On 4 March 1919, Russell wrote to Colette that he had just finished “Democracy and Direct Action” for The Dial 66 (3 May 1919): 445–8 (B&R C19.13). This article appeared the same month in The English Review, 28 (May 1919): 396–403, a monthly edited by Austin Harrison (1873–1928), a son of the English Positivist author and political activist Frederic Harrison (1831–1923). Martyn Johnson, editor of The Dial, who had solicited the article at the beginning of the year, informed Russell on the 12th of May that it had “attracted much favourable attention and I am pleased to have been able to give it to the American public through the medium of The Dial”.

Russell wrote the article just when labour militancy, fuelled both by the inspiring example of the Russian Revolution and by the precedents of wartime industrial unrest, took the form of threatening a general strike. In March 1919, the Labour Party and the trade unions became involved in long discussions about the practicality and morality of using such “direct action” tactics as the general strike to achieve political ends. Militants, especially from the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain, argued that the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress should commit themselves to this radical policy in an effort to gain the forty hour week and to effect such foreign policy changes as lifting the blockade of Germany and ending British intervention in Russia. But nothing concrete was done concerning the question of direct action until the summer of 1920 when Labour believed that the British Government would intervene in Poland against the advancing Red Army. Such action, Labour feared, could lead to a general conflict such as had occurred in 1914. In the event, there was no intervention. And the labour movement soon after rejected “direct action” as a method of bypassing traditional constitutional government processes.

Russell’s reflections on the possible uses of direct action in a democracy were always linked to his Guild Socialist ideas. That is to say, if self-government in industry existed, then direct action, with all its possibilities of developing into illegitimate coercion of government and society, would be unnecessary. Moreover, for Russell a society infused with Guild Socialism, and not capitalist ideology, would see no need to confront the Bolsheviks.

Seizing on the topicality of these arguments, Philip Snowden, Chairman of the Independent Labour Party, wrote Russell that he had “read with much interest your article in this month’s ‘English Review’” and that he wanted “to republish it
as an I.L.P. pamphlet ... I think it is very important that our active young men should read your article” (7 May 1919). Russell agreed and it was introduced on the title page in the following manner: “This Pamphlet, by the greatest living philosopher, is a brilliant analysis of the sphere of Direct Action in a democratic community.”

The copy-text is the version published in *The English Review*. 
The battle for political democracy has been won: white men everywhere are to live under the régime of parliamentary government. Russia, which for the present is trying a new form of constitution, will probably be led by internal or external pressure to adopt the system favoured by the Western Powers.

But even before this contest was decided a new one was seen to be beginning. The form of government in the United States, Britain, and France is a capitalistic or plutocratic democracy: the democracy which exists in the political sphere finds no counterpart in the economic world. The struggle for economic democracy seems likely to dominate politics for many years to come. The Russian Government, which cares nothing for the forms of political democracy, stands for a very extreme form of economic democracy. A strong and apparently growing party in Germany has similar aims. Of opinion in France I know nothing, but in this country the desire of the workers to obtain control of industries, subject to State ownership, though not sufficiently strong numerically to have much influence on the personnel of Parliament, is nevertheless able, through organization in key industries, to exert a powerful pressure on the Government and to cause fear of industrial upheavals to become widespread throughout the middle and upper classes. We have thus the spectacle of opposition between a new democratically-elected Parliament and the sections of the nation which consider themselves the most democratic. In such circumstances many friends of democracy become bewildered and grow perplexed as to the aims they ought to pursue or the party with which they ought to sympathize.

Time was when the idea of parliamentary government inspired enthusiasm, but that time is past. Already before the war legislation had come to be more and more determined by contest between interests outside the legislature, bringing pressure to bear directly upon the Government. This tendency has been much accelerated. The view which prevails in the ranks of organized labour—and not only there—is that Parliament exists merely to give effect to the decisions of the Government, while those decisions themselves, so far from representing any settled policy, embody nothing but the momentary balance of forces and the compromise most likely to secure temporary peace. The weapon of Labour in these contests is no longer the vote, but the threat of a strike—"direct action". It was the leaders of the Confédération Générale du Travail during the twenty years preceding the war who first popularized this theory of the best tactics for Labour. But it was experience rather than theory that led to its widespread adoption—the experience largely of the untrustworthiness of Parliamentary Socialist leaders and of the reactionary social forces to which they were exposed.
To the traditional doctrine of democracy there is something repugnant in this whole method. Put crudely and nakedly, the position is this: The organized workers in a key industry can inflict so much hardship upon the community by a strike that the community is willing to yield to their demands things which it would never yield except under the threat of force. This may be represented as the substitution of the private force of a minority in place of law as embodying the will of the majority. On this basis a very formidable indictment of direct action can be built up.

