Chapter 6

Occupy Wall Street, Steve Jobs’s “Genius,” and Mad Men
Reflections on the American Democratic Imagination

The fall of 2011 was marked by the concurrence of two events with sharply divergent economic, cultural, and political ramifications: the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement’s radical democratic protest against economic inequality and corporate power and media celebrations of the singular “genius” of Steve Jobs, the Apple Corporation CEO, spurred by his death that October. These events highlighted a basic tension in democratic capitalism: public affirmation of democratic equality—ideals of equality before the law, equal opportunity, and equal political rights—combined with widespread admiration of successful corporate leaders and entrepreneurs and acceptance of enormous economic inequalities. These two occurrences—the Occupy movement and postmortem celebrations of Jobs’s supposed genius—crystallized two conflicting ways that Americans envision, enact, and contain democratic equality.

The honoring of Jobs’s genius, which culminated in an unexceptional Hollywood biopic, Jobs (2013), fits into a narrative of entrepreneurial, meritocratic version of “democratic” equality.¹ This vision emphasizes equal opportunity for all individuals to rise (or fall) as far as their talents and efforts will take them. Consequently, it affirms “a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which by definition people must be left behind.”² In this way it rationalizes sharp inequalities in the name of democratic equality insofar as everyone presumably has had an equal chance to become rich
and powerful. By contrast, the Occupy movement spoke to the possibility of a more full-fledged democratic society, with a more democratically organized and directed economy. In opposition to the meritocratic view of equality as \textit{equality of opportunity}, the democratic ethos of the Occupy movement resonates with John Schaar’s observation that the \textit{inequality} resulting from such equality of opportunity, particularly sharp inequalities of power among people to command large institutions, debases “a genuinely democratic understanding of equality.”\textsuperscript{3}

The prevailing liberal democratic ethos hinges on the principle that virtually all adult members of democratic societies are entitled to an equal voice in the modern democratic state.\textsuperscript{4} In short, the \textit{democratic} aspect of the liberal democratic ethos rests on something like what Robert Dahl calls “the logic of equality”: the principle that all adult members of a community are “about equal in being well qualified to have a say in governing the group” or community.\textsuperscript{5} Yet while this principle is widely embraced in the United States with respect to the governance of democratic states, many (if not most) people routinely reconcile it with a ready acceptance of sharp inequalities not just of economic rewards. Even more momentous for the idea of a \textit{democratic} society, Americans are generally accepting of vastly unequal power among individuals and groups to direct the political and economic institutions that govern our lives.

In the contemporary United States, there are at least three notable aspects of this commonplace view. First, this acceptance of unequal economic—and indirectly political—power and influence is wedded to a meritocratic ideology according to which it is widely believed some people—especially managerial “geniuses” and entrepreneurs like Jobs—have earned their great wealth \textit{and} the economic power that accompanies it.\textsuperscript{6} Second, as Robert Dahl says, “probably most people… will find it hard to believe that employees are qualified to govern the enterprises in which they work.”\textsuperscript{7} Third, there has been a dominant ideological tendency in the United States to regard economic enterprises, even large corporations, strictly in terms of “private” property and, thus, as properly left to ultimate control and direction of their owners, except when they break the law or violate basic obligations to society.

Yet, as liberal thinkers since John Stuart Mill have appreciated, the large-scale corporation, which is a lynchpin of modern capitalist economies, fits uneasily—if at all—into the category of purely “private” concerns. Thus, in her discussion about the liberalism of fear, Judith Shklar notes the problem posed for liberalism by “the power of such basically public organizations as corporate business enterprises.”\textsuperscript{8} Even though they are often understood (particularly in the United States) as \textit{private} enterprises, they “of course owe their entire character and power to the laws, and they