is true for the rituals discussed in Chapter 6. More than with myths, relational meetings are taught and their intention is discussed. But as I know from my experiences with IAF organizations in both London and Vancouver, the approach varies. In London the emphasis is on having a core, personal story that must be told early in the meeting and in less than a minute. In Vancouver the approach is more fluid, and the emphasis is on finding a personal connection in whatever way works in the context.

Tradition is thus always a combination of receiving, reworking and handing on myths, rituals and magical feelings. It is the remembering and embodiment of people from the far and near past that we admire into our

stories and practices, and, in so doing, the passing on of their legacy, reworked for our own circumstances, to the beings and moments we encounter.

Tradition making as a public duty

For IAF organizers, it is not just that one has the right to remake one's tradition; we also have a duty to do so. Partly this is because, as the famous quip goes about governments in a democracy, we get the institutions we deserve. If we do not play a part in actively remaking institutions, then we allow them to be shaped by people whose views we despise. But it is also because when we think of civil society at large, every time we opt out of an institution just because a number of participants do not share our views, we are contributing to identity-based fragmentation. 'Divide and rule', the saying goes, but in these circumstances, we do not have to be divided before we are ruled because we have already divided ourselves.

To Beth, taking one's place in the making of a tradition is itself to resist the logic of capital. She chides me one day as we're sat together in a café. I tell her that I feel inspired by my Christian heritage but can't go to church. A 'secular Jew' herself, she asks me why not. I tell her that it's because I have never found an institution that speaks to my social and political stance. "That's kind of consumerist," she tells me.

> 'Think about it. You're at the age that you've been told you don't make anything – you go buy it. And you buy it as it is. So, what you're doing is exercising your right to choose. This one over that one – or choose not to buy it at all. But you don't have the right to say, well actually I want a different pair. … My first thought is, what's your relationship to an institution: is it, I go there just like I go into the supermarket, and I buy my groceries, and if the groceries I wanna buy aren't on the shelf, I'll be disappointed and leave? Or I go in and I think, well they're not exactly the groceries I want but maybe I can talk to the manager and ask him to order different groceries. And I think that there's a real difference in terms of the way people deal with institutions, in terms of saying, there's nothing here *for me*, or saying, there's so many possibilities here, I'm gunna see what I can change.'

Beth called me out on my values here, making me see, just as Janey had before me (see Chapter 7), the ways in which aspects of my own personality conformed to the logic of capital. Attributes I had regarded as demonstrating my authenticity and integrity were seen by her not only as self-interested, but also as reproducing the very social arrangements I criticized. I had been living my life in search of the perfect community. Indeed, that search had

brought me to Vancouver. But by walking out on every community that seemed imperfect and moving around the globe in search of the perfect combination, I was missing the point: no community is perfect. Indeed, the illusion that some perfect community exists out there, waiting for us, not only reproduces the notion that a community must be elective and identity based (see Chapters 2 and 4), but also undermines the possibility of creating community wherever we happen to be.

Conclusion

This chapter began by emphasizing the importance of embedding oneself in a tradition for leading a meaningful life. But it explained that liberals are presented with a dilemma: on the one hand, they recognize the power of tradition; but on the other, their very liberality, that is, their emphasis on inclusion regardless of background and on the importance of freely chosen action, seems to rule out embedding themselves in, or basing their actions on, the prescriptions of a single tradition. Yet this dilemma, I have argued, is based on an illusion: that tradition is a static object that is handed down unchanged. Alternatively, I have stressed that tradition is always both object and process. Each individual that lives out a tradition is engaged in a complex process of receiving and refining that tradition according to their own circumstances. I then turned to explain how myths, rituals and magic are always already situated within a tradition, while hearing, telling and enacting them is always also a process of remaking a tradition. Indeed, not only is it the case that we *can* remake traditions in our own image, but, for my friends at least, it is incumbent upon us to do so. By seeking to stand outside of tradition, liberals not only disempower themselves, not only leave traditions to be shaped by those they despise, but also contribute to a world in which Margaret Thatcher's vision becomes a reality: 'there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women' (1987).