There is no denying that direct action involves grave dangers, and, if abused, may theoretically lead to very bad results. In this country, when organized labour wished to send delegates to Stockholm, the Seamen’s and Firemen’s Union prevented them from doing so, with the enthusiastic approval of the capitalist Press. Such interferences of minorities with the freedom of action of majorities are possible; it is also possible for majorities to interfere with the legitimate freedom of minorities. Like all use of force, whether inside or outside the law, direct action makes tyranny possible. And if one were anxious to draw a gloomy picture of terrors ahead, one might prophesy that certain well-organized vital industries—say, the Triple Alliance of miners, railwaymen, and transport-workers—would learn to combine, not only against the employers, but against the community as a whole. We shall be told that this will happen unless a firm stand is made now. We shall be told that, if it does happen, the indignant public will have, sooner or later, to devote itself to the organization of blacklegs, in spite of the danger of civil disturbance and industrial chaos that such a course would involve. No doubt such dangers would be real if it could be assumed that organized labour is wholly destitute of common sense and public spirit. But such an assumption could never be made except to flatter the fears of property-owners. Let us leave nightmares on one side and come to the consideration of the good and harm that are actually likely to result in practice from the increasing resort to direct action as a means of influencing government.

Many people speak and write as though the beginning and end of democracy were the rule of the majority. But this is far too mechanical a view. It leaves out of account two questions of great importance, namely: (1) What should be the group of which the majority is to prevail? (2) What are the matters with which the majority has a right to interfere? Right answers to these questions are essential if nominal democracy is not to develop into a new and more stable form of tyranny; for minorities and subordinate groups have the right to live, and must not be internally subject to the malice of hostile masses.

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1 This, for example, is the view of Professor Hearnshaw in his recent book, *Democracy at the Cross-Ways*.
The first question is familiar in one form, namely that of nationality. It is recognized as contrary to the theory of democracy to combine into one State a big nation and a small one when the small nation desires to be independent.\(^2\) To allow votes to the citizens of the small nation is no remedy, since they can always be outvoted by the citizens of the large nation. The popularly-elected legislature, if it is to be genuinely democratic, must represent one nation; or, if more are to be represented, it must be by a federal arrangement which safeguards the smaller units. A legislature should exist for defined purposes, and should cover a larger or smaller area according to the nature of those purposes. At this moment, when an attempt is being made to create a League of Nations for certain objects, this point does not need emphasizing.

But it is not only geographical units, such as nations, that have a right, according to the true theory of democracy, to autonomy for certain purposes. Just the same principle applies to any group which has important internal concerns that affect the members of the group enormously more than they affect outsiders. The coal trade, for example, might legitimately claim autonomy. If such a demand were put forward it would be as impossible to resist on democratic grounds as the demand for autonomy on the part of a small nation. Yet it is perfectly clear that the coal trade could not induce the community to agree to such a proposal, especially if it threatened the “rights of property”, unless it were sufficiently well organized to be able to do grave injury to the community in the event of its proposal being rejected, just as no small nation except Norway, so far as my memory serves me, has ever obtained independence from a large one to which it was subject except by war or the threat of war.

The fact is that democracies, as soon as they are well established, are just as jealous of power as other forms of government. It is, therefore, necessary, if subordinate groups are to obtain their rights, that they shall have some means of bringing pressure to bear upon the Government. The Benthamite theory, upon which democracy is still defended by some doctrinaires, was that each voter would look after his own interest, and in the resultant each man’s interest would receive its proportionate share of attention. But human nature is neither so rational nor so self-centred as Bentham imagined. In practice it is easier, by arousing hatred and jealousies, to induce men to vote against the interests of others than to persuade them to vote for their own interests. In the recent General Election in this country very few electors remembered their own interests at all. They voted for the man who showed the loudest zeal for hanging the
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Kaiser, not because they imagined they would be richer if he were hanged, but as an expression of disinterested hatred. This is one of the reasons why autonomy is important: in order that, as far as possible, no group shall have its internal concerns determined for it by those who hate it. And this result is not secured by the mere form of democracy; it can only be secured by careful devolution of special powers to special groups, so as to secure, as far as possible, that legislation shall be inspired by the self-interest of those concerned, not by the hostility of those not concerned.

