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Antoon Braeckman
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THE CLOSING OF THE CIVIC MIND: MARCEL GAUCHET ON THE 'SOCIETY OF INDIVIDUALS'

Antoon Braeckman

ABSTRACT According to Gauchet we are living in a 'society of individuals'. But a central term is missing from that formula, and not by any accident, for contemporary society has lost it from view: the term of the political. In sum, thus reads Gauchet's diagnosis, society today is haunted by a kind of individualism out of which no society can be conceived, as it obfuscates its political dimension. The aim of this article is to elaborate this diagnosis, and more specifically the idea that there is no society, and therefore no individual either, without the political. In order to do so, I will explore the meaning of the formula 'society of individuals'. Within the scope of this analysis, I shall primarily pay attention to the 'primacy of the political' in Gauchet. To conclude, I will assess Gauchet's diagnosis, by fathoming in what sense contemporary individualism, besides being an 'eclipse of the political', is also a threat to democracy.

KEYWORDS citizenship • democracy • individualism • modernity • representation

A 'society of individuals': that is the kind of society we are presently living in, according to Marcel Gauchet (2002: ix).¹ That there is something basically wrong with this particular kind of society is expressed by this very formula, for a 'society of individuals' is an oxymoron. It combines two perspectives that cannot be brought together: the perspective of a unity, i.e. the unity of society, and the perspective of a multiplicity, i.e. of many individuals. Taken in its strict sense, a 'society of individuals' is not a society and can never be one. But more importantly, a central term is also missing from that formula, a term without which there is no society, let alone any individuals.

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This term is not missing by accident, for contemporary society has lost it from view: the term of the political. In sum, according to Gauchet's diagnosis, society is at present haunted by a kind of individualism out of which no society can be conceived, and which systematically obfuscates its intrinsic political dimension.

The aim of this article is to elaborate this diagnosis, and more specifically the central tenet Gauchet advances: the idea that there is no society, and therefore no individual either, without the political.² In order to do so, I will explore the exact meaning of the formula 'society of individuals'. Within the scope of this analysis, I shall primarily pay attention to the relationship between the individual and the state, and to the 'primacy of the political' in Gauchet. To conclude, I will assess Gauchet's diagnosis, by fathoming in what sense contemporary individualism, besides being an 'eclipse of the political', is also a threat to democracy.

1. THE SOCIETY OF INDIVIDUALS: AN OXYMORON THAT NEEDS EXPLANATION

In order to clarify Gauchet's 'society of individuals' it is important to distinguish between (1) its sociological description, (2) its historical explanation, and (3) its political significance.³ I will start with its sociological description, albeit with a side-glance to its effects on the political, as this is the ultimate goal of my discussion.

On Today's Individualism and its Effects on Politics

Gauchet conceives of contemporary individualism, or today's 'wave of liberalization' as he would call it (Gauchet, 1998: 89), as the result of two processes: the development of the welfare state, and the loss of meaning of all 'forms of collective transcendence'.

Ever since the second half of the 1970s the development of the welfare state has separated the individual from its original social environment (Gauchet, 1998: 94). This has at the same time also disconnected individuals from one another. The system of social security, as it was paradigmatically developed in Western Europe, may serve here as an example. It has discharged the individual from taking care of its immediate family and of the community at large. As a result, the individual today stands largely on its own. Whether willingly or not, it has become autonomous, and therefore responsible for its own 'biography' (Beck, 1986: 216) more than ever before (Gauchet, 1998: 105). In this connection, Gauchet apparently endorses what has meanwhile become the classical individualization thesis presented by Ulrich Beck (see e.g. Beck, 1986).

At the same time, all forms of collective transcendence, such as the nation, the state, class, religion, and ideology, have lost their former sublime quality (Gauchet, 2002: 340). By these forms of collective transcendence

Gauchet understands 'all phenomena in which the group transcends the individual' and which the individual indeed formerly saw as belonging to some superior order. As such, these were experienced as guiding forms of authority, for which the individual had an enormous respect. The reasons for the downgrading of these forms of collective transcendence are multiple (Gauchet, 2002: 344–5). At a surface level, they are evidently incapable of controlling various kinds of new developments. The globalization of the economy is a good example. More and more, decisive economic processes escape the nation-state's reach, whereas the welfare state proves incapable of absorbing the shocks of a globalized economy. This failure of the democratic nation-state is abundantly obvious in the powerlessness of western states to do anything about the re-localization of important branches of their national economies to low-wage countries. This is one of the reasons why society's confidence to engage collectively in a shared future is fading. It is a phenomenon that becomes apparent in the evaporation of former ideologies' mobilizing power.

However, reference should also be made to the disappearance of familiar watersheds between social groups; this too results from the above-mentioned individualization process. Due to this evolution, numerous societal points of reference have vanished, such as estate or class distinctions. On a deeper level, though, in Gauchet's view the downgrading of forms of collective transcendence above all has to do with the end of the conflict between church and state. Until the mid-1970s, the state had been struggling with the church for control over society – a conflict, moreover, that extends as far back as the beginnings of the modern era. In the course of this history, the state, step by step, has conquered the church's power. The triumph of the state over the church gave the state its dignity and authority (Gauchet, 1998: 62–3). But now that this dispute has been settled, i.e. since religion, or its secular version, ideology (R. Aron), is no longer regarded as a plausible alternative for the state, the state has lost, together with its opponent, the dignity it had once achieved for itself due to that conflict.⁴ If we were called upon to give one name to these various strands of downgrading the forms of collective transcendence, the notion of 'disenchantment of the political' would be appropriate. For they all come down to the disappearance of the dignity and respect for that dimension within society that transcends the individual and by which our sheer togetherness is transformed into a shared community.

