Democracy's Discontent

Debating the Crisis of Liberalism

The ResetDOC
Venice Seminars

Archibugi, Calloni, Ferrara, Leggewie
Magatti, Milbank, Pabst

edited by Fulvia Giachetti

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Democracy's Discontent
Debating the Crisis of Liberalism

ResetDOC Venice Seminars 2025

Daniele Archibugi, Marina Calloni, Alessandro Ferrara,
Claus Leggewie, Mauro Magatti, John Milbank, Adarian Pabst

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Introduction
Democracy at the Crossroads

Fulvia Giachetti

Across much of the world, democratic institutions that took generations to build are facing simultaneous pressures from within and without: the rise of authoritarian nationalism, the corrosive effects of transnational digital capitalism on deliberation and collective judgment, the growing gap between electoral democracy and meaningful popular agency, and the waning credibility of the multilateral liberal international order.

The essays collected in this volume were first presented at the ResetDOC Venice Seminars in 2025, a gathering convened to take stock of the crisis of democracy and think carefully about what might come next. They are written from different disciplinary vantage points, political philosophy, sociology, international relations, democratic theory, and they reflect different diagnoses of the current situation. What unites them is a shared recognition that the discontent with democracy cannot be addressed by mere procedural reform or technocratic fine-tuning. Something deeper is at stake.

The title of this volume deliberately echoes Michael Sandel's *Democracy's Discontent* (1996). Sandel's argument – that the "procedural republic" of liberal political philosophy had hollowed out democratic self-government by insisting on a spurious neutrality toward the good, eroding the civic bonds and shared moral languages on which meaningful political participation depends – anticipated much of what has since

become a widespread diagnosis of liberal democracy's crisis. In his 2022 preface to the reissued volume, Sandel deepened the indictment: the triumph of meritocratic ideology had added a further layer of civic humiliation to the procedural emptiness he had originally identified, while the neoliberal globalization of the intervening decades had accelerated precisely the dissolution of communities and particular attachments that the procedural republic had philosophically licensed. The discontent, in other words, had become more acute, and its political consequences – populism, authoritarian nationalism, the collapse of institutional trust – more visible. The essays collected here take Sandel's diagnosis as a point of departure, but not as a conclusion. They ask, with different emphases and from different disciplinary perspectives, whether the discontent with democracy can be adequately addressed within a renewed liberal framework, or whether it requires a more fundamental rethinking of the relationship between democracy, community, and political order. The answer, as the structure of the volume itself reflects, remains genuinely contested.

The essays gathered here pursue their own distinct paths. The question they collectively raise is not simply whether citizens are dissatisfied with their governments, but whether the liberal frameworks that have shaped democratic thought and practice over the past several decades are themselves part of the problem, or alternatively, whether they contain – properly understood and renewed – the conceptual resources needed for a response.

Part I. Inside the Crisis of Liberal Order

The opening section of the volume addresses the structural conditions under which contemporary democracies are operating. Three contributions approach this theme from different angles, but with a shared attention to the ways in which tech-

nological and geopolitical transformation are reconfiguring the terrain on which democratic politics must take place.

Daniele Archibugi's contribution, *The Democracy Levers: Internal and External Connections*, reopens a classical question in democratic theory – the relationship between the internal structure of a political regime and its external conduct – and examines it under present conditions. Archibugi argues that the dynamics of international relations and domestic democracy are more deeply intertwined than either mainstream international relations theory or democratic theory typically acknowledges. He develops the opposition between what he terms the *"rally 'round the flag effect"*– the tendency of embattled governments to manufacture or exaggerate external threats in order to suppress internal dissent – and a contrasting dynamic he names the *"shake your neighbors' hand effect"*, through which transnational linkages among civil societies can reinforce pluralism and democratic accountability. The erosion of the latter and the instrumentalisation of the former by illiberal governments is, he argues, among the most serious threats facing democratic politics today.

The essay *The Twilight of Liquid Modernity: Digital Rationalization and Technopopulism*, by Mauro Magatti, places the current crisis within a broader civilizational frame. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity and on thermodynamic metaphors of entropy, Magatti argues that the neoliberal project, which once presented itself as a force of liberation, has produced systemic exhaustion. The digital revolution, rather than resolving this crisis, has deepened it by combining unprecedented rationalization with growing social fragmentation and political disorientation. Out of this combination, Magatti argues, emerges what he calls "technopopulism": a new form of political power that fuses digital infrastructure with populist appeals, bypassing deliberative institutions and restructuring the conditions of democratic citizenship.

Marina Calloni introduces a conceptual innovation in her essay *The Rise of the Sophocrats: Political, Economic, and Epistemic Power in Algorithmic Governance*. She argues that the dominant diagnoses of our time – populism on one side, neoliberal financialization on the other – fail to capture a deeper transformation: the emergence of a new ruling formation whose authority derives not primarily from wealth, electoral success, or technical expertise within institutional frameworks, but from control over the epistemic infrastructures through which reality becomes knowable. She names this formation "sophocracy", situating it in an investigation of elite rule that runs from aristocracy through technocracy to the present. The case of Peter Thiel serves as a central illustration. What is at stake, Calloni argues, is the very capacity to sustain shared horizons of meaning: a capacity that democratic politics cannot afford to surrender.

Part II. Resources for Renewal

The second section turns from structural diagnosis to normative reconstruction. Both contributors in this section are defenders of liberal democracy, but they approach its defense from distinct theoretical positions, and with different emphases regarding what needs to be preserved, revised, or abandoned.

The most direct engagement with the thesis that liberalism itself bears responsibility for the populist backlash is developed in Alessandro Ferrara's contribution, *The Liberal Script, Democracy's Discontent, and Political Liberalism*. Ferrara subjects this thesis to careful scrutiny, distinguishing between different versions of liberalism and arguing that the standard critiques – that liberalism fails to accommodate belonging, exalts individual choice as a supreme value, and claims spurious neutrality – apply most forcefully to neoliberalism and to certain strands of libertarian and proceduralist thinking, rather than to the paradigm of

political liberalism associated with John Rawls. Far from being part of the problem, Ferrara argues, Rawlsian political liberalism – together with related approaches by Ronald Dworkin and Jürgen Habermas – offers conceptual resources that can strengthen democratic defenses against illiberal populism. The editor regards this contribution as an important corrective to versions of the "post-liberal" critique that are insufficiently discriminating in their targets.

Claus Leggewie's essay, *Will the Center Hold? In Search of a Renewed Democratic Middle Ground*, approaches the question of democratic renewal from the perspective of political sociology and the history of European political thought. Leggewie traces the concept of the "vital center" from Aristotle and Confucius through the post-war liberal recovery to the present moment of renewed polarization, and asks whether a renewed democratic middle ground can be constituted – and if so, on what basis. His answer is cautiously affirmative, but conditional: the center can hold only if it transforms itself from an "empty center" of managerial consensus into a dynamic space of engaged democratic participation. The disconnection between civil society and the party system, Leggewie argues, is the most urgent structural problem that democratic reformers must address.

Part III. A Different Diagnosis

The third section of this volume calls for a word of editorial explanation. The two essays gathered here – by John Milbank and Adrian Pabst – represent a current of thought that has attracted considerable attention in recent years, and that cannot be ignored in any serious discussion of democracy's future. Both authors argue, from different but related vantage points, that the crisis of liberal democracy is not merely contingent or correctable, but symptomatic of liberalism's deep philosophical inad-

equacies. In this, they go considerably further than the critics represented in the first two sections of the volume. The case for liberal democracy is stronger when it is tested against its most searching critics.

John Milbank's essay, *Democracy, Capitalism and the Ethical: A Post-Liberal Democratic Manifesto*, offers a wide-ranging critique of liberal democracy as an ideological formation that has consistently subordinated ethical and communal life to the requirements of capitalist accumulation and procedural formalism. Milbank argues for a recovery of what he regards as richer pre-liberal traditions of political thought, in which democracy is embedded within a broader ethical and spiritual order rather than conceived as a neutral procedural framework for managing individual preferences.

The volume is closed by Adrian Pabst's essay, *The Realist Turn: Freedom, Democracy and International Order After Liberalism*, focuses on the geopolitical and institutional dimensions of the post-liberal moment. Pabst argues that the return of realism in international affairs – visible in the Trump administration's realpolitik, the rise of civilizational powers, and the collapse of the "rules-based international order" – marks not merely a pragmatic adjustment but a philosophical rupture. Against both liberal idealism and amoral realpolitik, Pabst proposes a tradition of "ethical realism" anchored in concepts of social freedom, mixed constitutions, and an international order grounded in cultural and ethical ties.

Conclusion

The essays collected in this volume do not converge on a single answer, and they were not intended to. What they share is a refusal of two symmetrical temptations: the temptation to dismiss the crisis of liberal democracy as a temporary malfunction, correctable by institutional tinkering or better communication strategies; and the temptation to conclude from the reality of the crisis that liberalism itself must be abandoned in favor of some pre- or post-liberal alternative. The contributions by Ferrara and Leggewie argue, each in their own way, that the resources for democratic renewal are to be found within the liberal tradition – properly understood, critically revised, and freed from its neoliberal distortions. The contributions by Archibugi, Magatti, and Calloni map the structural conditions – geopolitical, technological, epistemic – that any credible project of democratic renewal must confront. The contributions by Milbank and Pabst press the argument further, contending that the crisis of liberal democracy is not contingent but symptomatic, rooted in liberalism's long-standing philosophical incapacity to sustain the ethical and communal foundations on which any viable political order depends. Together, all seven essays constitute a genuine debate – one that the editor believes is necessary precisely because it is unresolved.

The voices gathered here represent one arc of a much wider and more contested debate – they do not, and cannot, exhaust the conversation. The ambition of this volume, then, is modest in one sense and significant in another. It does not offer a blueprint for democratic renewal. It does insist that the discontent with democracy deserves to be taken seriously – diagnosed with precision, engaged with intellectual honesty, and met with arguments that do not condescend to those who feel it most acutely. If these essays contribute to that conversation, they will have served their purpose.

I would like to thank Alessandro Ferrara for his assistance in editing the text.

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Part I

Inside the Crisis of Liberal Order

The Democracy Levers
Internal and External Connections

Daniele Archibugi

Abstract

The idea that democracy could influence international relations and international organizations has emerged forcefully since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although the results achieved have been meager, the analytical issue remains relevant. This paper argues that, on the one hand, devolving powers to international organizations reinforces the possibility of implementing democratic transitions in authoritarian countries and of improving participation and accountability in those that are already democratic (the external lever). On the other hand, democratic achievements within nations reinforce not only peaceful cooperation but also the role played by international organizations in providing global governance (the internal lever). However, this connection may also work in the opposite direction, as incumbent governments may have a propensity to generate conflicts to reinforce their internal power, silencing opposition.

Keywords: International organizations; Democratization; Democratic peace; Rally 'round the flag effect.

"Rally Round the Flag" or "Shake Your Neighbor's Hand" Effect?

There is a widespread consensus in international relations theory that the external context influences the internal one and vice versa.

Incumbent rulers have often the propensity to exaggerate external threat to reinforce internal cohesion and to increase their power. Governments that are internally challenged and that are afraid of losing their authority are very likely to artificially blow on conflicts, to cultivate fears and to call for national unity around their leadership. Nothing better than a war helps this purpose: when there is an open conflict, all sub-national units (individuals, local government, political parties, civil societies organizations and even religious associations) have very limited choices: they are demanded to align with their government. If they do not, they are likely to be marginalized and named unpatriotic in the best scenario or even attacked as traitors in the darker scenario. Within international relations, this is named the "rally 'round the flag effect", and it has often proven very effective to divert internal controversies and to pave the way to authoritarianism (see Baker & Oneal 2001).

Fortunately, there are also forces which operate in the opposite direction: trade, foreign direct investment, scientific and cultural collaboration and tourism foster cooperative international relations. All these activities are not carried out by governments alone. They involve a plurality of players which do not necessarily align or are controlled by central governments. When nations are internally pluralistic and allow the co-existence of different positions, it is more likely that differences across each country will emerge, and this will facilitate transnational bounds. When sub-national units can collaborate across borders, and when the central government does not maintain its control over the transnational linkages of its

citizens and associations, there are powerful forces which are against international conflicts and, at the same time, pushes internally to foster tolerance and diversity.

To the standard "rally 'round the flag effect" we could therefore oppose a reverse effect, which I call "shake your neighbor's hand effect".

The "shake your neighbor's hand effect", however, is not achieved without political commitment. Authoritarian leaders look at the external linkages of their communities suspiciously. The governments of illiberal societies are afraid when their citizens, associations and firms connect with foreigners. They are afraid because this may lead to dangerous cross-fertilizations and their own political, economic, social or even religious ideas could be challenged and subverted. The more their subjects connect with external institutions, the more tyrants perceive that their power is dared. In fact, authoritarian regimes typically exercise a strong control over the external activities of their subjects. But how does a specific regime, a democratic one, act in determining international affairs? In fact, one of the core tenants of democracy is to institutionalize the existence of a government and of an opposition, both of which have equal legitimacy within the constitutional framework. Government and opposition in pluralistic nations are expected to have different views not only on internal issues, but also on foreign policy. Which effect does it have on the global scene?

Global Democracy at the Spotlight

International relations theory did not consider at all democracy as one of its constituting elements: if we read the old textbooks we will today be surprised that the very word "democracy" is absent. if democracy is mentioned at all, it is just as one

of the possible political regimes ruling the state, being the latter the real focus of the discipline.

At the end of the cold war, there was genuine interest in democracy as a potential constituting element of international relations. A fresh literature investigated the connection between international relations and democracy in two separate ways. One body of literature explored the question if internal democratic governance is leading states to be more peaceful than other forms of governance. The answer was that democracies are only marginally less involved in warfare than other political regimes. A subordinate hypothesis came to the fore, namely if democracies, even if belligerent as any other regime, tend to avoid wars among themselves. The debate about the hypothesis that "democracies do not fight each other" therefore focused on democracy as an internal political regime (see Russett 1993).

Another body of literature attempted to check if some of the norms, procedures and values of democracy could also be introduced at the global level, especially within international organizations (IOs) (Archibugi & Held 1995; Held 1995; Gould 2004; Archibugi 2008; Koenig-Archibugi 2024). Both these literatures had an implicit normative implication, namely that if in one way or another we manage to increase democracy within states *and* in international politics we reach a more peaceful world order.

For both these literatures it was crucial to identify what democracy is. Concerning the internal dimension, we cannot establish an "ideal" notion of democracy that can be applied to any political community. While several attempts tried to classify political regimes as free/not free (Freedom House), democratic/authoritarian (Polity IV), or through a larger number of indicators (V-Dem), when the internal/external nexus is explored it is perhaps better to use different lens (for a critical analysis, see Boese 2019).

Specifically, it becomes important not only to focus on the static aspect (how we classify a regime in each period) but also the dynamic component (how regimes are evolving over time). All political regimes could improve their level of participation, accountability and responsiveness, i.e. all of them could become more democratic. Certainly, we do not make a good service to, say, Denmark (the most democratic country according to V-Dem), by suggesting that since it has reached the peak, it could not further improve its democratic practice. And even countries that, according to these metrics, are at the bottom of the league could not only learn something from others with higher scores, but also teach something to others. China, a nation which is certainly not democratic, has a gender gap index which, according to the UNDP Human Development Report, is lower than India. What it is therefore crucial is how the international system could help each political community to learn from each other and possibly to expand the level of participation, legitimacy and accountability within its borders.