9

The Truth Won't Save Us

The world is deeply polarized at present. Whatever issue one takes, from climate change, to migration, to inequality, it seems that people are increasingly unwilling to reach across the divide and understand the world from the other's perspective. A number of pundits tell us that these are the problems of a post-truth era (McIntyre 2018). People are not simply interpreting the facts differently but are dealing with 'alternative facts'.[1] If we could only get back to truth, we could begin to clean up the mess we are in.

Rather than truth versus untruth, I would suggest that we are living in a time characterized by the battle between two alternative understandings of truth: rational truth and confessional truth. Rational truth comes from logical arguments and scientific studies. Confessional truth comes from within. It's the truth of being 'true to yourself'. Whereas some might equate rational truth with liberalism and confessional truth with illiberal populism, in Chapter 2 I argued that both understandings of truth are central to liberal political culture. And I explained that far from resolving our problems, when stressed to the exclusion of all else, these ideas of truth may well end up further fanning flames of division, standing in the way of those trying to build coalitions big enough to make change happen. Let me briefly expand on the problems with each understanding of truth in turn.

Rational truth is of fundamental importance in demonstrating the source and extent of the problems we face. But apparently it can't convince us to act on those problems. Thirty years of hammering home the data about climate change and biodiversity loss has not facilitated change on the scale required (Latour 2017, 45–6). Even if scarcity seems sufficient to get work on renewables going, the notion of keeping fossil fuels in the ground remains intuitively implausible. Governments understand that climate change and inequality will lead to social breakdown but investing in closing the borders and policing protest seem like cheaper fixes. Meanwhile, as already stressed in Chapter 1, rationality failed to stop Trump, Brexit, Modi or Erdoğan. Contrary to what many might like to believe in a post-Trump era, the truth is unlikely to save us (but see Friedman 2020). And yet time and again,

every upsurge of purportedly irrational beliefs and behaviours invites the same response: double down on the facts, find new ways for them to reach people, denounce those unwilling to accept them. There is a famous quip that 'the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'. Rationality turns out to be the least rational of all.

The problem is that facts alone do not convince us to act (see also Benjamin 2016). I can show you that whales are dying, that rainforests are depleting, that people are suffering through no fault of their own, but none of this matters without feelings of love, compassion, solidarity and hope (see also Jasper 2018): love and compassion for those that are suffering; solidarity with those others without whose help we cannot act; and hope that together we can make a difference. Myths, rituals, magic and traditions are containers of these feelings. They bind our emotions to ideas, people and other beings, and they show us that another world is possible. The problem is that now, as people look around at the devastation that surrounds them, they are already generationally alienated from these spirited elements. As we saw with my non-religious friends' references to religion throughout the book, and particularly in Chapter 8, there is a yearning for a deeper grounding, but it's not immediately clear where that will come from.

One of the reasons we hold so strongly to rational truth is that it can feel that without it there is only confessional truth. We are indeed confronted with the problems of confessional truth today. Our institutions and the individuals that purport to speak for them become more and more rigid about the creeds to which we must confess in order to belong. This is as evident among Christians as it is among anti-religious LGBTQ+ groups.

The minute we hear complaints about 'political correctness', as liberally oriented people, our ears prick up. "Here comes a bigoted comment." Social media abounds with people lamenting "political correctness Nazis" and for the most part these comments come from those angry that they are no longer allowed to use the exclusionary discourses that they grew up with. The standard left response is to either sarcastically criticize such people or to calmly explain that political correctness is an invention of the right (Weigel 2016). Yet what often goes unnoticed is that the right is newly perturbed by a problem that has long dogged the left: the demand for confessional purity. One only need recall Monty Python's 'Judean People's Front' sketch to know that the left has a problem with compromise. Just as with Spanish Inquisitors,

> [m]odern Left militancy has historically been intrinsically obsessed with the word and the canonical text, its correct and sincere pronunciations and so on. … A wrong word, the lack of a particular word could cause a crisis, a split or exclusion from the cell or the party, or even worse (Hansen 2009, 15–16).

Meanwhile, this truth that rises from within, which is only diluted or corrupted by external influence, leads more and more people to doubt whether the institutions that surround them can really serve their needs. And then, once they have abandoned those institutions, the need for a truth of their own becomes all the more important. A positive feedback loop is created whereby no institution can speak to my unique truth, and the absence of any institutions to which I can belong means I must hold on to that truth ever more tightly. And this is not even to mention the economic factors that stand in the way of finding one's very own truth. It is by no means foolhardy to fear confessional truth. It cannot be disproved. But thankfully the assumption that only rational truth can rise above confessional truth is misplaced. There is another way.