According to Gauchet, this downgrading of the dimension of transcendence in society is an important breeding ground for contemporary individualism (Gauchet, 1998: 108), for it is this 'disenchantment of the political' that leads to a profound transformation of the relation between the state and the individual. Due to the 'disenchantment of the political', the individual overtly comes to the fore. Today this is symptomatically illustrated by overall concerns for 'individual rights' (Gauchet, 1998: 111). In its relation to the state, the individual sees itself primarily as a bearer of rights. These rights

do not concern primarily its civil rights, but the rights of which the individual considers itself to be the legitimate bearer *as* an individual, as a person, i.e. as a human being – hence the outspoken concern at present for ‘human rights’. These are rights that the individual regards intuitively as its basic rights, whether or not they are formally recognized as civil rights.

Here Gauchet espies a serious shift with respect to the former, classical idea of citizenship. According to that earlier notion, every citizen was supposed to appropriate the commonly held general perspective along with its own particular perspective. Today, every individual seeks to have its own private interests asserted by the state, whose perspective no one is any longer prepared to share (Gauchet, 1998: 115). Concern for the general interest is thereby left to professional politicians. Moreover, all private interests are perceived as legitimate, regardless of whether and how they might contribute to the general interest (Gauchet, 1998: 116). These private interests are considered almost as inviolable as basic rights like ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ and it is asserted that therefore they should also be recognized! From this perspective we are actually living in a *political* market society (Gauchet, 1998: 117). The general interest is conceived to be the result of free competition between particular interests. Contrary to its former role, the government is no longer capable of directing matters from interests superior to particular interests toward what it takes to be the interests of society as such. Today one works from the assumption that the market of particular interests contains the answer to the political question of which goals should be set for a society. This market model, according to Gauchet, changes the individual profoundly. In contrast to the bygone citizen who was supposed to dissociate from its own particular interests in favour of the general interest, we are now confronted with an individual that is exclusively directed towards its own interests. Moreover, it identifies these very interests with its rights as an individual. Its interests have become its rights, and its rights have become its interests. Both merge into an almost undifferentiated unity.

Fading concern for the public interest, the coming to the fore of the individual and its individual rights and the joined privatization of the political realm together eventually transform the individual’s self-understanding and the way in which she presents herself within society. Characteristic of this modified position of the individual is that ‘convictions tend to be transformed into identities’ (Gauchet, 1998: 121). How we conceive of ‘our identity’ today, Gauchet argues, is the exact opposite of how we understood it yesterday. To become oneself, to become a person, used to be realized by dissociating from one’s own particularity. My real self was what I found once I swept away the ties that particularize me. Today, on the contrary, the individual wants emphatically to coincide with its ‘particular’ self: it identifies with its singularity. This identification between the individual and its singularity is at play at different levels. Subjectively, the ‘real self’ is the result of the subjective appropriation of one’s social singularity. I coincide with my

faith, with my origins, my being Jewish or Flemish, black, gay or whatever. Socially, we achieve contact with others on the basis of this singularity. This is the basis on which to start a dialogue. Politically, such singularity also eventually forms the basis for obtaining a position within the public realm. In this sense, the public realm today coincides with those private singularities having become public. The public realm by the same token no longer has any substantiality of its own that would refer to general goals that would transcend the market of singular individuals and their private interests (Gauchet, 1998: 124).

This situation has an important effect on the formerly existent pluralism within society. Such pluralism consisted of the acknowledgement of different convictions and ideologies in society, while at the same time containing an element of universality. Each particular conviction claimed universal validity. However, as soon as convictions transform into identities, the claim of universal validity must be dropped, since one can claim universal validity for convictions, but not for identities. One even stops, then, substantiating one's convictions, for one need not persuade another as to one's identity (as one cannot argue about identities); identities only want to be recognized (Gauchet, 1998: 132).

All of this fundamentally changes the relationship between the private and the public sphere. Due to the developments discussed above, the private sphere carries a heavy weight within politics, by speaking a language which is emphatically non-political, and instead religious, ethical, economic, social, etc. Here the private sphere takes the lead. It formulates the values and the goals of society which, although society as such is no longer capable of enacting them, it is still expected to endorse through politics. In this sense, politics today is confronted with goals it is supposed to pursue and with values it is expected to endorse. There is, though, also a reverse side. Acknowledgement of those goals and values forwarded by the private sphere enables politics also to dissociate itself somehow from these private convictions, for the public realm is the scene where all these singularities seek recognition and in which politics has the task to ensure their mutual co-existence. For this very reason politics can never coincide with these same particularities. It must distinguish itself and remain differentiated from them (Gauchet, 1998: 137–9). This does not alter the fact, though, that today the distinction between the public and private spheres is comparable to the distinction between the looking-glass and what it mirrors. With respect to content, there is no distinction at all since, as was indicated above, the state or the public sphere no longer has a normative substance of its own. There is only a distinction with regard to the forum. The public sphere mirrors private singularities and thus constitutes the forum upon which these private singularities become publicly acknowledged and visible to themselves. In this way the state today has become purely representative: it is a mirror, a pure reflection of civil society (Gauchet, 1998: 155–6).

Yet this sociological characterization says little about the historical pre-conditions of contemporary individualism. How could such individualism ever come into being? Put differently: how is present-day individualism interwoven with modern democracy?

On the Historical Roots of Individualism: The Three Pillars of Modern Politics

According to Gauchet, the coming about of democracy is the result of three so-called 'vectors of autonomy' that come into being, one after the other, between the 16th and 19th century. He talks about vectors of autonomy as they contrast with the heteronomy of former religious society, for Gauchet reads western political history as a process of 'leaving religion': the gradual emancipation from the view that society ultimately derives its order from a divine will – and therefore has a heteronomous origin – and its replacement with the understanding that society's order is and should be the result of human effort.