When the concept of democracy is applied to global governance and its institutions, it is still controversial to understand what it is meant. While world federalists propose to extend the same principles used within nations, others are more cautious and believe that more flexibility is needed. I suggested (Archibugi 2008) a minimal concept of democracy which considers what extent IOs and INGOs respond to democratic values and practices and, above all, how they could increase participation, accountability and transparency (see Table 1).

Table 1. Democratic principles and intergovernmental organizations

Basic principles	Current application in IOs	Democratic reform of IOs
Nonviolence	Commitment of member state to address peacefully international conflicts and to use force for self-defence only	Enforcement of the nonviolence principle through I) compulsory jurisdiction of the international judicial power II) individual criminal responsibility for international crimes III) humanitarian intervention to guarantee the security of peoples threaten by genocide and major human rights violations
Political control	Control exercised by member governments Publicity and transparency of acts Norms and procedures codified in International Treaties, Covenants, Charters, and Statutes	Expansion of political control through a World Parliament, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and other peoples' representatives Open the rooms of IO to global civil society and its NGOs Monitoring of national governments policies by cosmopolitan institutions
Political equality	Formal equality of states Equality of citizens in terms of rights sanctioned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights	Equality of states on a substantial rather than formal basis (involvement of states associated to the stake held) Political equality among citizens on the ground of a minimal list of rights and duties associated to cosmopolitan citizenship Direct participation in world politics through a directly elected World Parliament or other forms of peoples' representatives

Source: Archibugi (2008). Political control and equality are drawn from Beetham (1999).

After nearly 20 years, Table 1 looks very naïve. At the time, there were still expectations that it was possible to move on toward a democratic reform of IOs. Today, we see that all existing principles have been denied. But since the current world politics is generating more instability, it is still necessary to show that an approach to global governance based on non-domination and participation is still possible.

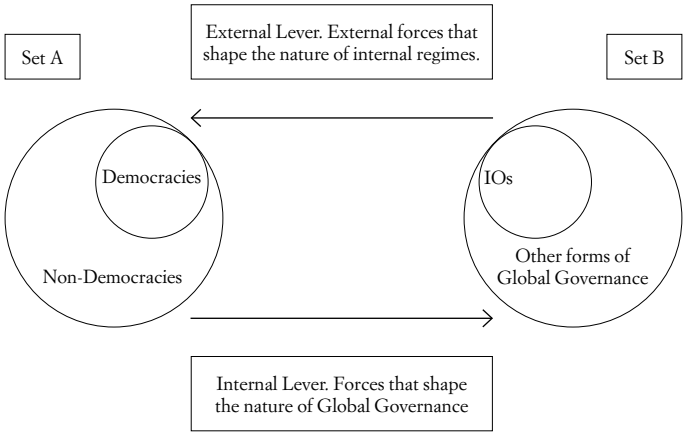
Can the Internal Democracy Foster Global Democracy and Vice Versa?

The "rally 'round the flag effect" may produce greater consent for the government within a country but the reduction of civil freedoms. At the same time, it disseminates externally fear and threats and it therefore generates instability in the international scene. But also the alternative, namely the desired "shake your neighbor's hand effect", can have an impact both internally and externally. If this understanding of democracy is accepted, it will also be possible to clarify how the internal dimension is associated to the external one. Figure 1 explores the possible connections. I have labelled these connections:

– The internal lever, i.e. the possibility that an increase in the number of democratic nations and of their quality may generate a more cooperative and participatory international environment.

– The external lever, i.e. the possibility that a more cooperative international environment has a positive impact in promoting and deepening democracy within nations.

Figure 1. The internal and the external levers



The Internal Lever

The first and crucial dimension is the role that governments allow IOs to play compared to other forms of global governance and international interactions. IOs were not born to respect the procedures of democracy as it is understood within states. We know that – even if created by liberal states as sorts of gentlemen clubs – IOs seldom require that member states should conform to a specific political regime. With the notable exception of the European Union and a few other institutions, IOs do not have requisite about the domestic regimes of their members.

Despite their limits, IOs have the advantage of being somehow visible, while alternative forms of global governance (such as secret agreements, diplomacy or simply coercion) are non-transparent. The post-war period has shown that IOs are far from incorporating all activities carried out under the rubric of diplomacy and power politics. In fact, besides IOs, governments employ a battery of instruments in foreign policy. We can however argue that if there is a good international climate, states make more extensive use of IOs and they become the locus for discussion, negotiation and compromise. If there is a tense international climate, IOs become less relevant and often stop to be used as compensation chamber.

The possibility to increase participation is certainly more likely to be obtained within the existing and eventually new IOs rather than outside them. When are governments willing to give a greater role to IOs? Let see how Set A can have an impact on Set B.

I assume that if there is an increase in the number of democracies in Set A, and if established democracies further develop their internal devices, it will become easier to increase the power and functions of IOs to the expenses of other forms of global governance. The assumption is therefore that for a state to be a good member of the international community it is not sufficient that it is democratic, but also that there is a recognized progress on the internal democratic devices. Furthermore, I assume that the activities of IOs will be likely to be more transparent, accountable and representative.

The internal lever will rely very much on the foreign policy pursued by democratic regimes. Are they better members of the international community and more favorable to increase participation, accountability and representativeness in IOs? If democratic nations are perceived to be good citizens of the international community, they are in a better position to advocate more progressive forms of global governance. If they are

not perceived with such qualities, it is much less likely that their moral suasion will be effective.

The External Lever

Let move to Set B, viewing it also dynamically. There are several devices which have been singled out in the literature and allows IOs to have a positive impact on the internal regimes of its members.

First, IOs can use positive conditionality through granting specific funds to foster democratic government or sustain democratic reforms. More importantly, they can link membership to the IO itself to the achievement of some minimum democratic threshold, as is the case in the EU. Membership to some IOs often provides material advantages, ranging from access to free trade zones, security cooperation, and cooperation in cultural, scientific and technological domains. These incentives provide strong reasons for prospective members to start and consolidate the transition to democracy.

Second, using socialization, IOs can provide a space in which transitional countries, through the proximity with consolidated democracy, can learn how develop democratic institutions and can interiorize the democratic norms required to rule a democratic polity. IOs can facilitate the transmission of knowledge on democratic governance and its institutions, for example IOs can help national political parties, professional associations, and the public opinion to learn how to organize controversies in an agonistic rather than an antagonistic format.

Often, IOs also play a more active role in providing expertise and training to public and private institutions. During democratic transitions, IOs have helped to train or re-train the police, the judicial system, the media. Particularly important is the role played in socializing the military, the typical institution on which authoritarian regimes are based. Within IOs, the military in transition countries can learn from their colleagues in democratic regimes what their role is in a democratic society.

Third, IOs have shown to be a powerful tool in carrying out the function of controlling and therefore they can play a crucial role in the transition from authoritarian to democratic regime. Incumbent authoritarian governments are often reluctant to give up their power because they are uncertain about their future. They may fear that if opposite political groups access the government, they will impose their own dictatorship rather than a liberal regime. The incumbent authoritarian forces are more likely to step aside if they envisage a political space as an opposition political party and if they are guaranteed that the coming democratic regime will allow government changes associated to free and recurrent elections. Membership in IOs helps to provide a center of gravity where all governments may act as brokers to guarantee the non-use of violence of the incumbent government against oppositions.

Fourth, IOs are often called as brokers in young and weak democracies, where there is still a fundamental lack of trust among political factions. For example, IOs have been more active in contributing in election organization and monitoring, up to the point that it is emerging as a new norm. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has frequently helped countries in designing their electoral systems and other IOs have been active as election monitors. Several IOs, especially at the regional level, have helped in election monitoring with various degrees of success.

Let hypothetically assume that all international public decisions will not any longer be taken outside IOs, and that they will therefore be able to increase their functions and powers (in terms of Figure 1, it means that all forms of global governance

will be in the hands of IOs). Will this influence the internal political regimes? I think that the effect will be very important. Authoritarian rulers will not any longer be able to use the "external threat" card to impose their choices. Therefore, it is likely that citizens will claim to participate more actively in their own ruling, and this is very likely to push towards democratization.

Back to the Hard Reality of International Politics

A quarter of a century ago, the so-called Western community divided itself on the invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and, above all, of Iraq (2003). The United States, supported by a so-called coalition of the willing, waged the Iraq war despite the opposition of many European countries. The Bush administration claimed that one of the objectives of these invasions was to make these countries democratic. The hidden idea was that if the number of democratic regimes will increase, also the overall global governance will become more peaceful. These wars ended up being the greatest fiasco of the XXI Century: neither Afghanistan nor Iraq have moved to democracy, and the occupying forces had to withdraw with shame after more than twenty years of bloody and costly military occupation. Both nations are today either in chaos or under brutal dictatorships, as they were before the occupation started. Democratic countries, which for so long were led by the USA, lost authority as inspirer of a world order based on legitimacy, the rule of law and ultimately democracy. Other countries learnt the lesson that to invade a foreign country can become standard practice. Russia has already capitalized the lesson invading Ukraine, and we are afraid that China may follow the same going in Taiwan.

The second Trump Presidency is forcing to rethink much of the academic and political program associated to the democratization of global governance. The program of making nations democratic against their will has certainly terminated. But the democratic rhetoric which accompanied many previous American administrations has also disappeared. The threat of invasion, also against liberal countries (i.e. Panama and Greenland) and other hostile actions against traditional allied (including Canada and Europe) show that the solidarity among Western democracies, which inspired the program of democratizing global governance, has gone.

The new foreign policy of great powers is humiliating IOs and it is reducing their functions (Dijkstra 2025). The UN Security Council, the forum where global issues were discussed in the 1990s, is today less likely to be consulted and certainly has proven unable to sort out the main problems related to peace and security (Archibugi et al. 2025). The WTO cannot any longer assess trade controversies since the United States have blocked the appointments of new judges (Pollack 2023). Other IOs such as the World Health Organization are forced to reduce their activities.

The current decline in the functions and scope of IOs is matched by a similar trend in internal regimes. IDEA (2025, p. 13) has identified the countries with significant advances and declines in democratic practices. In 2024, 54 per cent of countries have experienced some decline in their democratic practice, against 32 per cent of countries were some advances occurred. This is the opposite of the situation identified in 1991, when 55 per cent of countries reported advances in democracy, and less than 20 per cent declines.

From the analytical viewpoint, the connection between internal and external forces is still working, but in opposite directions compared to the optimistic expectations generated by the end of the Cold War. The abandonment of cooperative agreements in crucial institutions, including the UN Security Council, the WTO and NATO, is functional to reducing

human rights protection in consolidated democracies, and it is paving the way to new forms of internal authoritarian governance. We wanted more internal democracy leading to more global cooperation, accountability and transparency, but what we are getting is precisely the opposite: less international cooperation leading to less internal democracy.

How come that the march of democracy, which seemed unstoppable in the early 1990s, has ended so soon? On the one hand, the people invested too many energies and hopes in the democratic credo, and they obtained marginal advantages only. Political participation has often remained formal and not substantial, income inequalities have grown, leaders have proven ineffective and this has disillusioned citizens (Wike 2025). It is certainly significant that a substantial part of the world population, so often abandoned in the waves of globalization, is convinced that there is the need for greater participation, giving new hopes to the desire of a universal republic (Koenig-Archibugi 2024). But if we want to prevent democracies from perishing (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2019), we must remember that their fate is inexorably linked to the global picture.

Let Shake Our Neighbors' Hands

One of the learnt lessons of our age is that elections are not any longer sufficient to guarantee an adequate leadership (IDEA 2025; Wike 2025). One of the main problems with leadership is that too often leaders who wish to maintain control over their nations are ready to wage wars to activate the "rally 'round the flag effect". Unfortunately, there have not yet been found effective antidotes.

But awareness that peoples of different nations have much more common interests than those depicted by their incumbent governments could also be successful in limiting authoritarian governments. What I have labelled the "shake your neighbor's hand" is not done by governments only. This is the moment in which civil society should not only impede that the democratic values and procedures achieved after decades of struggle are cancelled, but also to increase linkages across nations to defuse the "rally 'round the flag effect". Non-governmental organizations, local governments, professional associations, human rights groups could lead the route towards a reinforcement of democratic practices within nations as well as in the global society.

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The Twilight of Liquid Modernity
Digital Rationalization and Technopopulism

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Abstract

Liquid modernity has entered an "entropic twilight": the flexible, emancipatory promise that followed solid modernity is nearing systemic exhaustion. As in earlier modern crises, rapid expansion has produced contradictions – today intensified by the long-term outcomes of neoliberalism: radical individualization, weakened institutions, and the rise of algorithmic governance. The paper frames the present as an entropic crisis spanning ecological, economic, social, and symbolic dimensions, culminating in a bifurcation where societies either collapse or reorganize at higher complexity. It then analyses digital rationalization as a paradoxical intensification of Weberian rationality: systems optimize information but erode meaning, producing semantic overload, fragmentation, and loss of shared reality. These dynamics generate three intertwined deprivations – economic insecurity, cultural disorientation, and relational isolation – fueling technopopulism, a hybrid regime fusing technocratic control with affective mobilization, embodied by the twin figures of the trickster and the algorithm.

Keywords: Transition; Liquid modernity; Entropy; Neoliberalism; Digital rationalization; Algorithmic governance; Economic deprivation; Cultural fragmentation; Relational isolation; Technopopulism.

Introduction: A Crisis of Transition

Liquid modernity is now facing a critical phase – what might be described as its entropic twilight. While solid modernity was characterized by industrial mass production, bureaucratic governance, and the primacy of the nation-state, liquid modernity emerged in its wake, promising flexibility, individual emancipation, and cultural fluidity (Bauman 2000). However, like its predecessor, liquid modernity now appears to be approaching systemic exhaustion.

This is not the first time that modernity has entered a state of crisis. This has often occurred after phases characterized by rapid growth. The unprecedented capitalist expansion of the latter half of the nineteenth century eventually culminated in two world wars and the collapse of multiple political systems. At that time, the combination of the industrial logic of mass production and the normative power of the state created explosive contradictions. The result was a devastating descent into chaos that could only be mitigated by the establishment of order in the form of welfare capitalism and democratic compromise (Polanyi 1944).

Today, a similar dynamic is unfolding, albeit under vastly different historical and technological conditions. At the heart of our present condition lies the double-edged success of the neoliberal project. In its early phases, neoliberalism appeared as a liberating force, promoting deregulation, globalization, and entrepreneurial freedom (Harvey 2005). However, its long-term outcomes have included radical individualization, the weakening of public institutions, and the growth of algorithmic systems that now govern economic, social, and political life (Zuboff 2019).

In this new context, we are witnessing the emergence of a paradox: a society that is more technologically rational than ever before, yet which is becoming increasingly irrational in terms of its organization, culture, and politics. The very tools intended

to enhance human agency and coordination – digital networks, data analytics, and artificial intelligence – are producing fragmentation, confusion, and widespread disorientation (Stiegler 2014). This paper explores this paradox. It begins by identifying the underlying entropic crisis that destabilizes contemporary institutions and ecologies. It then investigates the effects of digital rationalization and unpacks the social consequences of three structural deprivations. Finally, it analyses the political mutation that leads to the rise of technopopulism as the emergent form of governance in our time.

The Entropic Crisis

At the root of our current crisis lies a contradiction that transcends economics and politics. It concerns the trajectory of modern civilization and the energies that have driven it forward. For over two centuries, human agency – expressed through desire, production, consumption, and innovation – has grown in unprecedented ways. This has undoubtedly improved the quality of life for billions, extending longevity, reducing poverty, and unlocking new possibilities for human flourishing. However, it has also led to systemic destabilization.

