Prologue

Paris, France, 1848

How could the poor and inferior and yet powerful classes not have dreamed of rising up out of their poverty and inferiority by using their power, especially in a time when the view of the hereafter has become more obscure and when the miseries of this world are more visible and seem more intolerable?

— Alexis de Tocqueville, Recollections (1851)

On the evening of February 21, 1848, all across Paris groups of students, reporters, and members of workers’ guilds gathered to make final preparations for a demonstration planned for the following day. The democracy movement had started the previous year when a coalition of republican political leaders introduced a motion in the Chamber of Deputies extending the vote to all men who paid one hundred francs in direct taxes. When the Chamber, which had been elected by a limited franchise, rejected the reform, the democracy activists took their campaign onto the streets. Alarmed by the growing strength of the democracy movement, Prime Minister Guizot called out the National Guard to confront the demonstrators. Instead, the guard joined the protestors in chanting, “Long live reform!” The following day Guizot resigned. As the news spread, people poured into the streets to celebrate. Unfortunately, on the same day a unit of the guard panicked and fired into a crowd, killing fifty people, an incident that soon became known as the massacre of the Boulevard des Capuchines.

As the revolutionary spirit spread throughout Paris, King Louis Philippe, recalling the fate of a previous monarch, fled. The revolutionaries took over the Chamber and proclaimed the Second Republic.

The revolutionaries in 1848 were inspired by the spirit of equality and the “rights of man” as framed by the Marquis de Lafayette in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and adopted by the National Assembly in 1789. The leaders of the democracy movement sought demo-
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cratic reforms that could be achieved by an expanded franchise, reforms
that would make their government more accountable to its citizens. The
fuel that made the revolution flare up, however, was the “social issue” of
the day, the problem of poverty. The first half of the nineteenth century
witnessed a deepening economic crisis caused by the transfer of land rights
from peasants to the state and large landowners. In the countryside where
three-quarters of the population lived, peasants relied on traditional rights
to pasture animals and gather wood on communal lands. A forestry code,
passed at the end of the Restoration, abolished these “usage rights” and
established a rural police force charged with enforcing state regulations.
Large landowners, who were beginning to engage in commercial agricul-
ture for profit, took advantage of the opportunity to usurp the usage rights
of peasants. This led to increasing poverty in the countryside and a steady
stream of migration to cities. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the
population of Paris nearly doubled.

As this occurred, those who sought work in Paris and other cities were
exposed to new ideas. In the first half of the nineteenth century, primary
education was extended. People read newspapers where the problems of
poverty and the working class were debated in a vocabulary provided by
social reformers. Phrases like “exploitation of man by man” and “the right
to work” fired the imagination of workers, students, and revolutionaries.

The immediate cause of the revolution was a financial crisis. The potato
blight of 1845 followed by a poor wheat harvest in 1846 left up to one-third
of the population of France on relief in 1847. Food riots and protests against
the high cost of wheat led the government to import foreign grain, depleting
French gold reserves. In consequence the value of the franc fell, causing a
depression in the domestic market. Businesses curtailed production, and
many of the financial elite fled the country. The number of bankruptcies
skyrocketed, workers lost their jobs, and wages fell.

In the view of Alexis de Tocqueville, who in 1850 recorded his thoughts
on the political events leading to the Revolution in his Recollections, the
ture cause of the outbreak of revolution was a failure of political leadership
and corruption in the government. As he wrote in April 1848 to his friend
Nassau William Senior:

The great and real cause of the revolution was the detestable spirit which ani-
mated the government during its long reign; a spirit of trickery, of baseness,
and of bribery, which has enervated and degraded the middle classes, destroyed
their public spirit, and filled them with a selfishness so blind as to induce them
to separate their interests entirely from those of the lower classes from whence
they sprang, who consequently have been abandoned to the counsels of men who, under pretense of serving the lower orders, have filled their heads with false ideas.

The provisional government established after the fall of the monarchy proclaimed freedom of the press, the right of free assembly and association, and universal suffrage. The response to these freedoms was dramatic. Between February and December of 1848, 479 newspapers were started in Paris. Political organizing appeared in the form of a loose network of associations known as the “club movement.” By March 15, 1848, 59 clubs had been formed in Paris; by mid-April there were 203 clubs with over 70,000 members. Because the rich had fled the revolution, the number of businesses in Paris had declined by 54 percent, and small businesses could no longer obtain credit. Because there were no jobs, the number of unemployed increased daily. The chief demand of the clubs was that the “right to work” be recognized. The first step taken by the new government was to limit the workday in factories to ten hours in Paris and eleven hours in the provinces. The unemployed were paid two francs a day to work on the roads and fortifications outside of Paris. By mid-March there were 25,000 men enrolled in the workshops; by mid-June the number had escalated to 120,000.

By providing guaranteed employment, the workshops strengthened the position of workers in negotiating with employers. An article in the newspaper *Le Constitutionnel* described the situation from the perspective of employers: “The men were supported during their strikes by the government which paid them for doing nothing. They were encouraged by speeches that were hostile to the masters. The men’s solidarity in their strikes was confirmed, and they became more and more hostile to the employers. As this system developed the alarm increased in industry and commerce. The workers’ poverty helped swell what the employers regarded as the army of anarchy.” In fear of the army of the poor, the Parisian middle class, which had formerly supported the ideals of the revolution, began to turn against the democracy movement.