Gauchet discerns a political, a legal and a social-historical vector of autonomy (2002: 336–8).⁵ By the political vector of autonomy he refers to the coming about of the modern, sovereign nation-state between 1500 and 1650. For the first time in history, political society has freed itself from the given divine, cosmic order and sovereignly constitutes itself as a nation-state. Characteristic of this development is Thomas Hobbes' political theory, in which religion is explicitly subordinated to the state and in which, therefore, the monarch for the first time acquires sovereignty in an absolute sense. By the legal vector, Gauchet refers to the legal system as the basis of legitimacy for the modern nation-state, for the modern state has its foundation within itself. According to social contract theories, it results from the will of the individuals concerned. These individuals are by nature bearers of rights: they own subjective rights by nature. Subjective right as a vector of autonomy takes definitive shape during the 17th and 18th centuries. It is at the origin of today's 'human rights' (Gauchet, 2002: 339, 347 *et passim*).⁶ By the social-historical vector of autonomy, finally, Gauchet refers to society's self-understanding as a social dynamic that constitutes and designs itself through historical development. By the same token, the constitution of society presents itself as an historical process borne out by that very same society. This third vector is put into effect from the 1750s onwards, but culminates throughout the 19th century. In Gauchet's view, modern history is the process of the unfolding of each of these vectors as successive implementations of autonomy.

These vectors enter into their first productive synthesis between 1880 and 1914 (Gauchet, 2002: 338–9). This synthesis comprises the simultaneous consolidation of the nation-state as society's device for democratic self-government (cf. the political vector of autonomy), on the one hand, and of civil society on the other. During that period, civil society for the first time becomes organized and therefore presents itself as the actual driving force

of societal development (cf. the social-historical vector of autonomy). Typical of this evolution is the coming about of political parties, trade unions, public corporations and so forth, and the social dynamics that unfold with these new institutions (Gauchet, 1998: 57). This entire evolution finally leads to the first successful combination of liberalism, as the free organization of civil society, and democracy as the democratic organization of the nation-state – a configuration that has ever since dominated our political regimes.⁷ In that very configuration the individual as a bearer of subjective rights (cf. the legal vector of autonomy) is neither absent nor dominant. The individual is present in the system of universal suffrage and as private actor in civil society. But as such the individual is not of central concern. During this epoch the accent is on the collective dimension of human emancipation and autonomy. Again Gauchet refers to the rise of the traditional social movements, the organization of democracy through the party system, and the organization of the economy through the creation of public corporations, and so forth. In other words, during that pre-eminently liberal period, modern society is focused on organization, association, and on the combination of forces, far more than on its concern for the individual. Thus the first century of liberal democracy (1880–1980) is above all concerned with fine-tuning its liberal-democratic format as this was first realized during ‘la Belle Epoque’ (until 1914).⁸ Later, the liberal-democratic formula would culminate between 1945 and 1975 in the establishment of the social or welfare state (*l’Etat providence*) (Gauchet, 2002: 339).

Against this historical background there is a considerable increase of individualism by the 1980s, and this tends to undermine the collective frameworks of the former era. We have already discussed the major causes of such individualism. The most prominent of these causes, of course, is the individualization process that develops in the slipstream of the establishment of the welfare state. Yet these evolutions can now be understood as further steps in the process of autonomy of the individual – an autonomy that reveals itself in the increasing emancipation, and eventually in the outright supremacy, of the individualized civil society over the state (Gauchet, 2005a: 23–4, 517). The ‘disenchantment of the political’ that goes along with it can now be considered as the retreat of the political and socio-historical vector of autonomy, in favour of the legal vector now coming to the fore – i.e. the vector of the individual as a bearer of individual rights and liberties (Gauchet, 2005a: 40). The state is thereby reduced to a mere instrument to benefit the needs and interests of its citizens. As a result, a new kind of individual comes into being: an individual that on the one hand is part and parcel of society and is to a large extent dependent upon it, but who on the other hand is completely detached from society. It is an individual that is detached-within-society (*détaché-en-société*) (p. 343)⁹ but which at the same time regards itself, as a bearer of subjective rights, to be the beginning and the end of society (Gauchet, 2005a: 521).

Contemporary individualism, in other words, is basically founded on subjective law, as one of the pillars of modern democracy. Hence, whenever Gauchet talks about individualism, he refers in the first place to this 'individualism of rights', in which the individual regards itself primarily as the bearer of subjective rights and from this position makes its way into the public forum in order to claim recognition for these rights.

On the Political Meaning of Contemporary Individualism

In the foregoing it was shown that, viewed from a historical perspective, contemporary individualism results from inflating one of the pillars of modern democracy, namely the legal pillar, at the expense of the political and the socio-historical, which have today almost disappeared from sight. The legal system, and therefore with it the individual bearer of rights, is considered to be the one and only foundation of democratic society. In order to constitute democratic society, so the argument goes, nothing is needed but the recognition of the individual and its subjective rights. At grassroots level this means primarily that classical citizenship fades away. The individual is no longer concerned with the general interest, and is thus no longer prepared to consider its own private interest from the perspective of the general interest – let alone subordinate it, if need be, to that of the collective whole. Secondly, this evolution also gives rise to the transformation of convictions into identities. As a result, the public realm stops being a domain of discussion. It functions merely as the stage upon which the individual proceeds in order to receive recognition for its singularity and for the subjective rights the individual associates with itself.