This brings us to the second of the two questions mentioned above—a question which is, in fact, closely bound up with the first. Our second question was: What are the matters with which the democracy has a right to interfere? It is now generally recognized that religion, for example, is a question with which no Government should interfere. If a Mahometan comes to live in England we do not think it right to force him to profess Christianity. This is a comparatively recent change; three centuries ago no State recognized the right of the individual to choose his own religion. (Some other personal rights have been longer recognized: a man may choose his own wife, though in Christian countries he must not choose more than one.) When it ceased to be illegal to hold that the earth goes round the sun, it was not made illegal to believe that the sun goes round the earth. In such matters it has been found, with intense surprise, that personal liberty does not entail anarchy. Even the sternest supporters of the rule of the majority would not hold that the Archbishop of Canterbury ought to turn Buddhist if Parliament ordered him to do so. And Parliament does not, as a rule, issue orders of this kind, largely because it is known that the resistance would be formidable and that it would have support in public opinion.

In theory the formula as to legitimate interferences is simple. A democracy has a right to interfere with those of the affairs of a group which intimately concern people outside the group, but not with those which have comparatively slight effects outside the group. In practice this formula may sometimes be difficult to apply, but often its application is clear. If, for example, the Welsh wish to have their elementary education conducted in Welsh, that is a matter which concerns them so much more intimately than anyone else that there can be no good reason why the rest of the United Kingdom should interfere.

Thus the theory of democracy demands a good deal more than the mere mechanical supremacy of the majority. It demands (1) division of the community into more or less autonomous groups; (2) delimitation of the powers of the autonomous groups by determining which of their concerns are so much more important to themselves than to others that others had better have no say in them.
Direct action may, in most cases, be judged by these tests. In an ideal democracy, industries, or groups of industries, would be self-governing as regards almost everything except the price and quantity of their product, and their self-government would be democratic. Measures which they would then be able to adopt autonomously they are now justified in extorting from the Government by direct action. At present the extreme limit of imaginable official concession is a conference in which the men and the employers are represented equally; but this is very far from democracy, since the men are much more numerous than the employers. This application of majority-rule is abhorrent to those who invoke majority-rule against direct-actionists, yet it is absolutely in accordance with the principles of democracy. It must at best be a long and difficult process to procure formal self-government for industries. Meanwhile, they have the same right that belongs to oppressed national groups, the right of securing the substance of autonomy by making it difficult and painful to go against their wishes in matters primarily concerning themselves. So long as they confine themselves to such matters their action is justified by the strictest principles of theoretical democracy, and those who decry it have been led by prejudice to mistake the empty form of democracy for its substance.

Certain practical limitations, however, are important to remember. In the first place, it is unwise for a section to set out to extort concessions from the Government by force if, in the long run, public opinion will be on the side of the Government. For a Government backed by public opinion will be able, in a prolonged struggle, to defeat any subordinate section. In the second place, it is important to render every struggle of this kind, when it does occur, a means of educating public opinion by making facts known which would otherwise remain more or less hidden. In a large community most people know very little about the affairs of other groups than their own. The only way in which a group can get its concerns widely known is by affording “copy” for the newspapers and by showing itself sufficiently strong and determined to command respect. When these conditions are fulfilled, even if it is force that is brought to bear upon the Government, it is persuasion that is brought to bear upon the community. And, in the long run, no victory is secure unless it rests upon persuasion and employs force at most as a means to persuasion.