Entropy, a concept originally developed within thermodynamics, refers to the tendency of closed systems to move towards disorder and energy dissipation (Schrödinger 1944). In the context of contemporary society, however, entropy can no longer be confined to natural sciences. It increasingly operates across ecological, economic, social, and symbolic dimensions. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation are clear manifestations of ecological entropy. Social systems display entropic symptoms, too: political polarization, institutional fragility, cultural fragmentation, and widespread deterioration in mental health (Rosa 2019).

The neoliberal economic model, based on continuous growth, market deregulation, and globalized production, has reached a point of diminishing returns. What was once a dynamic engine of prosperity now resembles a machine stuck in overdrive, producing fewer benefits and more negative externalities. The expansion of productive capacity is no longer matched by growth in social cohesion or institutional legitimacy. Instead, we observe stagnation in real wages, the precarization of labor, the accumulation of debt, and the privatization of public goods (Standing 2011).

Ilya Prigogine's notion of bifurcation is useful here. As complex systems accumulate entropy, they eventually reach a threshold beyond which they can no longer sustain their structure. At this point, the system bifurcates: it either collapses or reorganizes itself at a higher level of complexity (Prigogine & Stengers 1984). We are nearing such a bifurcation point in global modernity. The existing economic, political, ecological, and symbolic architecture is no longer capable of dissipating the entropy it generates. Without deep transformation, collapse becomes a real possibility.

Furthermore, the crisis is not only systemic but also symbolic. It is not only that our systems are failing; it is also the case that our narratives are flawed. The once-powerful narrative of progress, which justified sacrifice and promised improvement, has lost its credibility (Koselleck 1988), (Koselleck 2007). As well the promises of happiness for all that had characterized the roaring years of neoliberalism. Younger generations, in particular, find themselves adrift in a landscape where institutions are weak, promises are broken, and futures appear foreclosed (Han 2015). The experience of temporal dislocation – what some call presentism – pervades the social imagination: the future seems either threatening or blank, and the past no longer serves as a reliable guide.

This collapse of time contributes to what we might call existential entropy. This manifests as rising rates of depression, anxiety, and alienation (Twenge 2017). In parallel, collective identities are losing their integrative force. Where nations, religions, or ideologies once offered frameworks of meaning, today we see a proliferation of fragmented and often contradictory subcultures and identity formations (Taylor 2007). These are less about shared purpose and more about emotional positioning within an unstable field of recognition.

At the same time, global interdependence has reached unprecedented levels. Economies are enmeshed in transnational supply chains, digital platforms connect billions in real time, and financial markets operate on a global scale. However, this interconnectedness has not produced solidarity. Instead, it has generated vulnerabilities: global shocks, such as pandemics or energy crises, rapidly cascade through tightly coupled systems, revealing their fragility.

In short, the entropic crisis represents the culmination of the internal contradictions of liquid modernity. It is the exhaustion of the conditions that enabled it: economic expansion, cultural flexibility, and technological acceleration. What remains is a system that continues to function technically – markets operate, data circulates, and apps are updated – but whose deeper coherence has collapsed. We are witnessing the hollowing out of the symbolic core of modern civilization (Stiegler 2014). The very forces that once promised liberation now appear to be dissolving the very basis of meaningful life.

Digital Rationalisation and its Paradoxes

As the entropic crisis unfolds, modern societies are doubling down on one of their founding principles: technological rationalization. From the Enlightenment onwards, Western modernity has pursued the dream of making the world more intelligible, predictable, and manageable through reason (Weber 1978).

Science, bureaucracy, and capitalism were the main drivers of this process in solid modernity. In liquid modernity, however, rationalization takes on a new and more insidious form: digital rationalization (Bauman 2000).

Digital rationalization is not merely the continuation of the bureaucratic project in a technological guise. Rather, it represents a deeper transformation in the architecture of human activity, rewiring the very conditions of communication, coordination, and cognition. Unlike bureaucracies, which imposed order through hierarchical structures and formal rules, digital systems operate through networked infrastructures, real-time data processing, and algorithmic modulation. They offer not just control but optimization: the ability to manage complexity by converting it into computable patterns (Beer 2017).

At first glance, this seems to be a rational response to a world spinning out of control. In the face of ecological instability, political gridlock, and economic volatility, digital systems offer speed, precision, and adaptability. Machine learning models can forecast climate events, optimize logistics, monitor health trends, and even detect fraud. In this sense, digital rationalization extends the logic of scientific management to virtually every domain of human life. The ambition is total: anything that can be quantified can be governed.

However, the efficiency of this approach conceals a profound paradox. Digital systems process information, not meaning (Stiegler 2014). They deal with correlations, not causations; patterns, not purpose. This is what makes them both powerful and dangerous. The more we rely on them to coordinate our societies, the more we risk replacing semantic richness with syntactic precision. In doing so, we generate semantic entropy, a state in which communication becomes faster and more voluminous but also more ambiguous, less reliable, and more emotionally volatile (Han 2017).

This paradox is nowhere more evident than in public discourse. Social media platforms exemplify the logic of digital rationalization and have transformed the public sphere into a hyper-performative space (Couldry & Hepp 2016). They democratize expression – everyone can speak – but they undermine dialogue. The structure of engagement rewards immediacy, outrage, and spectacle rather than reflection, nuance, or deliberation. The result is a public arena saturated with noise, where visibility is mistaken for relevance and virality for truth.

Furthermore, the algorithmic architectures that sustain digital rationalization introduce a new form of opacity. Unlike codified and contestable bureaucratic rules, algorithms are often proprietary, dynamic, and non-transparent. They influence our choices regarding what we see, who we interact with, what we buy, and how we vote, without our explicit awareness or consent. This creates a mode of governance that nudges and anticipates rather than forbidding or repressing (Zuboff 2019). It is less about law and more about influence, and less about sovereignty and more about behavioral capture.

In this environment, communication is no longer anchored in stable cultural, institutional or relational ecosystems. Instead, it is disembedded, fragmented and reassembled in real time according to the logic of the attention economy (Citton 2017). The consequence is not merely confusion, but ontological destabilization: people begin to lose confidence in the existence of a shared reality. Conspiracy theories, fake news and deepfakes are symptoms of this deeper fracture – not aberrations, but structural by-products of a system in which truth is not a priority.

Thus, we arrive at a disturbing paradox: the more rational our digital systems become, the less rational our societies appear. Efficiency increases while coherence dissolves. Precision expands while understanding contracts. Technical robustness advances while subjective fragility intensifies. This is the sociotechnical manifestation of the entropic crisis: systems that

function formally, yet produce unintended and frequently irrational consequences in the human domain. Welcome to the "Babel modernity".

Consider predictive policing algorithms, for example. These systems promise to reduce crime by allocating resources based on data patterns. However, the data they use is often historically biased, reflecting past injustices. Consequently, such systems risk perpetuating the very inequalities they aim to correct while concealing their discriminatory nature behind a veil of objectivity. A similar logic applies to credit scoring, hiring platforms and even educational evaluations: rationalization becomes a mechanism of automated discrimination, shielded from critique by its technical façade.

Or take the domain of education. Digital platforms promise to personalize learning, optimize content delivery, and monitor student performance. However, they also transform the educational experience into a series of quantifiable outcomes, thereby undermining the relational, exploratory, and ethical aspects of learning. Students become data points, teachers become content facilitators, and curricula become feedback loops. What is lost is the pedagogical relationship – the transformative encounter between people – that gives education its meaning.

In the workplace, digital rationalization enables remote coordination, task automation, and productivity tracking. However, it also fragments the labor process, increases surveillance, and weakens informal bonds. The result is a paradoxical condition in which workers are both more connected and more isolated. They are integrated into global systems but disembedded from local communities. Their productivity rises, but their sense of purpose declines.

This logic extends to the political realm as well. Digital tools enable governments to collect data, model behaviors, and predict public responses. However, they also encourage

governance by metrics, whereby policy is guided not by deliberation or ethics, but by data dashboards and engagement curves. Political leaders become managers of public sentiment rather than representatives of the common good. In such a system, the very idea of representation – of speaking on behalf of others within a shared normative framework – begins to erode (Urbinati 2019).

At the cultural level, digital rationalization accelerates the circulation of images, texts, and signs. It enables cultural fragments to be recombined across borders, genres, and languages. However, this acceleration can also lead to hyperreality, a condition in which representations become detached from their referents, and simulations replace experiences (Baudrillard 1994). Culture becomes a field of endless remixing, devoid of anchoring traditions or collective rituals. In such a world, individuals have the freedom to curate their identities but struggle to find authenticity or a sense of belonging.

The result is a distinctive form of social disorientation. Unlike earlier forms of alienation, which stemmed from economic exploitation or political repression, this new disorientation arises from cognitive overload and semantic fatigue (Rosa 2019). People are not silenced; they are overwhelmed. They are not oppressed; they are disoriented. They do not lack information; they are inundated with it. Traditional categories of resistance, such as class struggle, civil rights, and ideological critique, struggle to gain traction in a landscape where power is diffuse, interfaces are opaque, and agency is fragmented (Latour 1993).

This is why digital rationalization cannot be viewed as a purely technical process. It is a profoundly cultural and political phenomenon that reconfigures the very conditions of social life (Couldry & Mejias 2019). It demands a new kind of critique that goes beyond mere denunciation or nostalgia and instead interrogates the form of reason at work. If rationali-

zation now leads to irrationality, we must ask: what kind of reason is this? What ends does it serve? What possibilities does it foreclose?

The current phase of liquid modernity, driven by digital rationalization, reveals the limitations of a civilization that seeks control without comprehension, connectivity without community, and efficiency without ethics. It is a civilization in which systems function smoothly while meanings collapse. In order to navigate this situation, we need to develop new intellectual and institutional tools that can re-establish communication, reintegrate cultural narratives, and restore the relational and ethical dimensions of human life.

In short, we do not need less reason, but rather a different kind of reason: one that is reflexive as well as technical and existential. Only then can we begin to exit the paradox of digital rationalization and perhaps rediscover a path towards a new form of modernity.

Three Deprivations

The effects of digital rationalization, combined with the exhaustion of the neoliberal paradigm, are not only systemic or cultural; they are also deeply experiential. They reshape how individuals live, relate to others, and make sense of their existence. These transformations result in three structural deprivations that cut across the social fabric: economic, cultural, and relational deprivation. These forms of deprivation are not independent; they interact and reinforce each other, generating a feedback loop of disintegration that accelerates social entropy (Beck 1992).

I) ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION. Despite decades of technological advancement and economic globalization, economic

deprivation has intensified for large segments of the population (Piketty 2014; Milanović 2016). The post-1980s neoliberal model promised wealth through market efficiency, innovation, and entrepreneurial dynamism. While this has generated extraordinary wealth for a global elite, it has also produced a generalized sense of economic insecurity for the majority.

The traditional link between productivity and wages has been severed (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2014). Labor markets have become increasingly fragmented, with the rise of non-standard contracts, gig work, and algorithmic labor platforms. For many, employment no longer guarantees stability, dignity, or upward mobility. Instead, employment is characterized by short-termism, surveillance, and constant pressure to adapt.

Debt has also become a structural mechanism. Households, particularly younger generations, are burdened with student loans, mortgages, and consumer credit, creating conditions of long-term dependency and vulnerability. Meanwhile, asset inflation in areas such as housing, education, and healthcare has priced large segments of the population out of essential goods, further increasing feelings of exclusion and frustration.

Beyond income and wealth, economic deprivation today is primarily existential: the feeling of being dispensable in a system that measures value by market performance. Economic recognition, once granted through work and contribution, is increasingly elusive. This can lead to a kind of material invisibility, where people exist as consumers but not as subjects with dignity or agency.

II) CULTURAL DEPRIVATION. While economic deprivation affects people's material security, cultural deprivation affects their capacity to orient themselves in the world. For centuries, societies have relied on shared narratives – religious, civic, national and ideological – to give meaning to human experience, guide behavior and sustain collective identities (Taylor 2007).

In late liquid modernity, however, these frameworks have largely disintegrated (Bauman 2000).

Postmodern relativism, the diversification of lifestyles and the rise of hyper-individualism have undermined the authority of shared narratives. While this pluralism offers freedom and diversity, it also creates a vacuum of sense-making (Castells 2009). Individuals are bombarded with images, values and expectations, yet lack a unifying framework through which to interpret them. The result is deculturation: not the loss of culture per se, but rather the loss of cohesive cultural reference points.

Digital technologies have accelerated this process by fragmenting symbolic universes (Couldry & Hepp 2016). What we consume, believe or aspire to is increasingly shaped by algorithmic filters that isolate rather than connect. Each person inhabits a personalized media bubble, reinforced by feedback loops that affirm preferences but discourage engagement with difference. This contributes to the rise of cultural solitudes – coexisting groups with incompatible worldviews and vocabularies.

Furthermore, the commodification of culture undermines its formative role. Cultural products are consumed for stimulation rather than reflection, art is reduced to content, and language becomes a tool for branding rather than dialogue. In such an environment, education itself loses its transformative potential, becoming either technocratic, focused on skills, or bureaucratic, focused on credentials, and rarely fostering critical thinking or ethical imagination.

The deeper consequence is disorientation. Without shared symbolic anchors, individuals struggle to narrate their lives, define their aspirations, or locate themselves within a historical trajectory (Han 2015). The future no longer appears as a horizon of promise but as a field of risk (Beck 1992). Hope gives way to anxiety, and identity becomes reactive rather than proactive.

III) RELATIONAL DEPRIVATION. Perhaps the most subtle yet devastating consequence of the entropic condition is relational deprivation. Human beings are inherently relational: our identities, emotions, and capacities develop through interaction. When social bonds weaken, the very fabric of personhood begins to unravel.

Contemporary societies are experiencing an unprecedented increase in loneliness, particularly among young people and the elderly. Family structures have changed, intergenerational cohabitation has declined, and civic and religious participation has plummeted. Even friendship, traditionally a space of mutual recognition, has become instrumentalized or superficial, often reduced to digital interaction or performative display.

The culture of self-optimizations fueled by social media, exacerbates this isolation. Individuals are encouraged to present idealized versions of themselves, compete for attention, and measure their worth by metrics such as likes, followers, and engagement rates. This performative subjectivity erodes authentic connection, replacing empathy with envy and presence with projection.

Moreover, political alienation is growing alongside this. Traditional sites of democratic participation, such as political parties, trade unions, and town halls, have lost credibility and influence (Urbinati 2019). Citizens feel increasingly powerless, skeptical, and disenchanted. The public sphere no longer functions as a space for common deliberation but rather as a battleground of antagonistic, algorithmically filtered, and polarized voices.

Relational deprivation is not only a private condition; it also has public consequences. What is also weakening is the bond with institutions. This creates a widespread sense of abandonment. To the point that one wonders whether democracy can survive in societies lacking trust, solidarity, and dialogue. (Putnam 2000). The erosion of the social bond leads to insti-

tutional cynicism, withdrawal from civic engagement, and susceptibility to authoritarian simplifications.

These three deprivations are particularly dangerous because they reinforce each other in a vicious circle. Economic insecurity undermines relational stability and intensifies competition. Cultural fragmentation erodes a shared language, making solidarity more challenging. Relational isolation amplifies both economic vulnerability, symbolic disorientation, and democratic weakness. Together, these factors create a negative feedback loop – an entropic spiral in which the whole becomes less than the sum of its parts (Rosa 2019).

Without countervailing forces, such as strong institutions, shared rituals, and generative communities, this spiral deepens. It creates a psychosocial climate defined not by confidence or creativity but by apprehension, defensiveness, and resentment. In such a climate, democratic debate gives way to polarization, cooperation gives way to suspicion, and complexity is met not with reflection but with denial or simplification.