Solely from the historical understanding of modern democracy, which is founded on three and not on one single pillar, Gauchet regards that evolution as problematic through and through. Focusing unilaterally on one of these pillars means that the others risk erosion and, possibly in the long run, collapse (Gauchet, 2002: 374–5). The spectacle of democracy today, therefore, offers the image of a 'performative contradiction'. It is a democracy that in its democratic practice turns against itself and therefore becomes a threat to itself (Gauchet, 2002: 379).¹⁰ The disavowal of the significance of the political is a particularly major obstacle for Gauchet. This is so for two main reasons. Primarily and from a general historical perspective, it conceals that the individual is the product par excellence of the modern state. Secondly and more profoundly, it suggests that society is conceivable without referring to the political, which in Gauchet's view is absolutely out of the question. The latter claim is of course the more far reaching, and points immediately to the foundations of Gauchet's political philosophy. I will start elucidating the first reason.

First, Gauchet states that the modern individual is co-original with the coming about of modern sovereignty. Modern sovereignty is installed as soon as – and this is a Hobbesian scheme of thought – the state raises itself above

religious power, declares itself as the one and only sovereign, and no longer legitimizes itself by referring to a superior, divine order, but by referring to the social contract between its citizens. At this very moment, the social contract establishes an immediate relationship between the sovereign – the authority of the state – and its individual subjects, irrespective of their social position. This means that, in a political respect, all individuals are equal with regard to the sovereign: they are all *subjects*. It is precisely this structure that enables these subjects to consider themselves as independent, as dissociated from their traditional familial, local and/or religious bonds. This is the point of birth of the modern individual: the idea of modern man as an independent social entity that can engage freely in a plurality of associations (Gauchet, 2002: 18–19).

This connection between the development of the modern state and the origin of the modern individual, moreover, is not only an historical issue. Even today it can be observed on a daily basis. It is currently still the case that an increase in the rights and liberties of the individual goes hand in hand with an increase in the power of the modern state (Gauchet, 2005a: 370), for an increase of the individual's liberty presupposes a more elaborated legal system that makes that freedom possible in the first place (Gauchet, 2002: 184). A typical example of this paradox is the welfare state. Here (e.g. by state regulated health insurance, pension systems, basic education, and so on) the rights and liberties of the individual have increased enormously in comparison to bygone days, but this was only possible by a corresponding increase of state power in order to enable these social services.

In this sense and in contrast to the liberal view, the modern individual is not something originally given. It is an historical construction: a product of a specific organization of power and thus an effect of the political. This is one reason at least why Gauchet questions contemporary individualism. It presents itself as the original, autarkic basis of society, while at the same time obliterating its major condition of possibility: the democratic state that actually acknowledges the individual and its rights and liberties, and which has the power to enforce these rights if necessary. Yet the idea of the individual as an effect of the political is but an illustration of the more far-reaching claim that society as such cannot be conceived without the political.

In order to clarify the second position I need to take a detour through Gauchet's philosophy of history, in which the structure of religion offers – by negation – the key to his concept of the political.¹¹ Following the late French anthropologist Pierre Clastres, Gauchet conceives of the structure of primitive religion as a 'neutralization' of the political (Gauchet, 2005a: 12, 70).¹² That structure reads as follows. On the one hand, there is primitive society, which sees itself as an unbroken unity, due to its dependence on a founding, anterior otherness: the ancestors' founding of society. On the other hand, there is this same founding, anterior otherness which is the irrecoverable origin of society that has imposed upon society its changeless structure

and order. Typical of that original religious societal structure, therefore, is that, because it depends on such constitutive otherness, society sees itself as an unbroken unity (Gauchet, 2003b: 332).¹³

In Gauchet's view, this structure indicates that the perspective from which society conceives of itself, gives itself meaning, gives itself shape – structure, consistency and so forth – lies *outside* society (Gauchet, 2005a: 64, 66).¹⁴ This is clear in the case of primitive religion. There it is held that the ancestors founded the community and its basic social differentiations. This then means that in order to continue to exist the community must refer (in words and deeds) to that foundational act.¹⁵ Furthermore, this original religious societal structure indicates that when the constitutive otherness is banished *radically* from society, a distinction *within* society need not then exist between rulers who establish (or change) societal order and the ruled who are subordinated to those rulers. In such a situation, each member of society depends alike on the founding otherness. That same founding otherness enables society to conceive of itself as an unbroken unity, as a totality. In this structure of primitive religion all political power (i.e. all power that could be used to shape and change society) is removed from society. That is why Gauchet sees the structure of primitive religion as a 'neutralization of the political' (Gauchet, 2005a: 13). It is organized in such a way that it need not divide society into rulers and ruled. But at the same time there is a price to be paid. Such a society must conceive of itself as basically unalterable, i.e. as a-historical. In and through the foundational act of the ancestors, the structure of society is given for once and for all. No one within society has the right to take up the position of the ancestors and to change society.

Gauchet's thesis follows upon this analysis, arguing that modern political history can be read as a process of 'leaving religion', i.e. as gradually abandoning this religious structuring of society. The key moment in this process is the coming about of the state, i.e. the coming about of a power structure within society. At that moment the external foundation of society (that still lies with the ancestors or the gods) receives *representatives* or agents within society. These representatives can now rule over society, due to their participation in its supernatural origins. The result is twofold. Society loses its original unity and falls apart into the opposition of rulers and ruled. But something is also gained: society obtains the capacity to change itself, to direct itself. Society becomes historical. Therefore, Gauchet regards the coming about of the state as the actual birth of the political (Gauchet, 2005a: 18).¹⁶ What is originally 'neutralized' by primitive religion is precisely this *manifestation* of the political, i.e. the division within society between rulers and ruled and the concomitant possibility to change society. What is *not* neutralized by primitive religion and never could be, according to Gauchet, is what he calls 'the social fact' itself (Gauchet, 2005a: 46, 48): the fact that society cannot but conceive of itself from a position 'outside' itself, i.e. that society always conceives of its order and meaning as something which it borrows from an

'outside' (Gauchet, 2005a: 64). Primitive religion radically banishes this 'outside' from society, as the irrecoverable foundational act of the forebears who gave society its structure.