The mention of the Press and its effect on public opinion suggests a direction in which direct action has sometimes been advocated, namely to counteract the capitalist bias of almost all great newspapers. One can imagine compositors refusing to set up some statement about trade union action which they know to be directly contrary to the truth. Or they might insist on setting up side by side a statement of the case from the trade union standpoint. Such a weapon, if it were used sparingly and judiciously, might do much to counteract the influence of the newspapers in mis-
leading public opinion. So long as the capitalist system persists, most newspapers are bound to be capitalist ventures, and to present “facts”, in the main, in the way that suits capitalist interests. A strong case can be made out for the use of direct action to counteract this tendency. But it is obvious that very grave dangers would attend such a practice if it became common. A censorship of the Press by trade unionists would, in the long run, be just as harmful as any other censorship. It is improbable, however, that the method could be carried to such extremes, since, if it were, a special set of blackleg compositors would be trained up and no others would gain admission to the offices of capitalist newspapers. In this case, as in others, the dangers supposed to belong to the method of direct action are largely illusory, owing to the natural limitations of its effectiveness.

The use of direct action for general political purposes raises, in most instances, much more difficult problems than its use for industrial and economic ends. Whether it could under any circumstances be legitimate to employ this weapon to oppose a war which a considerable section considered unjust, or to prevent the enactment or continuance of conscription, or in any other matter which essentially concerns the nation as a whole rather than any part of it, is a question which cannot be argued without examining the whole basis of democracy. There are, however, some political uses of direct action which are in accordance with democratic principles. The most obvious case is a strike for the establishment of democracy where it does not yet exist. On the same grounds it might be justifiable to force a General Election when Parliament is obviously opposed to the present majority of the nation. The same might be said where there has been infringement of some important right, such as free speech. Except in cases of this kind, those who recognize that democracy, with all its faults, is the best practicable form of government, will be inclined to regard direct action for political purposes as a somewhat dubious expedient.

In addition to the political uses of direct action, and to its traditional use for amelioration of trade conditions within the present economic system, there is what, we may hope, will prove its most important sphere: economic reconstruction, including the partial or complete abolition of the capitalist system. The use of the strike for the fundamental change of the economic system has been made familiar by the French Syndicalists. It seems fairly certain that, for a considerable time to come, the main struggle in Europe will be between capitalism and some form of socialism, and it is highly probable that in this struggle the strike, or some equivalent weapon, will play a great part. To introduce democracy into industry by any other method would be very difficult. And the principle of group-autonomy justifies this method so long as the rest of the community
opposes self-government for industries which desire it. Direct action has its dangers, but so has every vigorous form of activity. And in our recent realization of the importance of law we must not forget that the greatest of all dangers to a civilization is to become stereotyped and stagnant. From this danger, at least, industrial unrest is likely to save us.
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30: 3–4 Russia ... form of constitution In April 1918 a committee was set up by the Bolsheviks to draft a constitution. After much controversy, a constitution was produced and approved by the Central Committee of the Party and the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets on 10 July 1918. It was novel in the insistence that the principal aim consisted in the establishment of “a dictatorship of the city and village proletariat and the poorer peasantry ... (for) crushing completely the bourgeoisie ... and of establishing socialism” (Bunyan 1936, 510). Important modifications were later carried out, particularly in the years up to July 1923.

30: 13 strong ... party in Germany The German Communist Party was formed on 30 December 1918 when the Spartacist League broke away from the Independent Socialist Party of Germany. On 5 January 1919 large demonstrations of workers erupted in Berlin, without the support of the Communist Party. The army put down this rebellion ferociously on 11 and 12 January, and murdered the two main Spartacist leaders, Karl Liebknecht (1871–1919) and Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919). These actions were but the prelude to a bloody civil war between elements of the army—the Freikorps—and workers, many of whom were or became Communists.

30: 37 leaders of the Confédération The largest trade union in France, the Confédération Générale du Travail had been established in 1895 and comprised a little less than half a million of the country’s workers in 1914. As Syndicalists, the CGT leaders, notably Aristide Briand (1862–1932) and Léon Jouhaux, had called upon the French and international working classes to confront the coming of war with a general strike.
Stockholm ... capitalist Press  The coming of the Russian Revolution led many European socialists to call for an international socialist conference in Stockholm to discuss ways to bring about an immediate peace. In early June 1917 Ramsay MacDonald, along with two other Independent Labour Party members, was granted a passport to sail to Petrograd to make preparations for Stockholm. That is when the Seamen’s and Firemen’s Union, led by the patriotic leader Havelock Wilson and the agitator “Captain” Tupper, refused to allow any sailors to transport them to Russia—an action cheered by such papers as The Times which applauded “The Seamen’s Triumph” (12 June 1917, p. 3). In the event, the proposed Stockholm conference was never convened.

prophesy ... Triple Alliance  In fact, the Triple Alliance between miners, railwaymen and transport workers that had been established in 1914 was to be temporarily revived from October 1919 until “Black Friday”, 18 April 1921, when the striking miners (see A128: 17) were left to fight on alone by their two partners.

attempt ... League of Nations  The Draft Covenant of the League of Nations issued on 14 February 1919 invested power in an executive council comprised of the five Allied and Associate Powers. The proposed League Assembly was not to be democratically elected, as Russell and the Left had hoped, but would consist of government nominees. The Left believed that the powers intended to use the League to protect their interests.