This shift is not merely a mood; it is a transformation in society's affective and epistemic infrastructure. While previous stages of modernity cultivated certain anthropological profiles, such as the disciplined worker, the autonomous citizen, and the expressive individual, the current phase seems to foster reactive selves that are anxious, disconnected, overstimulated, and deprived of the resources needed to construct coherent life paths (Rosa 2019).

In short, the entropic crisis is neither a single event nor a temporary dysfunction. It is a multi-layered transformation that erodes the foundations upon which social life is built. The three deprivations – economic, cultural, and relational – constitute not only symptoms but also mechanisms of this transformation. They reveal the costs of a society that has prioritized efficiency over meaning, connectivity over community, and flexibility over stability.

Responding to this condition requires more than policy reform or technological innovation. It requires a cultural shift – a revaluation of meaning, relationships, and direction (Taylor 2007). Only by addressing these underlying deprivations can we hope to halt the entropic spiral and start building a more sustainable, humane social order.

The Rise of Technopopulism as a Symptom of the Contradictions of Digital Rationalization

The socio-technical transformations outlined in previous sections, especially the paradoxical effects of digital rationalization, have not remained confined to the private sphere or economic and cultural domains. They have directly reshaped the political landscape, resulting in a new and unstable regime: technopopulism. This is not just a political trend or ideology. Rather, it is a structural outcome of the contradictions inherent in contemporary governance, characterized by the fusion of algorithmic rationality and populist affectivity amidst deep social entropy (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti 2021).

To understand its emergence, we must return to the central paradox of digital rationalization: systems are becoming increasingly technically sophisticated, yet are simultaneously unable to foster coherence, legitimacy, or inclusion (Zuboff 2019). This contradiction creates a governance vacuum. Traditional liberal democracies, already weakened by economic stagnation, loss of trust, and institutional fatigue, are no longer capable of providing convincing narratives or effective decision-making (Crouch 2004; Mounk 2018). A hybrid political logic is taking shape in this vacuum.

Technopopulism arises from the conjunction of technocratic depoliticization and emotional remobilization. On the one hand, governance is increasingly delegated to technical

systems, data infrastructures, and algorithmic processes. Conversely, political legitimacy is sought through affective mobilization, identitarian appeals, and spectacular communication. The result is a regime that governs through a combination of cold rationality and hot emotion, bypassing the slow and difficult process of democratic deliberation (Habermas 1987).

This hybrid form is no accident. Rather, it is a symptom of a deeper historical contradiction. The neoliberal vision of a depoliticized world governed by markets and expertise has collapsed, yet no coherent alternative has emerged (Harvey 2005). Meanwhile, digital platforms have made emotional mobilization easier, cheaper, and more immediate than ever before. Political actors no longer require robust institutions, programs, or ideologies. They require attention, engagement, and emotional resonance. This dynamic favors those who can perform populist theatrics while delegating actual decision-making to technocratic or algorithmic processes (Urbinati 2019).

We can identify two foundational drives that define technopopulism and reflect the broader contradictions of our time:

I) THE RETURN OF THE ENEMY. One of the defining features of technopopulist politics is the resurgence of the enemy. Classical political theory was based on the friend/enemy distinction (Schmitt 2007). However, liberal democracy attempted to move beyond this model by emphasizing compromise, pluralism, and institutional mediation (Habermas 1987). Technopopulism marks a return to antagonism – but with a postmodern twist.

Without shared narratives or stable institutions, politics becomes a theatre of moral confrontation. Rather than being treated as complex issues, migration, globalization, climate change, and identity politics are viewed as existential threats posed by an evil Other. This reintroduces the archaic logic of scapegoating to the center of public life (Girard 1986). Populist leaders, whether on the left or right, mobilize resentment by creating enemy figures, such as the corrupt elite, foreign invaders, disloyal minorities, and woke intellectuals.

Digital platforms reinforce this logic by enabling algorithmic tribalism. Content that provokes anger, fear, or outrage is shared more widely and quickly than content that encourages reflection. Platform logic rewards simplification and antagonism, creating echo chambers in which enemies are imagined, rehearsed, and affirmed daily. The result is a politics of affective polarization without resolution – a permanent war of all against all, mediated by algorithms.

II) INSTITUTIONAL INADEQUACY. Contemporary democracies exhibit a chronic condition of inadequacy, whereby the institutions responsible for producing collective solutions – parliaments, governments, and even supranational assemblies – risk degenerating into platforms for endless symbolic confrontation (Crouch 2004; Urbinati 2019). Legislative and executive arenas are increasingly functioning less as sites of substantive deliberation and more as theatres where carefully orchestrated performances replace effective governance. Urgent and complex challenges such as growing socioeconomic inequality, the accelerating climate crisis, demographic transitions, and widespread deindustrialization remain largely unaddressed (Beck 1992; Streeck 2016). Instead, political elites devote their energies to crafting performative legislation, polarizing discourse, and divisive narratives designed primarily for short-term media visibility and electoral gain.

The synthesis of these two forces creates a new regime type (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti 2021). Power is no longer legitimized through institutional procedures or ideological commitments. Instead, it is legitimized through emotional resonance and real-time responsiveness. This has several consequences:

– Direct emotional governance: political messages are no longer about policy; they are about emotion. Leaders communicate directly with the public via social media, bypassing delib-

erative bodies, and respond to public moods with performative gestures.

– Fragmented public discourse: as algorithms personalize content, each citizen receives a different version of reality. The public sphere fragments into multiple, non-communicating universes (Couldry & Mejias 2019).

– Crisis as governance: technopopulist regimes often sustain themselves by maintaining a permanent sense of emergency. This justifies the suspension of norms, the centralization of power, and the constant redefinition of enemies.

– Depoliticization: while the form of politics becomes hypervisible, its substance evaporates. Economic decisions are made by central banks, algorithms, or private actors. Political institutions manage emotions, not outcomes (Urbinati 2019).

Post-democratic, post-ideological, post-political: technopopulism defies classical categories. It is neither fully authoritarian nor democratic (Crouch 2004). Rather than being based on ideology, it is based on mood. Rather than offering a vision of the future, it provides a dramatization of the present. Its cohesion stems from fear, repetition, and affective saturation rather than conviction.

In many ways, this new regime represents the logical endpoint of liquid modernity (Bauman 2000). The erosion of institutions, the fragmentation of culture, and the breakdown of stable meaning all culminate in a political system that manages, rather than transforms, entropy. Rather than building, it seeks to perform; rather than deliberating, it responds; rather than governing, it circulates. Technopopulism thus reveals the political face of the entropic crisis. It demonstrates the consequences of digital rationalization extending into the realm of sovereignty: legitimacy is replaced by engagement, representation by metrics, and the common good by virality (Zuboff 2019).

Tricksters and Algorithms: the Double Face of Technopopulistic Power

To fully grasp the architecture of technopopulism, two central operational figures should be examined more closely: the trickster and the algorithm. At first glance, they appear to be opposites: the former is chaotic and theatrical, while the latter is precise and invisible. Yet, in the sociopolitical grammar of digital modernity, they work together. Together, they represent the dual mechanism by which contemporary power operates: disruption from above and control from below. Together, they present a world in which rule-breaking and system-making coexist without contradiction.

– The Trickster: rule-breaking as legitimation. In mythological traditions across cultures, the Trickster is a liminal figure – neither fully good nor evil, hero nor villain. They subvert rules, cross boundaries, mock the sacred, and expose the fragility of social orders (Hyde 1998; Jung 1960). Examples of such figures include Hermes, Loki, and the African Eshu. In Jungian terms, the trickster embodies both chaos and transformation; he brings disorder but also reveals hidden truths.

In contemporary politics, this archetype has reappeared in the form of charismatic leaders who defy conventions, speak in paradoxes, and embrace contradiction. The trickster does not pretend to be consistent or moral. They win followers precisely by being outrageous, unpredictable, and ungovernable. His performance is not about reasoned argument; it is about emotional resonance, symbolic provocation, and boundary-breaking spectacle (Debord 1967).

The trickster's power today stems from the emptiness of the symbolic order. In an era of fading institutions, fading ideologies, and shifting meanings, the trickster emerges as the only figure who speaks "truth," even if it is contradictory, sarcastic,

or absurd (McLuhan 1964). He channels a deep, widespread intuition that the system is rigged, appearances are false, and everything is a game. In this sense, the trickster becomes the performative icon of post-truth politics; he does not represent a program, but an attitude of opposition.

Trump, Bolsonaro, Berlusconi, Johnson, or Bukele embody different variations of the trickster. What unites them is not policy, but posture: they are anti-establishment, anti-protocol, and anti-discourse. They succeed by creating chaos and presenting it as clarity, breaking norms, and presenting themselves as authentic.

Yet this is not simply populism in the traditional sense. The trickster does not seek to restore sovereignty to the people through institutional renewal. They operate in a disillusioned landscape. He rides the waves of entropy. In a disoriented world, he does not offer coherence; he offers entertainment, catharsis, and revenge.

– The Algorithm governance. While the trickster dominates the stage, a second figure operates silently in the background: the algorithm. Unlike the trickster, the algorithm does not speak, provoke, or dramatize. It sorts, calculates, and predicts. Rather than governing through visibility, it governs through infrastructure. It is the quiet logic behind the scenes – the unseen brain of the system.

Algorithmic power is not about command, but modulation. Rather than imposing, it configures the field of possibility. Through machine learning models, recommendation engines, search optimization, and behavioral analytics, algorithms shape what we see, how we feel, what we desire, and even how we vote (Zuboff 2019). It governs through probabilities, patterns, and subtle prompts, optimizing for attention, engagement, and compliance.

The apparent neutrality of algorithmic governance is what makes it so powerful. It presents itself merely as technical –

efficient, objective, and data-driven. Yet its influence is deeply normative. Algorithms encode assumptions about relevance, risk, value, and legitimacy. They are trained using past data, which often results in the reproduction of historical inequalities and cognitive biases. However, because they operate invisibly, their decisions cannot easily be contested or held accountable.

Thus, the algorithm represents the opposite pole of the trickster. While the trickster transgresses norms, the algorithm automates them. Whereas the trickster disrupts, the algorithm orders. Together, however, they create a new configuration of power: theatrical turbulence on the surface and machinic regularity beneath (Couldry & Mejias 2019). This dual structure results in a form of governance that bypasses traditional mechanisms of political representation. Power no longer circulates primarily through deliberation, law, or ideology. Instead, it circulates through affect and infrastructure – through the performances of tricksters and the protocols of algorithms.

Citizens are drawn into this system in contradictory ways. On the one hand, they are spectators of an endless political show comprising tweets, scandals, memes, and provocations. On the other, they are data sources whose behaviors are captured, processed, and sold (Zuboff 2019). They experience power as both hyper-visible and radically opaque. They are emotionally activated yet politically disempowered (Urbinati 2019).

This form of governance is neither purely vertical nor horizontal. Rather, it is networked, distributed across platforms, actors, and systems that interact in unpredictable ways (Latour 1993). Decisions are increasingly made through hybrid structures such as think tanks, rating agencies, tech corporations, militarized border controls, content moderators, and AI tools – all of which operate outside the classical state apparatus yet are crucial to its functioning.

In their combination, tricksters and algorithms perform a new division of power: one engages people, while the other

keeps systems functional. One maintains legitimacy; the other produces governability. One offers noise; the other enforces patterns. Together, they substitute the institutional and symbolic coherence that liberal democracy once provided.

This dual system of power is problematic. It accelerates entropy even as it manages it. By eroding norms and institutions, the trickster weakens the foundations upon which governance relies. Meanwhile, the algorithm abstracts human behavior into data flows, thereby hollowing out the social relations it needs to function. The result is a feedback loop in which performance replaces substance, prediction replaces participation, and manipulation replaces mediation.

Even more dangerously, this configuration makes democratic repair extremely difficult. How can a society rebuild institutions when the public sphere is saturated with cynicism, irony, and fragmentation? How can deliberation occur when discourse is shaped by opaque algorithms? And how can accountability function when decisions are made in dispersed, post-representative networks?

The convergence of trickster politics and algorithmic governance signals a transformation not only in how power is exercised but also in what constitutes power. It marks the end of the modern concept of the autonomous political subject. Citizens become emotional audience members and behavioral data nodes, rather than participants in collective self-rule.

Thus, in late liquid modernity, power no longer resides in sovereignty, representation, or law but in performance and code. The trickster and the algorithm are not anomalies. Rather, they are the logical expression of a system that has lost its guiding principles yet continues to operate by inertia.

Conclusion: The New Dialectic of Enlightenment

At the heart of this analysis lies a deep and unsettling paradox: the very forces that were intended to lead to liberation – reason, technology, and autonomy – now risk entangling us in new forms of alienation, fragmentation, and systemic irrationality (Stiegler 2014). We began this journey with Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, an era of flexibility and fluidity that succeeded the rigidities of the industrial age (Bauman 2000). However, we now realize that when taken to the extreme, this fluidity has not produced more freedom or prosperity but rather disorientation, entropy, and loss (Rosa 2019).

This is not merely a political or economic crisis. It is, in the deepest sense, a spiritual crisis. In Weberian terms, it is the moment when the "iron cage" of instrumental reason becomes invisible and is no longer perceived as a constraint but as the only reality (Weber 1978). We are surrounded by unprecedented technological capacities that are capable of simulating intelligence, organizing logistics, and optimizing performance. Yet, when detached from questions of meaning, responsibility, and direction, these tools become monsters of abstraction. They produce outputs without questioning why, generate engagement without truth, and categorize behaviors without recognizing individuals. The problem is that, contrary to Weber's belief, instrumental rationalization is accompanied by new forms of enchantment, which digitalization multiplies infinitely.

We are living through a new dialectic of the Enlightenment. As Adorno and Horkheimer warned, the promise of rational mastery over the world can regress into myth if its limits are forgotten. Today, digital rationalization takes this idea to its technological extreme: it promises clarity, control, and connectivity, but instead delivers confusion, chaos, and emotional volatility. The problem lies not with technology itself, but with the form of reason we have encoded into it: a form that privi-

leges calculation over understanding, efficiency over wisdom, and signal over sense.

The consequences are becoming increasingly visible. Institutions are being hollowed out, language is fragmenting, politics is devolving into performance, and relational life is withering. The entropic crisis is not only a collapse of systems but also of symbolic and ethical infrastructures. This occurs when a civilization loses the ability to tell coherent stories about itself and can no longer act in accordance with shared values.

At stake is nothing less than the future of democracy, meaning, and civilization itself. Will we continue down the path of fragmentation, outsourcing decisions to algorithms, and emotions to spectacles? Or will we find the way to rebuild the symbolic, relational, and institutional foundations of shared life?

The twilight of liquid modernity risks ending in darkness and violent storms. Only by acknowledging this situation – and daring to imagine again – can the possibility of a generative future be explored.

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The Rise of the Sophocrats
Political, Economic, and Epistemic Power in Algorithmic Governance

Marina Calloni

Abstract

This article argues that contemporary transformations in digital capitalism and artificial intelligence are producing not merely a new economic phase, but an emergent regime of rule grounded in the control of epistemic infrastructures. It introduces the concept of *sophocracy* to describe a configuration in which legitimacy derives from privileged access to computational knowledge and the capacity to organize the conditions of cognition itself. Moving beyond accounts of democratic crisis cantered on populism or neoliberalism, the article identifies a structural convergence of epistemic authority, economic power, and political control. Situating sophocracy – as a neologism – within a genealogy of elites – from aristocracy to technocracy – it emphasizes the privatization of the means of cognition and the public sphere. Focusing in particular on Peter Thiel, sophocracy is interpreted as both an infrastructural and symbolic order. What is at stake is the capacity to sustain shared horizons of meaning and collective action within increasingly pre-structured environments, and to transform rather than escape them.