The second decisive moment in the process of leaving religion is the development of modern democracy. At the core of that revolution is the complete restructuring of the political, independent from religion. The origin of society is no longer situated within the externality of a sacred divine will, but is now placed within the will of the sovereign people. As a result, the founding otherness moves from the outside to the inside: from a transcendent origin to an immanent foundation. The structure of democratic society therefore dissolves, on the one hand, into the state or power structure that wields power in the name of the sovereign people and therefore *represents* that sovereign people and, on the other, into the plurality of citizens who build civil society together. In this way democratic society seems to carry its own foundation within itself. This is correct, and yet nonetheless more complex.

Gauchet indicates that even in the structure of democratic societies, the basic political structure of any society – found *by negation* from religious societies (Gauchet, 2003b: 330) – remains perfectly recognizable. First there is the idea that every society has its ground, its meaning, its reasons, its Law¹⁷ – these expressions are all synonymous – in an 'outside': in a foundational otherness. This is also the case in democratic societies. The sovereign people (or the nation), in the name of which power is exerted, does not coincide with its *existing* citizens. Further still: the liberty and equality, in the name of which power is exerted, do not coincide with their *actual* freedom and equality. Thus even in the case of democracy the foundation of society is an otherness; even here the place of power is 'outside' society. For it is *in the name of* the 'sovereign people' (or, better still: in the name of 'equality', 'liberty', 'civil rights' and so forth) that the state exerts power over its citizens and makes them obey the law. The state thus *represents* the Law that has to be enforced – if necessary by the use of (legitimate) violence (Weber, 1985: 29). The state, therefore, is in itself an otherness vis-à-vis civil society (Gauchet, 2005a: 453). Precisely due to their representation by the otherness of the state, citizens, according to Gauchet, constitute themselves into a society: they build a polity that is discernable to itself (Gauchet, 2003b: 329). Just as in primitive religion society comes about by referring to the shared 'founding otherness', under modern conditions society comes about because it is *represented* by the otherness of the state. For neither the sovereignty of the people nor even the people themselves *precedes* their representation by the state. Of course, the state exerts power over its citizens *in the name of* the sovereign people but, as a matter of fact, both the sovereignty and the people only come into existence – are only *instituted* together – by their being represented by the power structure, i.e. by the state.¹⁸ And only due to this very representation may citizens envisage themselves as one people and hence constitute themselves into one people. The same holds for the citizens' rights

and liberties. Even they cannot come before their representation by the state. Of course, again, the state exerts power over its citizens in the name of their rights and liberties. However, these rights and liberties only become a reality – again, are only *instituted* – by their being represented by the power structure, i.e. by the state. And only due to this very representation can citizens envisage themselves as free and equal, as bearers of subjective rights who present themselves as such.

Gauchet's starting point was the primacy of the political: the idea that a society cannot be what it is without the political. We now know what this thesis entails. Namely, every society refers to an 'outside', to an 'otherness', as to its origin. From this 'otherness' society borrows its order: its structure, its meaning, its understanding of itself. The 'otherness', therefore, constitutes the *symbolic order* of society: the complex of meaningful distinctions that structures and organizes society (Moyn, 2005: 181).¹⁹ In the case of societies 'after (primitive) religion', this symbolic order is represented *within* society by a power structure or state apparatus. This state apparatus exerts power in the name of the symbolic order – in the name of the Law (Gauchet, 2005a: 454). In so doing, i.e. by representing that symbolic order, society grasps itself as a unity and therefore comes about *as* society (Gauchet, 2005a: 145). In this manner, it becomes apparent that every society is effected by power (Gauchet, 2005a: 74). Every society constitutes itself by referring to an 'otherness' as its origin, which is at the same time its place of power: the place of society's Law.²⁰

2. THE ECLIPSE OF THE POLITICAL: A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY?

The foregoing analysis reveals the problematic scope of contemporary individualism. By focusing unilaterally on the individual as bearer of subjective rights, contemporary individualism is not simply an expansion of one of the pillars of modern democracy – the legal system – at the expense of the political and the socio-historical; beyond that, contemporary individualism appears to be a denial of the political as society's constitutive dimension (Gauchet, 2003b: 329). In other words, the liberal idea that the individual by nature or as a human being is entitled to rights, that subjects of these rights constitute the foundation of society and that only legal relationships between these subjects of rights suffice to preserve society as such fails in two respects. To begin with, it ignores that these subjective rights presuppose a political factor, i.e. a power structure by which these rights are acknowledged, distributed and, if necessary, enforced. However, behind this elementary disavowal stands another that is even more profound: the denial of the role of the political as the sphere in which society sees itself represented and by the same token constitutes itself as society. This being the case, contemporary individualism reveals a crucial shortcoming in political and, above all, in

democratic self-understanding, which in the end might threaten democratic society itself. For a society that fails to appreciate its own foundations risks implosion.

Yet, according to Gauchet, this verdict needs qualification, for today's neutralization of the political may be compared with its former religious neutralization (Gauchet, 2005a: 29). Just as religion would formerly banish all political power from society as a threat to its unity, today the roles both of state and of political power are pushed back for the sake of the individual, as both are seen as impediments to its free and unrestricted development (Gauchet, 2005a: 28, 537). Yet the positive aspect of this comparison is that just as was the case previously in religious society, the political likewise continues to exist today virtually, in spite of its actual neutralization. In the same vein, Gauchet suggests that although the political has today lost visibility, it continues to gain in its power of operation. After all, it is political power that creates the necessary framework and preconditions of the individual's free development; it is political power that gives societal power its effectiveness; it is political power that secures the integration of society and its continuation over time. And political power does so beyond the mobility and transience of individual relationships (Gauchet, 2005a: 26).²¹ Put differently, if contemporary society can present itself as a 'society of individuals', if it can allow itself the luxury of not having to present itself as one closely connected society like all other societies before it, this is because it possesses powerful means to remain a society, notwithstanding the fact that its members are disconnected. This much is certain: society owes these means to its political power (Gauchet, 2005a: 547).

