Democracy is an empty word unless it implies the power of ordinary people to prevail over any form of privileged interest or ruling class. Sovereign power commands compliance, and its essence is classically, and helpfully, understood as an exercise of political will. Here as elsewhere, to will the end is to will the means: to affirm popular sovereignty is then to affirm a capacity to overcome (rather than merely endure or resist) the obstacles that might block the realisation of 'the people's will'. This general capacity, in turn, depends on several mutually reinforcing collective abilities or powers, in particular capacities for assembly, education, deliberation, organisation, resolution, and imposition.

By thus approaching the notoriously ambiguous concepts of both 'people' and 'will' the one through the other, I hope to show how both terms, and their conjunction, still deserve a central place in our theoretical repertoire. In order to flesh out this account of democratic political will, I will draw on fragments of canonical texts by Rousseau and Marx, and on the quasi-voluntarist accounts of political agency and capacity advanced by figures like Robespierre, Blanqui, and Gramsci.

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