Keywords: Sophocracy; Epistemic elites; Knowledge infrastructures; Algorithmic governance; Artificial intelligence; Peter Thiel; Cognitive capitalism; Deliberative democracy; Public sphere; Epistemic justice.

Introduction: The Displacement of the Political

Contemporary political theory remains largely structured by categories inherited from earlier phases of modernity: sovereignty, class, representation, and institutional authority. Yet the rise of digital infrastructures and artificial intelligence has introduced a transformation that these categories only partially illuminate.

The dominant diagnoses of our time –.on the one hand, the resurgence of populism and sovereigntism; on the other, the deepening of neoliberal financialization – capture important dimensions of the present but fail to grasp the underlying reconfiguration that links them.

What is emerging is not merely a crisis of democratic institutions, nor simply a new stage of capitalism, but a transformation in the site and substance of power itself. Power no longer resides primarily in territorial control, juridical command, or ownership of industrial production. It increasingly resides in the capacity to structure the conditions under which reality becomes knowable.

Digital platforms, algorithmic systems, and artificial intelligence infrastructures do not simply process information; they organize perception, modulate attention, hierarchize relevance, and prefigure action. They function as conditions of intelligibility. In this sense, they occupy a position analogous to what Kant assigned to the transcendental conditions of experience; however, whereas for Kant the transcendental a priori is subjective, these conditions are instead a posteriori and objective, better understood as a form of "historical and objective transcendental," since they are privately owned and politically contested. This shift entails a profound mutation of sovereignty. Sovereignty is no longer exhausted by the monopoly of legitimate violence (as Weber argued) or the decision on the exception (Schmitt). It increasingly involves the capacity to

configure epistemic environments, able to determine what can be seen, said, known, and imagined.

To name the elite formation that emerges within this configuration, I propose the concept of *sophocracy*. Situating *sophocracy* - as a deliberate neologism - within a lineage of elite rule, from aristocracy to technocracy, it entails a critical rethinking - and even a reversal -of the classical concept of *sophia* in a technocratic sense, while highlighting the growing privatization of both the means of cognition and the public sphere. The challenge today is not to escape these structures, but to transform them by rethinking democracy.

Sophocracy: Definition and Conceptual Delimitation

Sophocracy designates an emergent regime, or more precisely, a regime tendency, in which authority is grounded in the control of knowledge infrastructures and legitimized through claims to epistemic superiority.

What is at stake is not merely the possession of knowledge, but the capacity to shape the conditions under which knowledge is produced, validated, circulated, and put to use. In this sense, sophocracy marks a shift from the governance of actions to the *governance of the conditions of intelligibility that define what counts as knowledge.*

This distinguishes sophocracy from adjacent categories such as technocracy, neoliberalism, and oligarchy. While it intersects with each, it operates at a different level, not primarily through decision-making, market coordination, or wealth concentration, but through the structuring of epistemic environments.

First, unlike technocracy, which refers to the rule of experts within established institutional frameworks, sophocracy operates at a prior level. Technocracy addresses given problems;

sophocracy shapes what can appear as a problem in the first place. Its agents design platforms, algorithms, and data systems that structure visibility, define evidence, and delimit the space of possible solutions.

Second, unlike classical capitalism, in which legitimacy is tied to production and accumulation, sophocracy reorients legitimacy toward intelligence, innovation, and the capacity to shape the future. Authority derives not only from generating value, but from anticipating and constructing what is to come. The claim shifts from production to prediction. According to Varoufakis, capitalism is being supplanted by *technofeudalism*, where dominant tech firms resemble feudal lords, collecting rents through their control of digital platforms and cloud systems instead of generating profits through open market competition (Varoufakis 2023).

Third, unlike neoliberalism, which conceives the market as a mechanism for distributing knowledge across actors, sophocracy recentralizes that epistemic function. Knowledge is no longer dispersed through competition but aggregated and operationalized within centralized infrastructures. The result is a shift from competitive coordination to infrastructural control.

Finally, while sophocracy shares with oligarchy a concentration of power, it differs in its mode of legitimation. Oligarchic power rests on wealth; sophocratic power is justified through knowledge. It is, in this sense, an epistemically legitimized form of concentrated rule.

Sophocracy can thus be understood as the convergence of three dimensions of power: economic (control of capital), political (the capacity not only to accept commissions, but also to shape and leverage governmental power in order to influence collective outcomes), and epistemic (control over the production and organization of knowledge). What is historically distinctive is their increasing fusion within the same actors and systems.

The novelty of sophocracy lies in the *primacy of epistemic power as a source of legitimacy*. Authority is no longer grounded primarily in lineage, productivity, or procedure, but in claims to superior, often computationally mediated, knowledge. Power presents itself less as domination than as necessity.

In this configuration, sovereignty is increasingly exercised through the governance of cognition. Power operates not only by directing action or regulating markets, but by shaping how subjects perceive, understand, and decide. The central political question is therefore no longer only who governs, but who defines what is real, what is possible, and what can be done.

The Sovereignty of Knowledge Infrastructures

In the algorithmic age sovereignty is not disappearing but shifting. It is moving away from traditional, territory-based institutions (like nation-states) and toward the systems that organize, filter, and even produce how we think and understand the world.

Sovereignty is no longer mainly located in visible state structures; instead, it is increasingly built into the largely invisible systems that shape how reality is perceived, interpreted, and acted upon.

Foucault argued that power/knowledge does not merely repress individuals, but produces "regimes of truth," shaping what can be said, what counts as knowledge, and what is accepted as legitimate (Foucault 1980). In terms of biopolitics, domination operates not only through force, but by structuring how reality itself is understood. In this sense, both our minds and bodies are shaped by these systems of power (Foucault 2008).

Today's digital systems take this a step further. They do not merely control or limit what can be said; they actively shape

the conditions under which thinking, knowing, and even ordinary life unfold. In the algorithmic age, our bodies and minds are increasingly configured and traversed by a complex web of interconnections, operating in a space that is at once real and virtual. Power, then, no longer simply governs knowledge – it designs the environments in which knowledge and everyday experience become possible.

These systems operate through three connected mechanisms:

Epistemic asymmetry. People do not just have unequal access to information, but they also have unequal access to the tools needed to interpret and use it. As a result, knowledge increasingly depends on access to advanced computational systems.

Computational agency. Decision-making is shifting from humans to algorithms. Those who control data and computational models gain new kinds of authority.

Futurity selection. Power shapes the future by prioritizing certain predictions and possibilities over others. It influences not just what happens, but what can be imagined and pursued.

AI systems are not just part of existing knowledge systems. They are redesigning them. They introduce a new level of reflexivity, where the production of knowledge itself is automated, optimized, and often enclosed within proprietary systems.

Bernard Stiegler argues that if technologies are extensions of human thinking, then privatizing these technologies reshapes human subjectivity itself, that is how we think, perceive, and relate to the world (Stiegler 1998 2009 2011). This means that questions about who owns and controls these systems are also questions about who we can become, both individually and collectively. The issue is not just access to tools, but the shaping of attention, desire, and our experience of time.

Similarly, recalling his original formulation of *Öffentlichkeit* (Habermas 1989), Habermas himself raised concerns about the conditions for rational public debate, a problem he later sought to rethink in his reflections on the transformation of the public sphere (Habermas 2023). It is no longer enough to think of the public sphere as a space for free discussion; it is now a digitally mediated environment whose structure is set by actors that are often not democratically accountableThe "colonization of the lifeworld," as conceptualized in the theory of communicative action in opposition to the system, thus occurs not only through markets and bureaucracies, but also through algorithmic systems that prestructure interaction from the outset (Habermas 1984–1987).

From this perspective, sovereignty becomes infrastructural before it is institutional. Power is exercised less through direct commands and more through the design of systems that make some actions easy. Governance is built into code, platforms, and protocols.

The term *sophocracy* describes the political logic and ideology that emerges from this shift: a system defined by the apparent primacy of the machine, yet in fact governed by an elite that controls and designs its operations. This tension reveals a new configuration of power, in which authority derives from control over knowledge infrastructures and the large-scale organization of cognition, exercised through algorithmic systems that both mediate and obscure human agency. At the same time, it carries a latent nightmare: that these systems may acquire a degree of autonomy, further displacing control from both their human operators and democratic institutions. In such a system, legitimacy rests less on representation or consent than on performance, that is, on the capacity to produce reliable knowledge and effective predictions.

This does not entail the disappearance of politics, but rather its transformation in form. Struggles over sovereignty increas-

ingly manifest as struggles over infrastructures as well as over material resources. Conflicts can no longer be understood as concerning merely land or territorial sovereignty; rather, they unfold over data, algorithms, and computational infrastructures. Yet these apparently immaterial domains remain inseparable from the material regimes of extraction–rare earths, semiconductors, and logistical supply chains–that sustain them. In this sense, contemporary geopolitical conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, are also struggles over the material conditions of possibility of the digital. The key challenge, then, is not just to understand these systems, but to make them open to debate and contestation, to question who controls the infrastructures that shape how we think and live.

Genealogy of Elites and the Algorithmic Transformation of Epistemic Rule

Sophocracy should be understood within a long history of elite formation. Across this history, the basis of legitimacy changes, but one core idea remains constant: the claim that a minority is entitled to rule because of its superior relation to knowledge. What changes is not the existence of elites, but how their superiority is justified, epistemically, politically, and economically.

Classical aristocracy grounded its authority in lineage, divine order, and inherited distinction. Its right to rule rested on a cosmological narrative: hierarchy was built into the structure of reality itself. Yet even here, knowledge played a role, not as technical expertise, but as privileged access to education, cultivation, and symbolic codes that distinguished nobles from common people. Aristocratic superiority was thus already epistemic, though embedded in tradition rather than formalized as cognition.

With the rise of the bourgeoisie, legitimacy shifted. Authority became tied to productivity, accumulation, and economic expansion. Still, bourgeois dominance was not purely economic. It relied on a new epistemic ethos: rational calculation, scientific reasoning, and managerial organization. The bourgeois subject presented itself as capable of mastering uncertainty through reason and planning. Economic capital and cognitive competence became inseparable. However, unlike positivism, where progress was seen as generating broad, collective well-being, sophocrats view progress as optimistic but inherently unequal, driven by elitist forces that ultimately create social divisions.

Technocracy pushed this further by explicitly grounding authority in expertise. Legitimacy derived from specialized knowledge and administrative competence. The technocrat claimed authority not through wealth or birth, but through mastery of complex systems. Yet this remained political: expertise justified intervention and control over social processes. Knowledge was no longer merely descriptive because it became operational.

This trajectory is captured in the elite theories of Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto. Against democratic idealism, both argued that all societies are governed by minorities with superior organizational and cognitive capacities. For Mosca, the "political class" maintains power by organizing and administering collective life, while legitimizing itself through a "political formula" (Mosca 1939). According to Pareto, elites circulate, but their defining feature remains a differential in psychological and intellectual qualities that enables them to rule (Pareto 1935).

Yet they did not reduce elite superiority to economic power alone. They emphasized cognitive, organizational, and political capacities, which means the ability to know, coordinate, and decide. Elites are defined less by what they own than by

how they understand and structure the social world. They are, fundamentally, epistemic minorities.

At the same time, these theories imply a philosophy of history: that elite rule, when properly organized, can improve society through conscious design. Whether through circulation (Pareto) or stabilization (Mosca), elites were seen as necessary for order and progress. Their privilege was grounded in education, knowledge, and a presumed capacity to guide collective development. In this sense, elite theory already contains the seeds of sophocracy: the idea that those who know better should govern.

Sophocracy is the latest transformation of this logic. It combines and reshapes earlier elite forms by bringing together:

– aristocratic distinction (hierarchical differentiation),
– bourgeois accumulation (control of resources),
– technocratic expertise (specialized knowledge),
– while redirecting them toward a new axis: the future.

In sophocracy, legitimacy no longer depends only on origin, wealth, or present competence. It rests on the capacity to construct and anticipate the future. Authority belongs to those who can model, predict, and operationalize what does not yet exist.

This shift corresponds to the move from industrial to cognitive (Moulier-Boutang 2011) or platform capitalism (Srnicek 2016), where value depends increasingly on information, data extraction, and network effects. The decisive resource is no longer material production, but the ability to organize cognition at scale. Economic power becomes dependent on epistemic infrastructure: those who control knowledge systems also control the conditions of accumulation.

Ideologically, this configuration is supported by meritocracy. As Michael Sandel argues (Sandel 2021), meritocratic discourse moralizes inequality: success appears deserved, failure justified. In sophocracy, this logic intensifies. Authority

is grounded not just in achievement, but in epistemic superiority. It is the presumed ability to know, predict, and decide better. Inequality is naturalized as a function of unequal cognitive access and computational leverage.

In this context, the Platonic question of epistemic rule returns in a new form. For Plato, legitimacy derived from *episteme.* Truth is secured through philosophical insight. The philosopher-king ruled because he grasped the Good beyond appearances. Sophocracy revives this structure while stripping away its metaphysical foundation. Truth is no longer contemplative; it is computational.

We thus see a shift from *episteme* to *technê*, and ultimately to algorithmic governance. *Knowledge is operationalized, externalized, and automated, becoming detached from the cultural and experiential frameworks of individuals. It is thereby de-subjectivized.* Wisdom gives way to calculation, deliberation to optimization, and judgment to probabilistic inference. Authority moves from the philosopher to the system designer, from the guardian of truth to the architect of models.

In this transformation, truth becomes statistical, justice scalable, and the good redefined in terms of functional efficiency. What matters is no longer what is right in principle, but what works within a system of constraints. *Politics is increasingly absorbed into technical systems.*

Here, the critique developed by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002) becomes especially relevant. Instrumental rationality turns into a means of organizing and extending control. In sophocracy, this dynamic intensifies: power operates through systems that expand knowledge while simultaneously structuring and constraining it. Domination is no longer external to reason. It is embedded within cognition itself.

The result is the transformation and intensification of elite rule. Elites no longer simply govern society; they shape the

very ways in which society is understood, imagined, and transformed. Their power is no longer primarily economic or institutional; it resides in the control of the systems that organize knowledge and orient how people think and live.

In this sense, sophocrats seek to preserve their position as creators – almost as demiurges – of the systems they bring into being, asserting a form of design-based omnipotence through which they attempt to shape and order a new world. The risk, however, is that this world becomes increasingly detached from material and shared reality. The task, then, is to confront these developments at a concrete level, in order to prevent the drift toward a fully unreal world that reinforces social inequalities.

Peter Thiel and the Mimetic Desire

Peter Thiel's thought offers one of the clearest and most explicit articulations of sophocratic ideology today. Unlike more neutral technocratic discourse, he presents a coherent and often deliberately provocative view of history, technology, and elite power, grounded in both theory and practice.

Thiel – co-founder of PayPal and Palantir Technologies – earned a B.A. in Philosophy in 1989 and later received a Juris Doctor (J.D.) from Stanford Law School in 1992. His intellectual formation reflects a classic elite trajectory, shaped by canonical texts and debates on modernity and political order (Thiel 2009).

Therefore, Tiel does not operate merely as an entrepreneur, but as a thinker who situates technological development within a broader narrative about the trajectory – and possible stagnation (Cowen 2011) – of Western civilization.