Today's Democratic Paradox

However, it is precisely this modification of the above diagnosis of contemporary democracy that confronts us with a startling paradox. On the one hand, Gauchet wants us to believe that today's democracy is at risk because of the overall eclipse of its foundational political and socio-historical vector – a plausible enough idea, as it is unclear how a construction built on three pillars can survive if and when two of them are in the process of breaking down. On the other hand, though, Gauchet is simultaneously at pains to indicate that, for the time being, the virtual remnants of the missing pillars will do, and that democracy therefore will last until bygone equilibrium is again restored in a new democratic setting (Gauchet, 1998: 174–5; 2002: 336, 376, 385; 2005b). So there is a paradoxical tension between Gauchet's criticism of the 'individualism of rights' as too narrow a track upon which democracy is set out, and his assertion that this individualism of rights is apparently harmless as to democracy's actual functioning.

In order to explain this paradox, Gauchet points to the historical individuality of the situation in which democracy exists today. After all, this is not the first time that such an imbalance in the foundation of democracy

has occurred. This was also the case around 1900 (Gauchet, 2002: 377–9). As indicated above, it was then that the liberal-democratic formula was stabilized for the first time. Simultaneously, though, this temporary equilibrium engendered a major crisis as it gave way to the unrestrained development of the second industrial revolution, whereas parliamentary democracy proved powerless to control and regulate the resulting unrestricted societal dynamics. Consequently, a feeling of anxiety and dispossession came over society, as it was confronted with mechanisms it could no longer control. As is well known, the whole situation ended first in rejecting parliamentary democracy, and then in installing totalitarian regimes; in Gauchet's phrasing: it ended in a hypertrophy of the political, aimed at controlling society overall, both publicly and privately (Gauchet, 2003a: 257, 303). Notwithstanding the similarities between this crisis and today's experience of dispossession with respect to societal dynamics, according to Gauchet we need not expect a comparable violent and despotic collapse of the democratic system (Gauchet, 2003a: 88–9). The major reason for this is that we are the heirs of the 'glorious thirty years' (*les Trentes Glorieuses*) – between 1945–1975 – during which the establishment of the welfare state led to a relative mastery of the destabilizing tensions in society, which had been caused by mass democracy and industrial society (Gauchet, 1998: 89; 2002: 378). Due to this relative mastery by the welfare state of both the political and socio-historical dimension, the 'individualism of rights' could come to the fore almost unrestrained, without undermining society's foundations – while exactly presupposing the stabilizing functioning of welfare state politics in the background.²² Therefore, the danger that haunts today's crisis of democracy is not so much totalitarianism but the gradual erosion or even implosion of society's grip on itself: its capacity to direct its own development (Gauchet, 2002: 379). In Gauchet's view, this is the real threat incurred by the closing of the civic mind, consecutive to the rise of the society of individuals.²³ For in the end, this closing of the civic mind tends to engender a new kind of dispossession – in essence comparable to primitive religion – as the result of departing from the capability of self-determination – both deliberately *and* inattentively.²⁴

Some questions to conclude

Nuancing Gauchet's position this way does not negate his basic assessment that democracy is going through a severe crisis. However, several considerations raise questions concerning the validity of Gauchet's disquieting diagnosis. Namely, democracy today is less questioned than ever before in history; in fact, it is desired and begged for world-wide as the political model that is the most legitimate and the most capable of promoting prosperity. Even today, democracy demonstrates its stability, notwithstanding the actual imbalance of its foundations. The paradox seems to be that democracy has an essential problem but not an actual one. Of course, it may be the case that the actual problem may still eventuate in the near future, and that

Gauchet is like a prophet in the desert, with the truth on his side, but with no-one to hear or believe it. But perhaps there is also something wrong with his analysis? At least some of its supporting elements might be questioned or partially reconsidered.

With regard to the ‘eclipse of the political’ – and moreover consistent with its metaphorical meaning – Gauchet obviously has to admit that the political today has not vanished but is merely concealed, while still continuing to fulfil its task. So if there is a problem – and I am ready to admit that this concealment of the political indeed engenders the ‘closing of the civic mind’ – it has to do with the lack of visibility and the consequent lack of power of the political to mobilize. Yet in the past *ideology* brought about this visibility of the political and its attendant power to mobilize – ideology here defined as a discourse that offers an encompassing view of society, while still demanding a specific power structure as well as a particular collective engagement on the part of its members. It was ideology, therefore, that cast the political as society’s legitimate grasp on its future development; it was ideology that claimed that the political holds the promise of society’s self-determination. Considered from this perspective, the crisis of democracy comes down to the ‘eclipse of ideology’ rather than to an ‘eclipse of the political’. Today it is precisely the ‘grand narratives’ that Lyotard spoke of that have retreated. Until recently, these had proved capable of mobilizing and directing civil society towards common goals in a shared future. Having lost these narratives, the political today has become ‘disenchanted’: it has lost its former seemingly magical hold on society’s past, present and future, because its ideological substance has evaporated.²⁵

Furthermore, if the putative ‘eclipse of the political’ were indeed to come down to the ‘disenchantment of the political’ due to the extinction of its ideological substance, then the concomitant closing of the civic mind would also appear in a different light. It would indicate that the former civic mind – referred to by Gauchet in terms of classical citizenship – likewise borrowed its political openness and concern from that very same ideological discourse. This would in turn raise the question as to its political and democratic quality and significance. For it is not clear to what extent civic concern with society’s general interest, directed by ideological considerations, would politically or even democratically be preferable to civic concern with one’s own particular interest engendered by the observation of one’s subjective rights. Due to its unilateral focus on individual rights, contemporary civic concern may be narrower in scope than its classical predecessor, but possibly it is better suited to a piecemeal, less hazardous approach to societal change. In any case, the individual’s concern for its own subjective rights seems perfectly to match the down-to-earth, businesslike character of its disenchanted political counterpart.