I hope that in this book I have started to offer inklings of what this alternative would look like. Taken together, my discussions of myth, ritual, magic and tradition demonstrate the importance of spirited elements to even the most liberally oriented of people. In the following section, I try to bring these complexly entwining discussions together in a way that can be of use to those seeking to engage people in the rapid behavioural transformations required to respond to the world's myriad intersecting ills. I am thinking of those challenging exploitation; tackling climate change; mitigating political polarization; fighting for economic and social justice; protecting people from floods, famine and war; and working for reconciliation in the wake of these. As I do so, I constantly return to a theme pressed throughout the book: that a big part of saving liberalism from itself is revalorizing the notion of a pre-contractual 'we' of place. I then turn to explain the full implications of this suggestion. I propose that we might see mine as a third model of truth to stand alongside these others and supplement them: namely, compassionate truth; the truth one feels when they have earnestly given themselves over to another and, in so doing, honoured the spirit of political participation.

Saving liberalism from itself wherever you're at

In Chapter 3 I argued that too often those seeking to enthuse liberalism with emotionally anchored solidarity end up thinking of society from the top downwards. They devise a political system in advance, or else borrow one from their favourite philosophers, and subsequently make recommendations for imbuing these systems with emotional depth. Instead, this book has been about following liberally oriented people as they build solidarity in their communities, and in the process reflecting on the myths, rituals, magic and traditions that emerge in these contexts. In this section I want to try to share these lessons 'upwards' and 'outwards' to the level of national politics and global activism. I focus on offering a critical overview of what is already being done, and seek to offer advice to those who, like me, wish

to reimbue the liberal project with the spirit of political participation. My approach is by no means systematic or comprehensive, but nor is that the point. Instead, I am simply trying to familiarize readers with how my lens might be applied in their context, and, in so doing, encourage them to play around with these ideas for themselves.

Myth

Of all the elements I have discussed, myths are perhaps the easiest to recognize. We have seen how myths have been deployed to great effect by populists, and it is relatively easy to see that we each have myths of our own, even if it can be disquieting to think that we share epistemic traits with those we despise.

In Chapter 5 I argued that myths have four characteristics that separate them from just any old story: they answer our 'weighty why' questions like 'why are we here?' and 'why is this happening to me?'; they offer moral lessons; they involve improbable or profound acts or events; and they have agentive force over people.

Understood in this way, for climate activists, the story of Greta Thunberg is already a myth. Greta began her school strike for the climate sat alone on the street in front of the Swedish Parliament. The next year, she was joined by an estimated 4 million people around the world. Aided by books like *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Wohlleben 2016) and *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer 2015), and by documentaries like *My Octopus Teacher* (Erlich and Reed 2020) and *Planet Earth* (Fothergill and Linfield 2006) other-than-humans too are taking on a mythic status. For Black Lives Matter activists, Eric Garner became such a hero. Killed by a police officer who kept him in a chokehold as he pleaded "I can't breathe", this slogan became a symbol both for those fighting black oppression and for all those who have been dehumanized, maimed or killed by those who are supposed to protect us. For those concerned by the plight of migrants, the warm reception of refugees at train stations in Germany took on a mythic status, as was shown in Chapter 5.

While each of these stories has a power, however, it must be remembered that myths that will save liberalism from itself and end our fractured politics must emphasize the power of the collective. In some cases, finding this relational focus won't require finding new stories but shifting the emphasis. The Greta myth, for example, is often told, understandably, with an emphasis on Greta herself. But what made this woman so powerful was the trickling into a torrent of millions of individuals giving her the benefit of the doubt, sitting alongside her and following her lead. The Fridays for Future movement is both a refusal to accept business as usual and an act of faith in the power of the collective.

Still better are stories that valorize coming together across differences in a single place. The film *Pride*, which portrays the expression of solidarity between gay rights activists and striking miners in the UK in the 1980s, provides a powerful example. The film shows how these two groups with ostensibly very different understandings of maleness are nonetheless able to recognize that they need one another. Particularly in an age in which the left continues to fragment along identity lines, in the process playing into the hands of right-wing critics, it is important to recall these stories of solidarity.