In this respect, his thought also resonates with themes associated with Carl Schmitt's emphasis on sovereign decision in moments of exception and Leo Strauss's concern with the

fragility of liberal order and the role of elite judgment in times of crisis.

Thiel's "stagnation thesis", most clearly developed in *Zero to One* (Thiel 2014), argues that the modern West has lost its capacity for genuine innovation. Technological progress has slowed, risk-taking has diminished, and democratic-regulatory systems have produced incrementalism rather than transformation. This diagnosis functions as a justification for elite intervention: if society cannot generate the future it requires, then those who retain this capacity acquire a quasi-historical mandate to act.

Thiel's thought takes on a quasi-prophetic structure. His references to the "Antichrist" frame global governance, surveillance, and political uniformity as expressions of a totalizing order that suppresses innovation and difference.

In this sense, the Antichrist becomes a metaphor for a world in which risk and creativity are neutralized in the name of stability. This is evident in Thiel's remarks at four-part lecture series held in San Francisco in September/October 2025, where, in discussing the Antichrist, he suggests that contemporary figures such as Greta Thunberg signal a politics of global coordination – "from a Christian theological perspective, you could describe that as the Antichrist" (Thiel 2025).

Against this horizon, the exceptional innovator emerges as a figure who disrupts stagnation and reopens the future. Here sophocracy takes on a mythic dimension:

– innovation appears as redemption,
– stagnation as civilizational decline,
– critics as obstacles to the future.

This helps explain why critics of technology or inequality are often cast as enemies rather than interlocutors.

This connects directly to Thiel's critique of democracy. His claim that "freedom and democracy are no longer compatible" signals a redefinition of freedom itself. What emerges is a form

of ego-liberty: freedom as the discretionary power of exceptional individuals – founders, visionaries, technological elites – to act without constraint. Thus, Ego-liberty:

– separates freedom from equality,
– prioritizes individual agency over collective deliberation,
– treats asymmetry as a necessary condition of progress.

From this perspective, democratic institutions appear not as safeguards of legitimacy but as obstacles to innovation. They slow decision-making, enforce conformity, and limit the emergence of radical futures. In this configuration, politics is subordinated to entrepreneurship, legitimacy arises from creation rather than representation, and technology becomes the primary means of reinventing the world.

The Transformation of the Platonic Ideal World in Sophocratic Elitism

Thiel thus revives – while reconfiguring – the Platonic problem of epistemic authority, envisioning an ideal that carries distinctly authoritarian implications. As with the philosopher-king, the figure of the innovator claims a privileged relation to truth. Yet here truth is no longer grounded in metaphysics; it is recast as foresight, that means the capacity to anticipate and actively shape the future. Authority, in turn, no longer derives from contemplation of the Good, but from the power to actualize what does not yet exist. Knowledge becomes fundamentally generative rather than contemplative, oriented toward the production and transformation of reality rather than its interpretation.

This shift binds philosophical reflection to a mode of visionary power. The philosophy of history no longer simply interprets temporal processes but seeks to intervene in them through technological means. The future thus emerges as an

object of construction rather than speculation.

Yet this transformation also raises a deeper question: what drives such world-making ambition? It is at this level that a key influence on Thiel's thought becomes decisive: René Girard's theory of mimetic desire (Girard 1977). This reference is not incidental. Namely, Thiel attended Girard's lectures at Stanford in the late 1980s (Girard 1987), an experience that left a lasting imprint on his intellectual formation.

Mimetic desire refers to the idea that human desires are not autonomous but shaped by the desires of others: we want what others want, generating both imitation and rivalry. In Thiel's interpretation, however, this structure is reoriented. Mimetic desire becomes not merely a source of conflict but a dynamic to be redirected. The desire to imitate is transformed into a drive to differentiate, that is to escape competition by creating what does not yet exist.

Innovation thus appears as a transformation of mimetic desire itself. Rather than competing within given structures, the exceptional innovator seeks to redefine the field of desire by producing new realities. In this way, imitation is converted into a project of radical creation, and philosophy becomes inseparable from the technological reconfiguration of the world.

This vision takes concrete form in Thiel's co-founding of Palantir, a US-based data analytics company that builds software to handle and make sense of complex datasets, mainly for government, defense, and large corporate clients, and whose very high market value reflects its strategic relevance. Even its name, Palantir – drawn from Tolkien's most famous work, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) – signals its ambition: to render the world legible through data integration and prediction. Palantir does not simply generate profit; it organizes knowledge for governments and corporations. It exemplifies sophocratic power in infrastructural form: the concentration of the capacity to see, predict, and act.

This project is further reinforced by the figure of Palantir's CEO, Alexander Karp, whose trajectory – like Thiel's – combines training in both law and philosophy. Karp graduated with a J.D. from Stanford Law School in 1992 and later pursued doctoral studies in Germany. He initially sought to complete his PhD under Jürgen Habermas at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, but this did not materialize due to disagreements over his interpretation of Talcott Parsons and related issues. As Karp recalls in an article published in *Politico* a few days after Habermas's death in Starnberg on March 14, 2026, he completed his doctorate in Frankfurt in 2002 under the supervision of Karola Brede, a sociologist at the Sigmund Freud Institute with whom Habermas worked closely (Karp 2026).

Despite this intellectual formation, Karp operates within systems oriented toward intelligence, security, and strategic advantage, thereby contributing to the construction of a "technological republic" (Karp & Zamiska 2025). This stands in clear contrast to Habermas's theory, which grounds reason in communication, deliberation, and intersubjective understanding. Palantir, by contrast, is structured around data integration, prediction, and operational effectiveness.

Karp's trajectory therefore reflects not simply a departure from Habermas, but the emergence of a conception of reason that is effectively antagonistic to communicative rationality. Reason is no longer oriented toward mutual understanding and consensus, but toward the concentration of the capacity to see, predict, and act.

What this reveals is a broader transformation: communicative rationality is increasingly displaced by computational rationality. Power is no longer organized around dialogue and justification, but around data processing and predictive capacity.

However, sophocracy cannot be reduced to infrastructure or expertise alone. It also depends on symbolic legitimation.

The sophocratic elite is legitimized by its capacity to disrupt, control and create. The criterion is no longer wisdom, but world-making power.

Taken together, Thiel's philosophy and its joint realization with Alexander Karp in Palantir articulate a distinct techno-elitist vision. It celebrates individual innovation within a post-subjective framework, while simultaneously challenging democratic forms of collective decision-making. In this view, a small group of highly capable individuals – defined by their ability to think, create, and anticipate the future – emerge as the primary drivers of historical change.

Thiel, then, does not simply describe a sophocratic order. Together with Karp, he helps to build it in practice. What emerges is a system in which power depends less on wealth alone and more on a particular kind of knowledge: the capacity to see further, think differently, and bring into being what others cannot yet imagine.

However, against the ideology of sophocrats, which envisions progress as unequal and driven by elites, AI development can still be anchored in an ethical framework grounded in collective responsibility. The case of Anthropic – a US AI company focused on building safe and aligned artificial intelligence, led by its CEO Dario Amodei, a former OpenAI researcher and developer of the Claude models – is emblematic in this regard. Anthropic's refusal to engage in military applications of AI, as discussed in the reported dispute Anthropic v. US Department of Defense, suggests that technological advancement need not be detached from moral constraints, but can instead remain oriented toward the common good and the prevention of harm (Amodei 2026).

The Erosion of Deliberative Democracy

The rise of sophocracy, as outlined above, does not only challenge democracy at the level of institutions. It reshapes its deeper foundations and its epistemic conditions. Democracy, in both its classical and modern forms, presupposes a shared space in which individuals can reason together and deliberate (Arendt 1961). Sophocracy intervenes precisely at this level, altering how such a space is formed and sustained.

What is at stake, then, is not simply a decline in participation or trust, but a transformation of the public sphere itself (Calloni 2023a). As suggested earlier in the discussion of knowledge infrastructures, the space in which opinions are formed is no longer relatively autonomous. It is increasingly shaped by systems that are:

– privatized, as communication platforms are owned and governed by corporations not accountable to democratic publics;

– algorithmically structured, as visibility and relevance are determined by opaque systems of ranking and selection;

– oriented toward engagement, privileging immediacy and emotional intensity over reasoned argument.

This transformation follows the same logic described in Thiel's framework. If the future is to be shaped by exceptional actors operating beyond democratic constraint, then collective deliberation appears less as a foundation of legitimacy and more as an obstacle. The displacement of public discourse by technical systems is therefore not accidental: it reflects a broader shift toward concentrated epistemic power. The consequences are extensive.

First, public discourse becomes fragmented. Instead of sharing a common horizon of meaning, individuals are distributed across isolated informational environments. This weakens not only consensus, but even the possibility of meaningful

disagreement, since conflicts no longer unfold within a shared reality.

Second, shared standards of truth erode. As algorithmic systems optimize for attention and intensify polarization by continuously constructing adversarial divides (Calloni 2025), they privilege what spreads rapidly over what withstands critical scrutiny. In this environment, truth becomes subordinate to visibility.

Third, citizens are increasingly treated as data subjects. Their role shifts from participants in a public conversation to sources of behavioural data, tracked, predicted, and influenced. The direction of influence reverses: instead of citizens shaping politics through discourse, technical systems shape citizens through continuous feedback and modulation.

From the perspective of political theory, this marks a shift away from what Jürgen Habermas called *communicative rationality* (Habermas 1984–1987) For Habermas, legitimacy arises from open processes of argumentation under conditions of equality and mutual recognition (Habermas 1996). These conditions depend on a public sphere that is not distorted by asymmetries of power and access.

Sophocracy normalizes such asymmetries. Rationality is no longer grounded in shared justification, but in computational efficiency. What matters is not the better argument, but the better-performing model. The ideal of consensus gives way to prediction; deliberation is replaced by behavioural steering.

A similar shift can be understood through Hannah Arendt's idea of the *space of appearance* (Arendt 1958) – the political space where individuals act freely and speak in the presence of others. Under sophocratic conditions, this space is not eliminated but transformed. To appear politically increasingly means to be visible within platform systems governed by metrics of attention. Visibility becomes quantifiable and programmable, and plurality is flattened into streams of competing content.

In Thiel's view, once innovation is taken as inherently good and critique as obstruction, the erosion of deliberative spaces appears justified. Democratic processes seem slow and inefficient, while technological systems promise clarity and speed. Reformulating Girard's theory, the public sphere becomes a scapegoat, blamed for stagnation and displaced by systems that claim to surpass it.

The result is a paradox. Democratic forms persist – elections, institutions, and the language of popular sovereignty remain – but their substance is weakened. The conditions that make democracy meaningful, such as shared knowledge, discursive equality, and collective agency, are gradually eroded.

In this sense, the crisis of deliberative democracy is not simply a side effect of technological change. It reflects a deeper transformation already traced in this analysis: the concentration of knowledge, the rise of epistemic elites, and the growing belief that the future should be shaped by those who claim to understand and build it. Democracy is not overthrown; it is increasingly bypassed.

Reclaiming Democratic Knowledge

If sophocracy works by capturing and privatizing the infrastructures through which knowledge is produced and circulated, then resisting it cannot be limited to institutional reforms or regulation alone. What is at stake is deeper: how reality itself is made visible and understandable, by whom, and in whose interest.

As the previous section has shown, the current crisis is not only political but epistemic and symbolic. The spaces where people once formed opinions together are increasingly fragmented, mediated, and controlled. If democracy is to remain meaningful, it must reclaim these spaces, not just formally, but in practice.

This begins by restoring the capacity for public reasoning. Citizens must be more than passive recipients of information or targets of algorithmic influence. They must be able to question, interpret, and contest what they see. This is what can be called *epistemic literacy*: not technical expertise, but the ability to understand how knowledge is shaped, filtered, used, and to push back against it.

But individual awareness is not enough. Democracy depends on shared spaces. This means rebuilding and protecting *public infrastructures of knowledge*, that is platforms, institutions, and media that are oriented toward transparency, accountability, and common access rather than profit and control. The aim is not to return to an idealized past, but to develop, alongside traditional spaces of public debate, new forms of digital public space in which discussion, disagreement, and critique can unfold under fair conditions.

A crucial part of this effort concerns AI and data systems. These technologies increasingly shape what people know and how they decide. Leaving them entirely in private hands means giving up control over the conditions of collective understanding. Democratizing them does not simply mean wider access, but public involvement in how they are designed, governed, and evaluated. In other words, they must become objects of public debate, not just tools of optimization.

At the same time, there is a need to *rebuild the public sphere – both virtual and real – as a concrete space of shared meaning* (Calloni 2023b). The fragmentation described earlier cannot be solved by technical fixes alone. It requires practices: discussion, interpretation, and even disagreement carried out in common. Social criticism plays a central role here. Against a culture that treats critique as obstruction, it must be reasserted as a necessary part of democratic life and how societies reflect on themselves and correct their course. This also means challenging the idea that the future belongs only to those who claim to build it.

Sophocratic thinking presents innovation and acceleration (Rosa 2013) as the only path forward. Technology, in Andreessen's formulation of effective accelerationism (Andreessen 2023), is posited as the primary driver of wealth creation and human flourishing.

In contrast, from the perspective of *epistemic justice*. This means that the future must remain open to collective interpretation and contestation, rather than being pre-structured by predictive systems or controlled by a narrow set of actors. The struggle, then, is not only over power or resources, but over the shared conditions of understanding. That means our capacity to know, judge, and act together. If sophocracy operates by shaping what can be known and how people think, democracy must respond by reclaiming these epistemic conditions and restoring their collective, public character.

Epistemic justice, then, is not a single solution but a direction: a way of reorganizing knowledge, technology, and public life so that no single group monopolizes truth, and so that the future remains open to democratic contestation.

Conclusions: Resisting Sophocracy. Why Human Agency Still Matters

Sophocracy designates a form of power that operates through the organization of knowledge. Sovereignty is no longer located primarily in law, territory, or economic control, but in the infrastructures that shape perception, interpretation, and action. The central shift identified in this article is therefore epistemic: power increasingly lies in structuring the conditions under which reality becomes knowable.

This transformation redefines elite authority. It is grounded less in ownership or expertise than in the capacity to model, anticipate, and shape the future. Actors such as Peter Thiel

and institutions such as Palantir exemplify this development: they do not simply act within established frameworks but contribute to producing the frameworks themselves.

At the same time, this configuration is stabilized by a narrative structure with a quasi-prophetic orientation toward the future. Innovation appears as necessity, while critique is framed as obstruction. In this way, asymmetries in the control of knowledge and decision-making are legitimized.

The consequences are observable at multiple levels. Public discourse becomes fragmented and mediated by systems that prioritize visibility and engagement over argument. Individuals are increasingly treated as data subjects, and the conditions for shared judgment are weakened. These developments are not only institutional or epistemic; they also have material effects in the form of surveillance (Zuboff 2019), exclusion, and new forms of exploitation.

From this perspective, the problem is not only who governs, but how the conditions of governance are configured. When systems anticipate and shape behaviour, the space for autonomous judgment is reduced. This raises a fundamental issue: whether human agency can be maintained within environments that tend to translate action into prediction.

A response to this situation cannot be limited to institutional reform. It requires intervening at the level where knowledge is produced and organized. This includes pluralism (Giacomini 2023), the cultivation of critical capacities, the construction of accountable knowledge infrastructures, and the opening of technical systems to public scrutiny.

At the same time, resistance has a more basic dimension. It depends on the recovery of practices that sustain a shared world. Resisting sophocracy requires a return to concrete human relations and social bounds. Democracy begins with the ability to listen, to recognize others not as data points, but as individuals with voices, perspectives, and claims. Dialogue,

rather than prediction, is the condition of common understanding. To listen is to acknowledge the irreducibility of the other, and thereby to affirm both human dignity and the possibility of political life.