One might build on the above idea of the evaporation of the ideological substance of the political and its disenchanting effects for democracy and

classical citizenship in order to develop a further hypothesis: that the crisis we are actually going through is not so much a crisis of democracy itself, but a crisis of its modern representational institutions, such as the nation-state. That representation is a precondition for the constitution of political society, and more so for democratic society, is beyond dispute. But this should not imply that modern institutions, like the nation-state, are the only suitable candidates for representation. Perhaps the loss of credibility of political representational institutions today, and by extension of all forms of collective transcendence, should be interpreted in the first place as a loss of credibility of *modern* representational institutions. Perhaps today we are living in a transitional phase, in which current representational institutions – due, for instance, to the process of globalization – have lost credibility and therefore are disinvested of ideological support, whereas at the same time we still lack new kinds of representational devices and institutions that tomorrow may replace their modern predecessors. In other words, we should consider the possibility that the proper and balanced recovery of democracy's foundations – as Gauchet has spelled them out for us – lies beyond the boundaries of our modern institutions, even though they once constituted the institutional framework of democracy's beginnings.

Antoon Braeckman is Professor in Contemporary Political Philosophy at the University of Leuven, Belgium. His research interests include conceptualizations of modernity and theories of democracy in the postnational constellation. He has published on Alexis de Tocqueville, Max Weber, Niklas Luhmann and Marcel Gauchet. Recently he edited a critical assessment of Marcel Gauchet's political philosophy: *La démocratie à bout de souffle? Une introduction critique à la philosophie politique de Marcel Gauchet* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

Notes

1. The publication referred to is a collection of essays, written between 1980 and 2000, and covering most of Gauchet's critical articles during that period, assessing the new developments within contemporary democracy. Some of these articles were translated into English (e.g. in *Thesis Eleven* 29: 5–13; *Thesis Eleven* 60: 23–41).
2. In this respect Gauchet is the perfect disciple of Claude Lefort. With Lefort, whose student he once was and whose assistant he afterwards became, Gauchet still shares today the membership of the Centre de Recherches Politiques Raymond Aron in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Whereas Lefort (1924–) was strongly influenced by phenomenology (above all by Maurice Merleau-Ponty), Gauchet's (1946–) frame of reference is far more determined by structuralism (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and especially Pierre Clastres). In the mid-1970s their relationship was darkened by a discussion of the rights, and hence of the authorship, of an important text (cf. 'Sur la démocratie: le politique et l'institution du social', published in 1971 in the journal *Textures* (edited in Brussels) mentioning both

Lefort and Gauchet as its authors). The text is important because it contains early elaborations on central concepts of Lefort's political thought, such as the famous distinction between 'the political' (*le politique*) and 'politics' (*la politique*) and 'the empty place of power'. (For an insightful analysis of the complex relationship between Lefort, Castoriadis and Gauchet, see Doyle (2003); see also Weymans (2005).) In 1985 Gauchet wrote the startling book *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, that made him almost instantly well known in French intellectual circles. In this masterpiece he conceives of the history of western civilization as a process of 'leaving religion': the gradual emancipation from a basically religious structure of dependence upon a founding otherness. At present Gauchet lectures at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales; since 1980 he has been the editor in chief of the journal *Le Débat*.

3. Gauchet himself insists on the fact that the notion of 'individualism' may cover various meanings. He distinguishes between its metaphysical, its politico-judicial and its social meaning (Gauchet, 2002: 235–6). His criticism is mainly directed towards today's (politico-judicial) individualism of rights, i.e. to the predominance in public space of the individual as the subject of rights, and far less to the so-called social individualism that today is commonly referred to in terms of individualization (see below).
4. To a certain extent this is Gauchet's version of Jean-François Lyotard's thesis of the 'collapse of the Grand Narratives': the decreasing credibility of the meta-narratives that from the time of the modern era legitimized both scientific knowledge and political action (Lyotard, 1979).
5. In *La condition historique*, Gauchet refers in this respect to a theologico-political phase (1500–1650), a theologico-legal phase (1650–1800) and a phase of conscious historicity (the entire 19th century) (Gauchet, 2003a: 229; see also Gauchet, 2005b; Braeckman, 2007).
6. For a critical assessment of Gauchet's view on the issue of human rights and its putative ideological character, see Braeckman (2005; for the French version of this article see Braeckman, 2007).
7. In *La religion dans la démocratie*, Gauchet points to the differentiation between state and civil society, and above all to the autonomy of civil society vis-à-vis the state, as the most important achievement that liberalism has brought about (Gauchet, 1998: 54).
8. Note that Gauchet also points to that very period, in *La condition historique*, as the epoch of totalitarianism. At its centre, there is the Thirty Years' War of the 20th century: 1914–45 (Gauchet, 2003a: 263). By the 1970s and 1980s the crisis of totalitarianism comes to a close and liberal democracy, as it started in the 1880s, is consolidated (Gauchet, 2003a: 287).
9. This formula fits well with Beck's concept of individualization: it refers to an individual that is thrown back upon its own resources.
10. Hence the title of Gauchet (2002): *La démocratie contre elle-même*.
11. A very good survey of Gauchet's intellectual development with respect to the complex interrelatedness of religion, history, politics and modernity is offered in Gauchet (2005a). As a collection of essays written over the last 30 years, it covers almost a lifetime of intellectual apprenticeship in political philosophy. At the same time it should be remembered that Gauchet elaborated his theory

of the intricate relationship between religion and the political in its most detailed manner in *Le désenchantement du monde* (Gauchet, 1985). Probably the most concise summary of Gauchet's views on the relationship between religion and the political is to be found in his clear-cut reply, in the form of 12 theses, to Alain Caillé (Gauchet, 2003b).