Similar narratives are greatly needed at the level of national politics, where the left continues to split. *Team of Rivals* (Goodwin 2005), which depicts how Abraham Lincoln was able to build a broad left coalition that together won the Civil War and abolished slavery, is a rare but important example. If we are to save liberalism from itself, we need to start enacting a liberalism that puts solidarity before confessional purity and celebrates those who are able to do this.

Rituals

Involving rituals in enacting alternative visions is perhaps harder to grasp. For some the inauguration of the US President might spring to mind, but it is important not to hand a monopoly to these grand ceremonies that reify the nation state. Below the level of the state, plenty of people have explored the power of ritual to make individual lives meaningful without the need to address structural oppression (Kuile 2020), but less attention is paid to how rituals can be harnessed to sustain ethical behaviour and build collective identity. In Chapter 6 I suggested that rituals for radicals were performative, normative and subversive, and can be seen to take place on three levels: small acts, solidarity games and public dramas.

Anyone can begin right now with small acts in their neighbourhoods and places of work. All it takes is going against the grain of rationalization and cherishing face-to-face interactions with individual human beings, wherever they may lead. One way to practise is allowing yourself to get lost in a chat with a vulnerable neighbour, colleague, student or client that offers you no immediate or obvious benefit and isn't part of what you are contracted to do.

Such behaviours do not come easily. Although we may want to chat to the elderly neighbour next door or the homeless person on the corner, there is always something more pressing: we need to get to work, to feed the kids, to be on time for our friends, to squeeze in an episode of whatever before bed. And as our politicians and employers increasingly take advantage of us, there is a desire to work to avoid people and things that drag on our time and energy.

Ritual resists these pulls from the world as it is by performatively producing the world as it should be. Keeping that world in mind is key. When we act

within the world as it is, without imagining an alternative, we easily fall prey to a prisoner's dilemma mentality, in which we refuse to act kindly for fear that we will be cheated, outpaced or punished. This is problematic because, as social contagion theory suggests, cynicism begets cynicism (Tsvetkova and Macy 2015) and generosity begets generosity (Tsvetkova and Macy 2014). Ritualized action is about thinking beyond the everyday world and acting as an example of the world we wish to see. A good example of this comes from the movements for what is generally called 'prefigurative politics', whereby activists seek to embody the changes they wish to see in the world (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). For example, if one is seeking a world without hierarchy, then a prefigurative politics might operate according to egalitarian principles, with decisions based on consensus.

Prefigurative politics has been criticized on the grounds that it cannot be scaled up to the levels required to meet global challenges (Gordon 2018). In line with this critique, a number of activist organizations, trade unions and individuals act as if, in order to keep up with consumer capitalism, it is necessary to mimic its strategies. Consumer needs have to be gauged and products sold that match those needs. Members become clients who must be provided a service. In just a few decades the last bastions of an alternative, from trade unions to universities, have slowly succumbed to the service model. Political and activist campaigns too can be highly instrumental. Too often, any human interaction not contributing to the success of a campaign is treated as a waste of time (see Chapter 8). But what to do when consumerism and instrumentalism are themselves the issues being tackled? In such cases, if alternative ways of relating to one another cannot be prefigured in the institutions, movements and political parties promoting them, then the end being aimed at becomes riddled with contradiction.

The standard centrist refrain is 'don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good'. But it is important to note that every action we engage in performatively realizes *some* system. There is no choice between prefiguring and not prefiguring. Rather, the choice is over what kind of a world we wish to prefigure. This is why distinguishing between prefiguration and strategy seems so misguided. Making this distinction rests on the assumption that actions are inherently instrumental – nothing more than a means of achieving some end such as a better distribution of resources. But as I have been emphasizing throughout this book, political participation is in part its own end. It makes people feel as if they matter and embeds them in a network of shared action.

Even if considered from a purely ends-based point of view, prefiguration need not come at the expense of strategy. This is first of all because prefiguration is often anyway only an experiment in alternative ways of relating to people. As such, it *is* a strategy (Maeckelbergh 2011). But more fundamentally, ritualized interventions bring with them their own power.