In this sense, democracy is not only an institutional arrangement, but a form of collective practice grounded in interactive human agency. Its persistence depends on sustaining the conditions under which individuals can speak, be heard, and act together.

The future under sophocracy remains open. Its direction will depend on whether the infrastructures that organize knowledge can be rendered contestable, and whether human beings retain the capacity to act within them as agents rather than as reified objects.

What is at stake is not only the viability of democratic forms, but the preservation of a shared world grounded in mutual recognition rather than governed by prediction alone. To meet this challenge requires more than critique: it calls for the construction of concrete institutions, practices, and digital spaces capable of sustaining public reasoning, limiting epistemic domination, and resisting the logics that normalize violence and perpetual conflict.

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Part II

Resources for Renewal

The "Liberal Script", Democracy's Discontent, and Political Liberalism

Alessandro Ferrara

Abstract

The article critically examines the widespread thesis that liberalism might have contributed to the current democratic backlash by feeding discontent with democracy on account of its inability to accommodate and prize the values of belonging and membership, extolling instead individual choice as the core of freedom, eschewing all concern with the good and purporting to be a non-partisan, neutral public philosophy for a global world. John Rawls's paradigm of "political liberalism", taken as representative of a family of liberal theories that includes also those put forward by Ronald Dworkin and Jürgen Habermas, is then shown to be free from all of these flaws and is argued to instead offer insights that can strengthen the democratic defenses against illiberal populism.

Keywords: Democracy; Liberalism; Neo-liberalism; Populism, Rawls.

Two things crucial in politics are: to get the narrative right and to sort out what is part of the problem and what of the solution. The aim of this article is to take a closer look at the narratives of the liberal script (Börzel, Gerschewski, and Zürn 2024) and of "democracy's discontent" (Sandel 2022), so popular and central in the debate on democracy today, and in particular to a specific component of that narrative, namely the role of liberalism in favoring the growth of the resentment that today propels the populist backsliding of democracy. The thesis of democracy's discontent can be linked with the liberal script that undergirds the existing democracies and with the cracks in the script that populist movements animated by anti-elite resentment take advantage of. However, liberal-democracy and liberalism are very capacious categories and should not be taken wholesale: the main point of my argument is that when it comes to the narrative of democracy's discontent, Rawls' paradigm of political liberalism – which certainly is part and parcel of the larger family of liberal views – is part of the solution, not of the problem.

The Electoral Confrontation of Liberals and Conservatives

Before addressing the accusation that liberalism as a political-philosophical paradigm may have contributed to the discontent that led to the populist upsurge, it is worth mentioning the inadequacy that liberals – in this case understood as "progressives" confronted with "conservatives" and later with "neoliberals" – have shown at countering the cultural and political hegemony of their adversaries. The ebbs and flows of the fortunes of Democrats and Republicans in the United States sharply illustrate this dynamics, and for this reason my examples and comments will relate basically to that context. The occasion of his funeral has recently resuscitated Jimmy Carter from the oblivion that Ronald Reagan had undeservedly consigned him to. Carter never managed to shed away his public image as a weak leader, the moralist of the infamous "malaise speech", the exemplar of unassertiveness, but should also be credited for having remained immune from the sirens of tax cuts and supply-side economics. The association of his name with deregulation is misleading: his deregulation of transport or airline industries had nothing to do with Reagan's mythology of tax cuts leading to economic benefits trickling down from top to bottom. In the late 1970's, however, Carter was way more distant from his opponents than two decades later Clinton would be from G.H. Bush before and G.W. Bush after him. Can both versions of liberal-democracy – the "liberal" and the "conservative", Carter and Reagan, Bush and Clinton, Bush and Obama – be equally responsible for what we are experiencing now? We should be wary of falling into this trap.

When reflecting on how liberalism has contributed to "democracy's discontent", we might want to keep in mind the increasing submissiveness of "liberal liberal-democracy" to the hegemony of neoliberal liberal-democracy especially in the areas of defense and economic policy. Carter got nailed for the taking of hostages at the American Embassy of Teheran, his inconclusive negotiations, and a failed attempt to rescue them. A landslide of votes enthroned Reagan. What lesson did Democrats draw?

The next episode, after the Reagan cycle, in the politics of image of liberal presidential candidates is when Michael Dukakis, running against George Bush, thought it would help, in order to project the image of a democratic tough "commander in chief" to appear, on 18/9/1988, at the General Dynamics plant where the M-1 Battle Tank – "the most lethal tank in the world" – was assembled, to wear a helmet and military coveralls over his suit and ride the 63-ton tank around

a field, gripping the handle of a 7.62-millimeter machine gun while caught by TV cameras and at some point even murmuring "Rat-a-tat". What good did that do to his and the Democrats' image? In 2004, another liberal candidate, John Kerry, challenging George W. Bush who had just begun his war in Iraq, had the idea of introducing himself at the Democrats' convention with a salute and the line "I'm John Kerry and I'm reporting for duty". Did mimicking, instead of challenging, the conservative rhetoric of military toughness bring any benefit to these forgotten liberal candidates?

On the economic terrain, the subjection to the opponent's hegemonic narrative proved even more unproductive. As we will detail with some examples in Section 3, the liberal and progressive parties and leaders in many countries failed to oppose the Reagan-Thatcher neoliberal narrative according to which the magical mix of tax cuts, deregulation, cuts in governmental expenditures, privatization of previously public services, elimination of trade barriers would, after boosting the profits of global firms and wealthy investors, eventually "trickle down" to the average middle-, lower-middle- and working-class household.

Finally, the story of the Biden candidacy raised the curtain on the third act of the drama of the liberals', progressives' subjection to the hegemony of their adversaries, after embracing domestic neoliberalism and muscular foreign policy. Stepping down was inevitable for Biden, it may have happened well too late for the electoral odds to change, but the problem started much earlier. It began when the liberal Democrats accepted the adversary, Trumpian standard, that the competence of a president is best gauged by how dexterous he is in negotiating treacherous steps or at snapping back at insidious questions from reporters. Accepting this dubious and in any event alien benchmark is what truly doomed the Biden candidacy. Instead, circling the wagons, on the democrats'

part, around the idea that the competence of a president lies in holding a clear and coherent vision for the country and the world, and adapting it to changing circumstances – two things at which Biden's competitor scored zero during the campaign and even below zero since being in office, as evidenced by the inscrutable vagaries of his tariffs policy, his oscillations in foreign politics and the ripples of instability that both send world-wide – could have de-dramatized the issue of dexterity, lack of which famously did not prevent a previous president from leading his country in WWII from a wheel-chair.

So we should be wary of concluding that the correct address at which to deliver the blame for the setback of liberal democracy is liberalism or liberal-democracy as such. Rather it is the liberal submissiveness to the non-liberal ideologies of neoliberalism, populism, and suprematism now combined with economic nationalism, and its shyness in asserting its own values.

The Liberal Script and the Discontents That It Generates

The core of the liberal script, according to the authors of "The Liberal Script: A Reconstruction" (Zürn and Gerschewski 2024) is constituted first and foremost by the idea of freedom as individual self-determination, by the private-public distinction and by the postulate of the equality of citizens, and then by a second layer of components that includes principles ruling over the political, economic and the societal sphere:

The political sphere refers to the liberal's mistrust of power concentration, demanding the rule of law and separation of power, the universality of human rights, and the basal right to collective organization. The economic sphere emphasizes not laissez-faire and freedom at all costs but a market principle in

which the government has a right to intervene, to a greater or lesser extent. Relatedly, the economic sphere underlines the right of private property and the merit principle. In the societal sphere, we refer to the toleration of different lifestyles and openness to the unknown as the hallmark of liberal societies (Zürn and Gerschewski 2024, 34).

The authors of "The Liberal Script" point to a number of internal tension in the script, that oppose for example majority rule and rights, markets and the spirit of solidarity, cosmopolitan yearnings and loyalties to bounded communities, the pursuit of the common good and the pursuit of self-interest (Zürn and Gerschewski 2024, 42). As they conclude, "normative deficiencies are one of the primary sources for the contestation of the liberal script. It is necessary to account for these weaknesses of the liberal script when studying its contestations". Where are the cracks then? At this juncture, the narrative of democracy's discontent, outlined thirty years ago by Michael Sandel and recently updated by him, alerts us to the following five insidious aspects allegedly typical of all varieties of liberalism.

First, all liberal positions evidence a typical inability to adequately acknowledge the values of belonging and proud membership, especially of membership in religious congregations, and the disparaging of these values to local, familial, community and national bonds as morally inferior to loyalties and commitments directed at human rights or humanity at large. This trait, according to Sandel, can be found in pop psychology treatises that urge the reader to adopt certain ideal-typical models of the self that feel no solidarity with those close to them: "Their values are not local. They do not identify with the family, neighborhood, community, city, state, or country. They see themselves as belonging to the human race, and an unemployed Austrian is no better or worse than an unemployed Californian. They are not patriotic to a special

boundary; rather they see themselves as a part of the whole of humanity" (Dyer 1976, p. 233, quoted in Sandel 2022, p. 220). But also in high-brow liberalism, exemplified by the contest of Rawls and Nozick on justice in the liberal state, the unexamined assumption is the equation of freedom and individual choice: "Despite their differences about distributive justice, Nozick agreed with Rawls that individual rights outweigh utilitarian considerations and that government should be neutral among ends in order to respect people's capacity to choose and pursue their own values and ends. Like the political debate they brought to philosophical clarity, theirs was a debate within the terms of the voluntarist conception of freedom" (Sandel 2022, p. 218).

Second, for all liberals "individual choice" is the ground not only of freedom, which they understand basically along the lines of the most extreme version of negative freedom as an unimpeded faculty to do whatever one wants, but also the ground of all commitments (which cannot bind us contrary to our will) and the keystone of all normative orders. Liberals tend to lean toward "atomism" and conceive of society as the end result of the actions of individuals.

Third, regardless of their specific ilk, liberals tend to cast their script for society as neutral, non-partisan, grounded on some procedural normativity, while the competing scripts always exude parochial traditionalism of one kind or another, religious or secular. They hide the partisanship of their scheme for a social order under a veneer of neutrality. Inevitably, liberalism "insists on neutrality toward competing conceptions of the good life" and an agnosticism of public institutions. Furthermore, "this penchant for neutrality bends liberalism in the direction of the market faith. The deepest appeal of markets is not that they deliver efficiency and prosperity, but that they seem to spare us the need for messy, contentious debates about how to value goods" (Sandel 2022, p. 341).

Fourth, the "procedural republic" advocated by liberalism, premised on the priority of the right over the good, inevitably ends up syphoning away of all reference to the common good in public discourse, in favor instead of the fairness of rules, institutions and procedures. Liberalism is bound to miss on the republican insight, according to Sandel, that sharing in self-rule involves something more. It means deliberating with fellow citizens about the common good and helping to shape the destiny of the political community. But to deliberate well about the common good requires more than the capacity to choose one's ends and to respect others' rights to do the same. It requires a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake. To share in self-rule therefore requires that citizens possess, or come to acquire, certain qualities of character, or civic virtues. But this means that republican politics cannot be neutral toward the values and ends its citizens espouse. The republican conception of freedom, unlike the liberal conception, requires a formative politics, a politics that cultivates in citizens the qualities of character self-government requires (Sandel 2022, p. 13).

Fifth, the liberalism responsible for the resentment that risks to submerge democracy has surrendered to the sirens of neoliberal globalization. It's a liberalism that has given in to the myth of the ineluctability of globalization, as though it was a quasi-natural phenomenon pointless to oppose, which just calls for savvy adaptation, not for debating its contested pros and cons. Sandel takes as exemplary Blair's line that "people say we have to stop and debate globalization. You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer." (Sandel 2022, pp. 287–288).

Liberalisms That Are Not Part of the Problem

This narrative about how liberalism contributed to its own demise at the hand of populist forces is, at best, only partially accurate. For starters, it fails to properly distinguish liberalism and neoliberalism. The emphasis on privatization of state services and administrative processes, on deregulation, on consumer choice, on the flexibilization and precarization of labor, on free trade and globalization, as well as on lowering fiscal pressure and cutting on government spending do not in any meaningful way define liberalism, but only the neoliberal reaction, inaugurated by the electoral victories of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, to the fiscal crisis of the welfare state in the 1970's (O'Connor 2017). It is certainly true that in the political arena of affluent liberal-democratic societies center-left parties, leaders and heads of government – i.e., commonly understood as *liberal* or progressive, in opposition to *conservative,* actors – have embraced these neoliberal policies or failed to distance themselves from them. For example, Clinton in 1999, in tribute to neoliberal doctrines of deregulation, repealed the Glass-Steagall Act, put in place in 1933 by a really liberal-democratic president, FDR, which for more than half a century had stabilized the banking system and had kept speculative risk-taking under control, by mandating the strict separation of commercial and investment banks and forbidding commercial banks from speculatively investing their clients' deposits[1]. Less than 10 years elapsed before the outbreak of the great recession of 2008, ignited by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers.

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[1] On November 12, 1999, Congress passed the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (or the Financial Services Modernization Act), formally repealing the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 — which, as Stiglitz puts it, had "served the country and the world well, presiding over an unprecedented period of stability and growth" (Stiglitz 2010, 76).

Then, in response to the 2008 financial crisis, the bail-out policies of both the Paulson Plan (during the Bush Presidency) and its twin, the Geithner Plan (during the Obama Presidency), proved the point that no matter which administration, conservative or liberal, was in charge the safest policy for a bank is to become "too big to fail" (Stiglitz 2010, pp. 24–25). Bail-outs shifted the costs of failed investments and inconsiderate risk-taking onto the taxpayer, unburdened those responsible for it, and thus created resentment while further encouraging speculative investments in volatile financial markets. The legislative measures taken by the Obama administration, e.g. the Dodd-Frank "Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010"[2], never challenged the neoliberal fundamentals: the four largest banks in the US in 2013, under Obama, were 30% larger than they were in 2008, under George W. Bush. But these undeniable blunders committed by single progressive or liberal heads of government have little to do with the conceptual separation of liberalism, as a family of doctrines, and neoliberalism, though of course some laissez-faire liberal authors as Hayek and Von Mises certainly have inspired neoliberal policies.

My point is that in no conceivable sense can some major strands of contemporary liberalism be brought under the umbrella of the liberalism subservient to the hegemony of neoliberalism. Three major examples are the conceptions of liberal democracy elaborated by John Rawls in *Political Liberalism* (2005), by Ronald Dworkin in *Is Democracy Possible Here?* (2006) and in "Liberal Community" (1989), by Jürgen Habermas in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996). An entire area of contemporary liberalism fails to be captured by the elusive notion of "the liberal script". Reasons of space allow me to detail point by point only one case, that of political liberalism.

[2] See Preamble to HR4173, accessed at https://www.congress.gov/111/bills/hr4173/BILLS-111hr4173ih.pdf, 16.11.2025.

Concerning the value of "belonging", in response to Locke's famous theory of legitimacy as based on the "tacit consent" implicitly conveyed by enduring residence within the territory of the polity (Locke 1965, II, § 119, 392) here is what Rawls has to say in *Political Liberalism*:

> normally leaving one's country is a grave step: it involves leaving the society and culture whose language we use in speech and thought to express and understand ourselves, our aims, goals, and values; the society and culture whose history, customs, and conventions we depend on to find our place in the social world… The bonds of society and culture, of history and social place of origin, begin so early to shape our life and are normally so strong that the right of emigration does not suffice to make it [the government's authority] free, politically speaking, in the way that liberty of conscience suffices to make accepting ecclesiastical authority free, politically speaking (Rawls 2005, p. 222).

