Chapter 12

What is Self-Rule?
Lessons from Gandhi

Behind the screen of flux and turbulence, our age seems to be pervaded worldwide by a dominant idea: the idea of “democracy” or at least the aspiration of “democratization.” Despite the immense diversity of social and cultural traditions, humankind today seems agreed on the superiority of democracy over any competing alternative. People of diverse political convictions—from conservative to radical—all share at least the proposition that, to be legitimate, governments need popular approval and guidance. Seen in this light, humankind seems indeed united by a common purpose or telos—whose meaning, however, appears puzzling on closer inspection. For, what is the meaning of democracy when translated as popular self-government or self-rule? How can the people govern themselves—more precisely: how can the people be both rulers and the ruled, and perform their roles legitimately without domination or oppression? In the well-known phrase of Lincoln—“government of the people, by the people, for the people”—How can the people exercise government (by the people) over themselves (of the people) and do so in way as to promote the common good (for the people)? Differently and more simply put: How can the self rule itself? How is popular self-rule—or to use the Indian term, swaraj—possible and even conceivable?

Questions of this kind are liable to appear strange or alien to many contemporary democrats wedded to the belief that popular rule means satisfaction of the people’s wants and needs. But what if human wants are intrinsically infinite (or at least can be infinitely generated) and if available resources (especially ecological resources) are limited? And what if efforts to secure these resources willy-nilly involve people (some people) in mastery and domination? The above questions were
not as alien to the older tradition of political philosophy in the West. Despite differences in detail, Plato and Aristotle both insisted on a qualitative differentiation between modes of rule or rulership. In their view, rulership exercised for purely selfish interests or the sole benefit of the rulers was illegitimate or unjust, while rulership performed unselfishly or virtuously for the common benefit was deemed just and legitimate. With regard to popular rule, this criterion meant that people had to rule themselves unselfishly and wisely—which presupposed a widespread practice of self-restraint and the cultivation of ethical dispositions. The classical distinction persisted throughout the Roman period and well into the Christian Middle Ages. According to Augustine, there was a need to sharply distinguish between two opposing “cities” or regimes: the one (called “earthly city”) was governed by self-love manifest in lust for power and self-aggrandizement, while the other (termed “heavenly city”) was marked by self-giving, self-surrender, and service. In our time, all these teachings have become nearly apocryphal and persist only at the margins of modern consciousness. In large measure, this eclipse is due to the modern tendency to replace the “tale of two cities” with a stark public-private dichotomy: a formula whereby self-transcendence is consigned to a purely private sphere of inner spirituality, while the public square is increasingly equated with power struggles and the pursuit of self-interest. This equation, needless to say, exacts a price, especially for democratic politics. Stripped of qualitative connotations, self-rule shades over into self-indulgence and into the restless search for (what Augustine aptly calls) “sottish pleasures.”

The present pages are an exercise of retrieval. Basically the attempt is to retrieve some public voices who, in the midst of our modern and contemporary era, have resisted the lure of consumerism and selfish complacency while holding fast to the principle of popular self-rule. Among these voices easily the most prominent is that of Mahatma Gandhi, who led India in her prolonged struggle for independence and self-rule from England—but who never lost sight of the difficulties and paradoxes of self-rule. Although vigorously opposed both to British colonialism and native fundamentalism, Gandhi’s writings and speeches made it amply clear that, with the demise of empire, the struggle for self-rule would not come to an end but really only begin. The presentation here proceeds in three steps. The first section reviews some of Gandhi’s numerous comments on self-rule or swaraj, from his early plea for “Indian home rule” to statements made on the eve of independence. The second part advances an interpretation of the Gandhian view of swaraj, partly by relying on the insights of