In Chapter 6 I somewhat facetiously called this the 'the power of love'. Ritually enacting more caring behaviours, though seemingly taking up more time than transactional encounters, can in fact be a far more effective way of building alliances. But to be instrumentally effective, it has to be authentic.

Because ritual goes against the grain, emphasizing its integrity does not mean that we should instantly denounce failures. When the Occupy movement descended on institutions across the world, the right-wing press was quick to denounce young people who were seen to take coffee and food from global-brand caterers (Agyoung 2011). It is a cynical move of the right, who, let's be fair to them, prefigure the world they want to see quite well, to instantly ridicule those who are searching out another way, learning as they go but always, in the meantime, embedded in a capitalist culture. As ethically exhausted supermarket shoppers know, it is almost impossible to source sustenance entirely ethically without literally growing food yourself – an option increasingly unavailable to most of the world's population, who can barely afford a flat, let alone a house with a garden on fertile land.

Solidarity games too can easily be integrated into any movement. Some readers might have already recognized the parallels between solidarity games and team-building exercises. And indeed, there are a number of books and online articles claiming to harness the power of rituals for the workplace (Ozenc and Hagan 2019). It is often capitalist enterprises, that is, those focused on making money rather than safeguarding ethical purity, that are quickest to see the power of spirited elements. Another field in which rituals have received their due attention is peacebuilding (Schirch 2005). Perhaps because all other routes have so clearly failed, perhaps because tragedy and loss bring out certain instincts, rituals have been widely employed in creating a sense of common purpose in post-conflict situations. As was seen in my discussion of solidarity games, the beauty of rituals is that they do not ask people to find agreement, or even to work together, but only to perform sharedness.

I have, moreover, found that activist groups like Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter are very good at solidarity games. So much effort is put into 'checking in', hearing where each person present is 'at' emotionally, that it can often take an hour before the core business of the meeting is introduced. And during this discussion so much emphasis is placed on giving each individual their say that ensuring consensus is reached in the allotted time requires skilled facilitation. These groups intuitively recognize that making people feel like they belong and that they are listened to is at least as important as the cause itself.

Public dramas already play an important role in both electoral politics and large-scale campaigns. Politicians and activists alike understand the importance of getting press attention as they engage in a dramatic struggle (Graeber 2009, 501–4; Alexander 2017, 30–8). The problem is that in the battle for media attention, organizations will often put their best-trained and most charismatic

leaders forward without reflecting on the ways in which they could be developing new leaders and giving new people a moment in the limelight. The public dramas I discussed, on the other hand, were explicitly designed to empower people who have long been ignored. We might consider the difference similar to that between Hollywood blockbusters and community theatre. Rather than seeking only to look as professional as possible and to reach as wide an audience as possible, my friends use public dramas to give more people the opportunity to participate in the political process.

As people increasingly turn away from liberal politics, it is crucial that political parties relearn the spirit of political participation. In the period following the Second World War, technocratic politics has increasingly become the norm (Centeno 1993; Gould 2011; Pastorella 2016; Stacey 2018b; Godard 2020). From a social scientific perspective, this is with good reason. There may seem nothing more democratic in large-scale societies than scientifically gauging the needs of the populace and answering those needs through policy. But there is a problem that goes well beyond the fact that some needs (namely, those of floating voters living in contested constituencies) are always more important than others. When politics becomes something done *to* people rather than with them, they increasingly feel alienated from the process. It is in this context that the populist cry to 'take back control' goes so much deeper than the dog whistle politics that detractors put it down to. Community organizing methods help people to feel that they can take back control of their own lives by connecting with other disaffected people in their local area. This is not a choice between national politics and direct action. Party politics can easily, though not without huge effort, integrate community organizing methods into their organizing structures (Stacey 2018b). Moreover, *because* these strategies are so strategically effective, many centre-left parties across the world have done so. But too often community organizing is embraced for an election, only to be dropped when the party achieves power. The result is still deeper disillusionment.

Magic

Unlike Weber, for whom the iron cage of rationality is an unfortunate fact of modern life, what is left behind when the dreamworld of childhood fades away, I see the iron cage as the backdrop of modern life. This backdrop is just as reliant on irrational elements as any other. Busting through the bars of the iron cage does not require a leap from rationality to magic, but just a turning of the gaze away from the magic of commodities and towards the magic of political encounter.