The April election brought to power a Constituent Assembly with more landlords, clergymen, and aristocrats than any assembly elected during the July Monarchy. Leaders of the club movement were divided on how to press for further democratic reforms. Encouraged by their success in the February revolution, some favored resorting to violence. Others argued for a long-term campaign for peaceful reform. As one of the reformers assessed the situation, the working class consisted of two groups—skilled workers in
the artisan trades and wage laborers driven by anger over their poverty and with nothing to lose: “The [former] are very democratic and understand the proper meaning of the word ‘liberty.’ The [latter], on the other hand, mistake liberty for license and are apt to commit disorders to avenge their suffering caused by their masters. Thus they are capable of compromising our cause.”

A demonstration in support of pro-democracy revolutionaries in Poland was scheduled for May 15. As thirty thousand demonstrators gathered to march on the National Assembly, anxiety about a possible outbreak of violence spread. There were rumors that some demonstrators wanted to force a violent confrontation with the assembly. This caused the crowd of protestors to dwindle to about two thousand. The remaining demonstrators did force their way into the assembly and declare it dissolved, but their audacity was ineffectual. This incident, which came to be known as the “Polish fiasco,” led the National Assembly to take action against both the political clubs and the national workshops.

On June 22, 1848, a crowd of a hundred thousand massed at the Hôtel de Ville to protest the closing of the workshops. In the report of the Paris prefect of police, a second revolution appeared imminent: “11:00 a.m. A column of five hundred people, headed by a banner [with the words “National Workshops”] has just marched through the 7th Arrondissement. The men in it say they will not go away to Sologne [a project to drain the marshes] and that they prefer to die here. They add that they will take up arms against the National Assembly, and that the Mobile Guard will support them.” By the next day working-class quarters were studded with barricades, many flying the flags of national workshops or National Guard legions. Brutal street fighting between members of the Parisian working class behind the barricades and poor unemployed youths in the Mobile Guard, whom Karl Marx called the “lumpen proletariat” lasted for four days. When the June insurrection was suppressed, three thousand people had been killed and fifteen thousand more arrested and deported to Algeria.

For Marx, the revolution in France was the first against capitalism. He called for the workers of the world to unite in a long struggle for a society in which there would no longer be classes and a division between those who owned property and those who sold their labor. For Tocqueville, too, the revolutionaries of 1848 were inspired by the love of equality. He believed that the ideals of equality and universal human rights would ignite future revolutions to establish democratic governments. The Revolution of 1848 in France stands at the beginning of an era dominated by two great opposing forces: on the one side capitalism, which tends to concentrate wealth
and power in the hands of a few; and on the other, a call for democratic government accountable to the people, a more equal distribution of power and wealth, and an end to poverty.

In 1998, one hundred and fifty years after the Revolution of 1848, a democracy movement led by students, reporters, and elements of the middle class emerged to confront the authoritarian regime of Suharto’s New Order in Indonesia. There is a striking similarity between the causes and course of the Revolution of 1848 and the reformasi movement in Indonesia. Like the democracy activists in Paris who had inherited the tradition of the French Revolution, protestors in Jakarta saw themselves as carrying on the traditions of the “generation of ’45” that had fought for independence and the “generation of ’65” that had destroyed communism. When the regime of Suharto unexpectedly collapsed overnight as elements of the middle class gave their support to the democracy movement, like the revolutionaries of 1848, reformasi leaders found themselves unprepared to establish a new government.

As in France, the democracy movement in Indonesia grew out of an economic crisis. This was precipitated by the spread of capitalism in the guise of export-oriented policies aimed at production for the world market. The transfer of land rights from farmers and indigenous groups to the state and corporations involved in commercial agriculture increased rural poverty and led to urban migration. In Indonesia, as in France, the expansion of education during the New Order, as well as access to newspapers, radio, and television, brought new ideas to many and fueled hopes for political change. As in France, the success of the democracy movement in Indonesia was due in part to a financial crisis that hit Indonesia in 1997; the Indonesian rupiah was reduced to less than one-quarter of its former value. Businesses went bankrupt, the middle classes saw their prosperity erode, and wealthy Chinese Indonesians tried to preserve their fortunes by sending their money out of the country. The loss of jobs plunged many in the urban working class into poverty, and a dramatic rise in the cost of food provoked mass protests.

After the fall of Suharto in 1998, elites associated with the regime tried to retain their grip on power by calling for order, security, and national unity. Supporters of Suharto’s authoritarian New Order warned that demonstrations of workers and peasants could lead to mob rule, anarchy, and chaos. They argued that the economy would not revive without foreign investment, and foreign investment would not return to Indonesia until there was order and stability. Many in the government maintained that the people were not ready for democracy. Leaders of the reformasi movement
were afraid that a military coup would crush their hopes for democratic reform. They feared that if the middle class were convinced that it must choose between the twin threats of anarchy and despotism, it might prefer despotism.

The democratic revolution that took place in Indonesia in 1998 provides an opportunity to take stock of the worldwide struggle for a more just economic order 150 years after the Revolution of 1848. The spread of free-market capitalism as a global system has fueled democratic movements, but the gap between rich and poor continues to grow wider despite fifty years of Western-sponsored “development.” This study aims to describe the challenges faced by those who struggle for democratic reforms and social justice and to consider, given the world we live in, what kinds of policies and strategies are most likely to promote more accountable government and justice for the poor.