Norway ... obtained independence  On 7 June 1905 the Norwegian National Assembly declared that the union with Sweden was dissolved—an action that was accepted by the Swedish Parliament late in September of the same year.

Benthamite theory, upon which democracy  Bentham outlined his political radicalism in a number of writings, particularly in chapter IX of his Constitutional Code: “In so far as his aim is, to serve such of his interests alone, as are theirs as well as his, he finds all hands disposed to join with his: and these common interests correspond to the immediately subordinate right and proper ends of government, maximization of subsistence, abundance, security and equality” (Bentham 1962, 63).

recent General Election ... Kaiser  The Unionist politician and economic historian W. A. S. Hewins noted that early in the campaign the nation “seemed to care only or mainly about trying the Kaiser, making Germany pay and clearing all Germans out of England. On these subjects the Government had said nothing” (Hewins 1929, 2: 175). Disturbed by the electoraté’s evident lack of interest in Unionist speeches, the War Cabinet on 28 November 1918 decided to emphasize punishing the Kaiser. Subsequent election addresses on this topic, especially by Lloyd George, were greeted with enthusiasm.
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The copy-text ("CT") is the version published in The English Review. The textual notes give the results of a collation of CT with the versions published in The Dial ("DL") and in the pamphlet produced by the Independent Labour Party ("ILP").

30: 5 Powers CT, ILP] powers DL
30: 11 Government CT, ILP] government DL
30: 15 desire of the workers CT, ILP] workers who desire DL
30: 15 State CT, ILP] state DL
30: 15 industries, CT, ILP] industries DL
30: 17 personnel DL] personnel CT, ILP
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30: 18 industries, CT, ILP] industries DL
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land-owners and capitalists who at pres-
produce that we choose to allow to the
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technical methods of
our conditions and hours of work, our
and price of the coal that we supply. But
cares concern the community is the quantity
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DL
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footnote appears in text as sentence following
workers CT, ILP] Miners, Railwaymen,
steps CT, ILP] Miners, Railwaymen,
and Transport Workers DL
majority.¹ CT, ILP] content of CT
footnote appears in text as sentence following
majority. DL
tyranny; CT, ILP] tyranny, DL
State CT, ILP] state DL
one CT, ILP] one, DL
independent. CT, ILP] footnote not
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popularly-elected CT, ILP] popularly
elected DL
claim autonomy. ILP] say: “What
community is the quantity and
price of the coal that we supply. But
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methods of CT] the technical methods of
our DL] production, and the share of the
produce that we choose to allow to the
land-owners and capitalists who at pres-
ent own and manage the collieries, all
these are internal concerns of the coal
trade, in which the general public has no
right to interfere. For these purposes we
demand an internal Parliament, (Parlia-
mant, CT] parliament, DL) in which
those who are interested as owners and
capitalists may have one vote each, but no
more.” CT, DL
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demands CT, ILP] demands: DL
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newspapers CT, ILP] newspapers,
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And, in the long run, CT, ILP] And
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Direct action may be employed (a) for amelioration of trade conditions within the present economic system; (b) for economic reconstruction, including the partial or complete abolition of the capitalist system; (c) for political ends, such as altering the form of government, extension of the suffrage, forcing an appeal to the country, or amnesty for political prisoners. Of these three, no one nowadays would deny the legitimacy of the first, except in exceptional circumstances. The third, except for purposes of establishing democracy where it does not yet exist, seems a dubious expedient if democracy, in spite of its faults, is recognized as the best practicable form of government; but in certain cases—for example, where there has been infringement of some important right such as free speech—it may be justifiable. The second of the above uses of the strike, system, or some equivalent weapon, may be employed.