As I explained in Chapter 7, there has already been much reflection on the ways in which people may become re-enchanted or reawakened to their enchantment with trees, rivers and animals. Far less attention is

given to enchantment with other people and political processes. This is problematic because it may reproduce the notion that for anyone living in a modern society without the luxury of having a view of mountains from their backyard, or at least a vegetable patch, the iron cage cannot be escaped. Alternatively, I have argued that although certain aspects of modern politics are dehumanizing, enchantment is immediately available to people when they find ways of acting together with others against the odds.

The majority of work regarding the magic of political encounter has tended to focus on esotericism and witchcraft. Although such work is highly valuable in showing us where, when and why magical thinking arises, it may serve to reproduce the idea that magic is something fringe that is only relevant to rational readers insofar as it threatens their power and influence. On the contrary, magically connotative language and emotional registers are widespread in political circles (Epstein 1993, 157–94; Graeber 2009, 220; Farmer 2015). It is quite common, for example, for people to see achieving consensus in a group of people they barely know as magical.

I have explained that for me, rather than a way of thinking, magic is a way of feeling. It is a feeling, first, that certain people, objects and processes have an inherent meaning to them that is independent of our assigning them value within a preconceived system; and second, that harnessing the power of these things may give us access to a world that we had thought impossible. To bring this way of feeling in the world to light, I focused on what I called substantive poetry and enchanted speech. I went on to explain that even when we take such a broad reading of magic, people living in modern, secular, liberal societies can find it hard to attune themselves to this way of feeling in the world. Activists often do operate out of a preconceived worldview and act with an endpoint in mind. Keeping focus on that endpoint can be important as it stops us from being lured in by products and activities that undermine our ethics. But for this reason, we can also close ourselves off to encounters that do not directly serve the end we are aiming at. Reopening ourselves to these moments of magic may serve as a crucial means of reviving the spirit of political participation.

Tradition

In Chapter 8 I emphasized how important it is for even the most individualistic and rationally oriented of people to imagine themselves as inheriting a legacy from the past, reworking it for their own time and, in turn, leaving something behind. And I explained that myths, rituals and magic are each threads within an overall canopy of meaning that tradition provides. But liberals struggle to simply step into a tradition. The past is often present to them, but normally as something they have escaped from. Any particular tradition that they may wish to step into ends up being riddled with exclusion.

In Chapter 8 I neglected to mention perhaps the most obvious exception to the liberal rejection of tradition: the long 1960s (Strain 2016). Although any single figure of the time may turn out to be tainted (so Martin Luther King jnr is now accused of sexual abuse, while Germaine Greer is seen as a 'Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist'), the 1960s still stands out as an era of change against which people in the present are to be judged (see, for example, Hayden 2010). It is remembered by those on the left as a time shot through with magic, in which people felt always on the brink of something (Varon et al 2008). And it is constantly revisited in Hollywood biopics like *Selma* and 'true fictions' like *The Trial of the Chicago* 7.[2]

The problem with getting stuck on the 1960s, in my view, is that for all their triumphs, movements of that time also gave birth to many of the issues that I outlined in Chapter 2 and have been trying to overcome in the course of the book. Although the 1960s saw inspiring civil rights, anti-war and anti-capitalist uprisings, it was also the beginning of the end of the 'old left' as it splintered according to positionality and conviction (see Chapter 2; see also Hansen 2009, 15–16). As with the Beatniks (see Chapter 8), so the 1960s more broadly seems not to offer a way out of our silos because it played a significant role in building them (Fraser 2000). A new critique of capitalism did emerge that focused on its being dehumanizing, hierarchical and obsessed with production for production's sake. But this was swiftly absorbed into capitalism, as work was redefined as a creative pursuit, entered into by equals with a common goal (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 201). Once again, we need to find stories from the past in which people managed to put aside stark confessional differences to work towards a common good.