12. For a critical assessment of Gauchet's indebtedness to Clastres for his basic view on the political, see above all Moyn (2005). In his critical rendering of Gauchet's early intellectual development Moyn, in my view, underestimates the significance of the representation theorem in Gauchet's putative revaluation of the role of the state. The structure of representation enabled Gauchet (with Lefort) to state the irreducible character of the political which, at the time, and ever since in his view, constitutes a major argument for criticizing both Marxism *and* liberalism. Eventually, Gauchet's political philosophy comes down to the persistent investigation – up until contemporary democracy – into the nature of political representation as a necessary and hence inevitable precondition for the constitution of society.
13. To be clear, it should be stressed that the 'unbroken' character of primitive society does not imply that it lacks all forms of social differentiation. It only involves the absence of a specific kind of social differentiation, namely the *political* distinction between rulers and ruled (see below).
14. Gauchet even gives it a more pointed formulation: society cannot constitute itself as society but by conceiving of itself as instituted by something or someone different: by an authority that has the *power* to institute society. Society, therefore, cannot be conceived of except by reference to an *outside* – an external – *power* from which society 'gives itself to itself': from which it conceives of itself as society (Gauchet, 2005a: 74).
15. In Gauchet's view, the fact that the very sense of our thinking and acting always comes from outside, i.e. that we ourselves are never the origin of meaning; or still: that we are always tributary in matters of meaning – Gauchet refers to an 'indebtedness of meaning' (*la dette du sens*) (Gauchet, 2005a: 68) – is not only characteristic of human societies, but of humanity as such.
16. By 'the political' (*le politique*) Gauchet understands exactly this configuration. Society exhibits an order that comes from an 'outer world': it has its origin in an 'instituting otherness' such as the ancestors or gods. This 'outer world' has representatives within society, who rule over society in the name of that 'outer world'. By 'politics' (*la politique*) Gauchet understands the particular way of giving shape to this 'ruling over society in the name of that outer world'. I refer, for example, to distinct types of regimes, like despotism, tyranny, democracy, etc. (See Note 2 for a very similar distinction between 'the political' (*le politique*) and 'politics' (*la politique*) in Lefort.)
17. It concerns the Law with a capital 'L', which basically designs society and therefore is distinct from the particular laws that borrow their legitimacy and hence their ordering capacity from the underlying basic structuring of society by the Law (as the symbolic order – see below).
18. The structure of representation thus converges with the structure of the 'original supplement' (*le supplément original*) in Derrida: the derivative (here: the state as representation of society) is the condition of possibility and therefore the foundation – the origin (!) – of the original (here: society). Only in and through this

representation does society as society come into being. In his famous reading of the American *Declaration of Independence*, Derrida has expounded this logic of representation in a masterful fashion, as the ‘logic of the supplement’ (Derrida, 1984). See also Lindahl (2006), Van Roermund (2003) and Janssens (2006) for similarly interesting elaborations of this logic of representation in various respects.

19. Again, for example, in democracies: that otherness is the sovereign people, the freedom and equality of its citizens, etc.
20. Elsewhere, Gauchet refers to this basic structure of any society in terms of its three constituent dimensions: its political power structure (*le pouvoir*), its social division (*le conflit*) and its Law (*le norme*) (Gauchet, 2003b: 329; see also Gauchet, 2005a: 556).
21. At present this is still best illustrated by the social welfare state.
22. This is probably best illustrated by the representative role of politics in contemporary society, referred to above. On the one hand, the political system is deprived from any substantial content of its own: it is a mirror-like representation of civil society. On the other hand, and by the same token, the political system must be distinct from civil society, and therefore it is able to do what it should do: warranting and facilitating the co-existence of the plurality of voices, values and interests within civil society.
23. Gauchet, in this respect, actually repeats the well-known criticism by Tocqueville of democratic societies in *De la démocratie en Amérique* (Tocqueville, 1961: 395–406, 431–8). In her presentation of Gauchet’s view of the ‘society of individuals’, Natalie Doyle overlooks the Tocquevillean ambivalences in Gauchet’s assessment (Doyle, 2003: 86). Of course, the society of individuals can be interpreted as the outcome of the historical project of autonomy, but this does not alter the fact that this very society eventually ends up in a ‘closing of the civic mind’, which is an immediate threat to its overall achievement concerning individual autonomy.
24. The comparison with primitive religion is legitimate to the extent that Gauchet, modifying Clastres’ original view in this respect, conceives of the ‘dispossessive, heteronomous structure of primitive religion as the result of a “choice”’ (Gauchet, 2005a: 50; see also Gauchet, 1985: 20; 2003a: 66–7).
25. The political – as Weber probably would have said – has thus become something ‘businesslike’ (*versachlicht*): ordinary (*alltäglich*); it has stopped being something extra-ordinary (*ausser-alltäglich*) (Braeckman, 2004). This might be one of the reasons, moreover, why Gauchet so fiercely criticizes the ‘ideology of human rights’, as he calls it (Gauchet, 2002: 359 *et passim*). For the ideological content of human rights is not suited to underpin and revive the political within a particular society. At the most it can offer the basis of legitimacy for subjective rights of the individual. Therefore, Gauchet continues to argue that human rights can by no means be considered to replace politics, let alone to substitute for the political (Braeckman, 2005).

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