Just as people need to reconnect with the past, I explained that they also need to think in terms of the future generations that will inherit their work. Helping people to think in terms of the future may lift them out of the notion that they should only be motivated by the rewards they receive within their lifetime. Most importantly, I stressed that both past and future are imagined in the present. Tradition is not only a static *object* – like a statue, a book or a talisman – that is received and handed on, but also a *process* of choosing what to receive, how to remould it and who should be involved in deciding. Tradition can thus be seen as a collaborative, constructive and creative process of finding stories from the past, reworking them for the present and passing them on to the future.

A pre-contractual 'we' of place and compassionate truth

In the foregoing sections, and throughout this book as a whole, I have been emphasizing that it is plausible to restore a spirit of political participation across manifold differences without creating new exclusions or fuelling new

divisions. Predominantly, this is because myths, rituals, magic and traditions need not be simply or uncritically inherited from the past but instead can and must be collectively constructed with each new generation and in each new setting. But crucially, participating in the process of construction requires that we are willing to engage with people who hold very different views to our own. Rather than starting with our own confessional truth and finding others that agree with us, and rather than, when no such others can be found in our own institutions or areas, moving town or country, or moving online, it requires that we root ourselves in a pre-contractual 'we' of place. In the following, I try to explain in more detail why this is, as well as what it entails.

In his *Down to Earth* (2018, 34), Bruno Latour explains that, confronted with multiple intersecting crises of climate change, mass migration and stark inequality, politicians and members of the public are developing ideas that are literally 'out of this world': this is not *despite* these issues but *because of them*. Politicians are wilfully neglecting the consequences of their actions as they continue womanizing, allowing for racial discrimination, cutting down rainforests, refusing to sign climate treaties, reducing taxes for unethical companies, and cutting social services. Meanwhile, we are all, or most of us, continuing to fly, continuing to purchase products that exploit the land and people, continuing to vote for parties that serve our own narrow interests. To combat this, Latour stresses, we need to get back 'down to earth' by taking stock of the multiple injustices in which we are implicated in the way that we live our lives.

Latour's analysis is profoundly important but his understanding of what it means to get down to earth is disappointing. He suggests that we awaken ourselves to the consequences of our actions, thinking through the many ways in which our everyday actions and our geohistorical location implicate us in the destruction of both the planet and other people's livelihoods. On its own, Latour's suggestion is nothing new. It is a daily reality to those of us who hover at supermarket shelves reading labels and making 'financial cost vs human cost' calculations, all the while aware of the customers impatiently waiting behind us. Latour's take on getting down to earth does little to resolve the splintering of people according to confession.

Alternatively, this book has suggested that meaningfully getting down to earth in the places we live means reckoning with the people who are our neighbours and learning how to work together with them towards a common good. In some sense, we are all living 'out of this world' when we start to turn away from the humans who are closest to us and think it is enough to believe the right things, vote for the right parties, support good charities and buy the right products.

A central element of each of the empirical chapters in this book has been about how people learn to honour the human being who is in front

of them. We might think of this as a third understanding of truth that we could call compassionate truth: it is the truth that comes when we stand close to something other than ourselves and recognize the world from their perspective.

Many readers will have experienced this truth with family or old friends. I often think of it in relation to my own and my partner's family. Many of my family members think, say and do things that do not fit with my idea of what is good and true. The same is true of me for them. And yet there is a bond with them that goes both below and above what is true. I recognize them as human beings, as in many ways better than I am, and whenever I begin to judge them, I cannot help but feel overpowered by the only truth that overrides all others – a truth that is softer, less assertive than either rational or confessional truth: the truth that we are all humans, as flawed in our actions as we are in our ability to know what is good and true. Their spirit becomes a mirror for me that makes me question myself. Sure, they are lacking according to my frame of what is good, but their frame encompasses ideas and ways of being that mine lacks and according to which I fall short. What I am talking about here is similar to what Beaman (2017, 14) has called 'deep equality'. It is a feeling that there is a bond between people that is deeper than, cannot be broken by, and in fact can push through differences in, ethics, identity and ideology. Compassionate truth also shares a strong affinity with Levinas' (1969, 252) anti-Cartesian idea that the face of the other, and particularly their eyes, is the source of ethical self-consciousness.

Another time we experience compassionate truth is when we watch well-made films and novels in which an unexpected character is made sympathetic: a murderer perhaps, or a corrupt police officer. By artfully offering the viewer an intense understanding of a character's life from the character's perspective, filmmakers can make us sympathize with those characters regardless of what they have done. We just need to be shown the human being behind the facts. As was seen in Chapter 5, social media too can provide an important source of stories and faces from elsewhere.

Via films, social media and the arts we can extend compassion beyond our families to our communities and across the world. We are all of us always already implicated in networks of reciprocal dependency: with our neighbours, whom we hope won't make too much noise while our young children are sleeping; with our countryfolk, whom we hope will pay their taxes, pick up their litter and behave honourably in public; and with those who own the land on which our coffee grows, whom we hope will care for the land, pay their workers well and charge us honestly. Various media can be employed to bring these relationships home to us.

We can also extend compassionate truth beyond the human world. Every being is a worlding thing that reduces the world to categories by which it can be known and made useful. To humans, flowers are for eating, smelling and

seducing, while bees are dangerous. For flowers, bees are part of lovemaking, while humans are often a threat to their livelihood, as well as to the soil on which they grow. Who are we to say that how *we* see the world is more important than how they do? Photographers, filmmakers and researchers alike have long recognized the power of encounter with animals' eyes (Taylor 2009, 24), and artists and activists are working on various myths, rituals and magical encounters that might elicit compassion for beings that do no bear eyes, such as bodies of water.

Saving liberalism from itself doesn't mean giving up on either rational or confessional truth. Instead, it means balancing these with compassionate truth. Myths, rituals, magic and traditions bring us in touch with compassionate truth. They draw us beyond our individual lives without making use of logic or science. Rather than quashing and debunking these spirited elements amongst our foes, we need to actively encourage them amongst our allies. The pressing question that remains is where to begin in making myths, rituals, magic and traditions that can bring people together across manifold differences and re-embed them in relationships with other humans and other-than-humans. Readers identifying with a major world religion may well laugh, or even lament, at the pitiful reach and power of the examples I have offered in this book. But the effort is in its infancy. Indeed, it is barely conscious yet.

Notes

Chapter 5

[1] In response to one of my public interventions, one reader asked, "Are you suggesting that we should return to a pre-Enlightenment belief system? Didn't that lead to the wars of religion such as the Thirty Years War, over whose mythical interpretation was 'right' and whose 'wrong'? What if one's myth includes ideas of a master race, or that one can go to paradise as a martyr?" (see comments to Stacey 2017b).

Chapter 8

[1] This reminds me of a funny story that my sister, then 13, told me when she came home from school one day. She had asked her friend whether her new boyfriend had got her anything for her birthday. Her friend looked at her somewhat sheepishly and said, "Yes, but it was kind of weird. He got me this necklace with some dude on a cross." "That's not some dude," my sister replied, "That's Jesus."

Chapter 9

[1] Although initially uttered without irony by then US President Donald Trump's senior advisor Kellyanne Conway, this idea has come to be seen as characteristic of contemporary political culture globally.

[2] A noteworthy exception is *Judas and the Black Messiah*, in which the intellectually astute and smooth-talking Black Panther leader Fred Hampton is depicted drawing together disaffected black people and working class, confederate flag-wielding white people to stand together against class oppression.

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Index

"This is an original contribution to the field – it shows the weakness of liberalism without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It is a very urgent book that offers the inspiration and hope that we so often lack these days."

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"At this critical moment in the history of liberal democracy, when we have become so polarized that it threatens our very system of government, what can we do to heal ourselves? To rekindle our commitments to each other and heal our fragmented society Stacey argues we need new myths that encourage collective political action."

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"In a bold empirical and conceptual move, Stacey explores the contours of lived liberalisms which are navigating the conflicts of individualism and rootedness with the help of rediscovered myths, rituals and re-enchantments. His claim that these form the basis of a new civic solidarity in an increasingly fragmented West deserves serious attention."

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Timothy Stacey *is Researcher in the Urban Future Studio at Utrecht University.*

In the wake of populism, Timothy Stacey's book critically reflects on what is missing from the liberal project with the aim of saving liberalism.

It explains that populists have harnessed myth, ritual, magic and tradition to advance their ambitions, and why opponents need to embrace rather than eschew them. Using examples of liberally oriented activists in Vancouver, it presents an accessible theorization of these quasi-religious concepts in secular life.

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