No stronger attestation can be demanded of the intrinsic value of "belonging" for contemporary liberalism.

Concerning the second aspect mentioned by Sandel, the subject of individual choice, namely the "individual", in *Political Liberalism* is so little glorified as to fail to make it to the index. There is no entry for the individual. We do find, instead, a whole section, § 5 of Lecture 1, devoted to a "political conception of the person", as possessed of two moral powers. Likewise, the neoliberal idea of society being reducible to a collection of individuals, nowhere can be found in *Political Liberalism*. Instead, society is characterized, like in *A Theory of Justice,* as a "social union of social unions" (Rawls 1999, p. 462).

Concerning the so-called "procedural republic", in *Political Liberalism* Rawls entirely rejects a formalistic view of neutrality as the purely procedural, contentless neutrality of the Kantian generalization test, to which Habermas has

impressed a discourse-theoretical twist. Procedural neutrality is bogus neutrality for the later Rawls (see Rawls 2005, pp. 192–194), in that a neutral procedure still is desired in view of its substantively desirable expected outcomes. In this respect, the distance between *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* cannot be overestimated. While in *A Theory of Justice* "justice as fairness" is shown in the original position to be the view of justice most *rational* for each and every human being, in *Political Liberalism* it is justified as "the most *reasonable* for us", where "*us*" is evidently a subset of humanity, and is "most reasonable" not by virtue of respecting some normative order "antecedent and given to us" but by virtue of its unequalled "congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations" (Rawls 1980, p. 519).

Furthermore, contrary to the presumed liberal aversion to the idea of "the good", in *Political Liberalism* Rawls argues that *any* constitutional order, liberal or non-liberal, always affirms some substantive value, and that problematic for liberalism are only *controversial* ideas of the good. The entire Chapter 5 of *Political Liberalism* is dedicated to spelling out 5 *shared* ideas of the good that undergird liberal-democratic orders: goodness as rationality, primary goods, permissible conceptions of the good, political virtues, the good of political society. In complete opposition to the rendition of liberalism conveyed by the "liberal script", and the alleged incompatibility of simultaneously pursuing the neutrality of institutions and pursuing the good, Rawls finds that "even though political liberalism seeks common ground and is neutral in aim, it is important to emphasize that it may still affirm the superiority of certain forms of moral character and encourage certain moral virtues" (Rawls 2005, p. 194).

Finally, concerning the ineluctability of globalization, even if political leaders indeed have occasionally depicted this ineluctability as sort of natural, *pace* Blair we may have

come to understand that there might after all be some causally non neglectable relation between certain persisting patterns of human action, especially in the area of industrial production, and the natural succession of seasons. Be that as it may, these politicians' blunders cannot obscure the fact that a trend toward globalization also originates from the rise of entirely new "global challenges" – climate change in the first place, but also pandemic outbreaks, international security, international terrorism, major fluctuations of the global market – that no single national Leviathan, however powerful, can successfully handle. The Great Depression originated from the 1929 Wall Street crash of the stock market and could be remedied by appropriate legislation by the US Congress. The recession of 2008 equally originated in the United States but risked triggering a global financial melt-down in motion that could only be prevented through the coordinated action of several central banks and governments. Challenges of global scope require global agency, if not a global Leviathan (Cerutti 2007). That's what makes globalization inescapable and the project of reversing it an illusion, perhaps momentarily appealing, but destined to lead nowhere.

For these five reasons, political liberalism can't be part of the problem of a discontent for democracy allegedly induced by liberalism.

Can Political Liberalism Be Part of the Solution?

The answer is positive. Political liberalism not only does not include any of the features that the narrative of "democracy's discontent" identifies as liabilities of contemporary liberalism, but can arguably contribute to protect liberal democracy from some negative consequences of the populist wave of resentment, polarization and democratic backsliding.

Political liberalism can mitigate those effects by challenging the basic premises of most populist movements and parties. More specifically, political liberalism can expose three dangers inherent in the *serial* view of democratic sovereignty presupposed by populist forces. Populists conflate the people and the electorate, attributing full constituent power to the voters (Ferrara 2023, pp. 66–69). Deep-seated in a venerable *democratic tradition*, started by Rousseau and Jefferson, this *serial* view of popular sovereignty equates each generation of a people with the entire people, and attributes to the living citizens the power to modify the constitution without any constraints, as the current owners of a piece of real estate are not constrained by the will of previous or future owners (Ferrara 2023, pp. 209–211). Political liberalism, instead, embeds a *sequential* view of popular sovereignty. The electorate is a *constituted* power that acts within the constitutional tracks set by "the people", of which the electorate, of course, partakes, but with which is not coextensive. The author of a constitution is the transgenerational people its single generations are *co-authors*. As *co-authors*, voters can speak their minds, but within the bounds of a political project shared *across generations* (Ferrara 2023, pp. 11–12).

The political-liberal sequential view of democratic sovereignty is "part of the solution" because it safeguards us from three pernicious implications that possibly, though not necessarily, follow from the populist *serial* view. First, a "wanton republic", prone to revolutionizing the political order at each generation, may reduce the constitution to a pleonastic amplification of the living citizens' will. Second, insofar as a constitutional project for self-government fails to stabilize over time, the symbolic basis of the people's trans-temporal identity may recede along ethno-cultural lines. Third, the generations of a people may fail to treat each other as equals, with the present one granting itself the Orwellian status of "more equal than others" (Ferrara 2023, pp. 211–216).

The political-liberal *sequential* view of democratic sovereignty avoids these dangers, inherent in the serial view, by keeping the "will of the people" *distinct* from the will of the voters, submitting the initiatives of both "the few" and "the many" to the test of "legitimation by constitution" (Ferrara & Michelman 2021), and by incorporating a demanding criterion of legitimacy for constitutional reform inspired by the principle of *vertical reciprocity* among free and equal generations of the same people (Ferrara 2023, pp. 272–275).

In conclusion: the narrative that democracy's discontent originates from the shortcomings of liberalism should be corrected. One major paradigm – political liberalism – not only is immune from all those shortcomings, but is also part of the solution because it counters the consequences of this discontent, by offering a precious alternative to the theoretical underpinnings of all populist ideologies.

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Will the Center Hold?
In Search of a Renewed Democratic Middle Ground

Claus Leggewie

Abstract

The frontal attack on democracy by right-wing extremist, and in some cases neo-fascist and racist, parties and movements has alarmed liberal European societies. There are serious concerns that the democratic center will not withstand the pressure and that conservatives in particular will tear down the firewall. Climate skepticism, illiberal democracy and social inequality thus work closely together. In contrast, the formation of a broad "climate coalition" across the entire spectrum of society, as well as in local, national, and supranational parliaments, is necessary and new forms of political participation are at hand.

Keywords: Democracy; Ungovernability; Centrism; Climate coalition; Authoritarianism; Right-wing politics; Right-left-divide; Citizen's councils.

Attack From the Right

The frontal attack on democracy by right-wing extremist, and in some cases neo-fascist and racist, parties and movements has alarmed liberal European societies. A large part of society rejects this attack and wants to participate politically, but beyond occasional mass demonstrations, there is a sense of helplessness about how this can be achieved in the long term. What can "poor me" do? Sign petitions, join a moderate party, assume a political office, get actively involved in associations and public welfare organizations? At the same time, the political establishment gives the impression that, beyond generating votes, it is not particularly interested in increasing citizen engagement and refreshing parliamentary party democracy. (The gravest example is the permanent political crisis of the Fifth Republic in France, with its division into a self-referential political class in Paris and the *pays réel*, the angry hinterland.) Arrogance against anger: With a participation backlog "below" and business as usual "above," the rise of the radical right will be almost impossible to stop and contain not only in France. The postulate of the "firewall", i.e. a taboo barrier to offers of alliance between conservatives and right-wing extremists, becomes hollow when there is a lack of attractive programs and lively practice on the "correct" (i.e. left-liberal) side (Schroeder et al. 2025; Jacobsen 2025). There is a pressing need for a vital center of expanded democracy; the broken link between civil society and the party system must be reestablished. (Leggewie 2022)

In the Netherlands, the Greens and Social Democrats recently joined forces with Frans Timmermans, the long-standing leader of the European Socialists, as their lead candidate, to replace the right-wing coalition ruling in The Hague under the informal leadership of Geert Wilders, an archetype of recent European right-wing populism. The merger

could be seen as an attempt to revive the "democratic center" in a party system that has frayed far to the right (without a threshold clause). In the parliamentary elections in October 2025, the radical right retained its share of the vote, but it was split between three parties and lost out to the resurgent centrist parties, the left-wing liberals, the Christian Democrats, and the "green left."[3] Traditionally, in most European countries, the anchor points of this ominous and fluid location in the political landscape were Social and Christian democrats; as "catch-all parties" (popular parties with cross-milieu and cross-camp support, Krouwel 2003), they cut old ideological ties after 1945 and replaced each other in peaceful coexistence as governing parties, including in grand coalitions when smaller tandem partners refused to cooperate. Unlike party systems with majority voting, especially presidential democracies, which tend toward "two-humped" polarization with two parties on the right and two the left, parliamentary consensus democracies were characterized by this drift toward the center and an increasingly "centrist" (alias moderate) self-positioning of the voter majorities. The fundamental opposition advocated by communists and fascists, which was sometimes violently pursued, also mobilized extra-parliamentary protest actors less and less. By emphasizing the fundamental coalition potential of "all democratic parties (of the center)" (social democrats, reform communists, and left-wing liberals) the pointed, often "empty center" expanded from a steep non-place into an broader inclusive saddle. Some parties fully abandoned the right-left dichotomy; they profiled themselves, exemplified by the German CDU, as the "party of the center" and thus claimed a "structural majority capability." Macron's analogous political experiment was to create a liberal center, which was thought almost impossible in France (Gougou/Persico 2017).

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[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_Dutch_general_election.

After his failure due to the rigidity of the political institutions of the Fifth Republic, the extreme right and left regained strength (Collard 2025).

Deserted Middle Path and Conservatives Under Pressure

The center owes its appeal to philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Rousseau to Kant, as well as to non-European sources such as the "Book of Measure and Center" attributed to Confucius: "Not leaning to either side is the middle; not allowing oneself to waver is the middle. The middle denotes the right path that all under heaven should follow; measure denotes the principle that is valid for all under heaven" (Zhu Xi).[4] In this sense, 19th century German conservatism invoked social and political stability with the formula of "Mitte und Mass" (moderation and balance) (Meyer-Tasch 2006, Münkler 2012). This middle path still aims entirely at preserving a proven, harmoniously conceived order that has been thrown off balance by linear conceptions of time and dialectical leaps. The Irish poet William Butler Yeats coined the famous phrase "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold" in his apocalyptic vision "The Second Coming", a good hundred years ago, after the material and moral catastrophe of the First World War and in the midst of the chaos of the Spanish flu. The idea that the center no longer holds then corresponded to the life experience of many Europeans and remains a popular topos in literature, music, film, and essays to this day in times of upheaval.

Among them was the equally epoch-making book "The Vital Center" by historian and later Kennedy advisor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who in 1949, after the new disaster of World War II, postulated a strong liberal position against

[4] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/zhu-xi/.

right-wing and left-wing totalitarianism. Here, too, the center is attributed an essential function of intellectual, psychological, and social cohesion, which is threatened and challenged from the margins. Accordingly, historian Eric Hobsbawm summed up the entire history of the (short) 20th century as an "age of extremes." This seemed to come to an end with the supposed triumph of liberal democracy and capitalist globalization, but the 21st century began with a renewed authoritarian threat that radically challenges the democratic center.

The seating arrangement introduced in the French National Assembly in the 19th century assigned seats on the right to the forces of tradition and preservation, and on the left to those of progress and change. In the "Trente Glorieuses", the glorious Post-War days from the Fifties through the Seventies in the rich welfare states, the "middle-class bulge" built up by increased incomes and wealth, job security, and educational patents, lifestyles, and consumer behavior triggered a centripetal tendency, which was followed by the de-ideologized programs of the mainstream parties, whose preferences no longer differed diametrically from the attitudes and behavior patterns of the upper and lower classes.

The heyday of the center drift is clearly over. The Radical Right (and to a minor extent the Radical Left) have risen again from the ashes of history. In quantitative terms alone, the once (excessively) large mandate potential of the parties of the right and left center no longer adds up to a governing majority. The famous "Great Coalition" shrank to the point where it no longer had a majority. Christian democracy, once the initiator and backbone of the European (Economic) Union, has been curtailed in many of its traditional countries, as have classical and neo-liberal parties. Emmanuel Macron's above mentioned attempt to center France's two-party system via the "Republique en Marche" alliance failed spectacularly. Fidesz, founded by Viktor Orbán as a liberal party for post-socialist youngsters,

mutated into a prototype of explicitly authoritarian illiberalism (Halmai 2024, Leggewie/Karolewski 2021), which is setting a precedent in many Eastern European countries (Wilkinson 2021, Manucci/van Hauwaert 2025).

In this way, conservatives, liberals, and even moderate socialists have been literally cannibalized by ethno-nationalist, sometimes openly fascist right-wing parties. In Scandinavia, populist parties such as the Sweden Democrats, the Danish People's Party, the Norwegian Progress Party, and the "True Finns" have gained support from both sides. Social Democrats and (where they have been successful) Greens are not only up against the wall in the Netherlands; red-green coalitions that have been formed in the meantime have not been able to assert themselves as alliances that convincingly combine the welfare state and sustainability (Bergmann, Diermeier 2024). Since the late 1970s, even the term "reform" has changed sides. It no longer refers to the domestication of wild market capitalism, but rather to its liberation from regulatory barriers and the triggering of a "conservative (counter) revolution."(Spektorowski 2025)

This encompasses open xenophobia and racism, even a social Darwinist argument based on the natural and God-given superiority of white populations, whose demographic and cultural hegemony is under threat (Ferber 1999, Gibbons 2018). Wherever "migration" is now seen as the main issue and is being hammered home by the media, the xenophobic right, which is further strengthened by the mainstream's adaptation, usually wins support. In contrast, the "democratic center" in many places seems like a numb emergency coalition without a programmatic profile in order to maintain its ability to govern. In the German Land of Thuringia, a "blackberry coalition" of the CDU, SPD, and BSW is in power, tacitly dependent on votes from the Left Party; the Union's decision on "incompatibility" has quickly become a dead letter at the federal level

since Friedrich Merz's election as chancellor was only possible thanks to a "procedural" approval of the Left Party.

Meanwhile, the skepticism that political philosopher Michael Sandel had dubbed "Democracy's Discontent" (2022, Calhoun et al. 2022) three decades ago radicalized into aggressive fundamental opposition–articulated peaceful dissent turned into violent disruption. Its symbol is the chainsaw. Thus the extreme right has launched a massive attack on democracy as a whole. It is systematically working to delegitimize the "old parties" and blaming immigrants and refugees for obvious infrastructural and security policy deficits. In France, the long-standing rise of the Front National alias Rassemblement National is being seconded by the extreme left-wing La France Insoumise's total refusal to make concessions, for example on pension policy. This blockade aims to bring about the serial failure of prime ministers in the illusory hope of strengthening an "anti-fascist" camp that includes political Islam, which has only made a presidency of the extreme right more likely.

In the Austrian case, the path that was set out in 2024, with the far right, which had become increasingly powerful both in the coalition government and in the fundamental opposition, surpassing the traditional conservative People's Party and dictating terms to it, was a warning sign for Germany. However, resistance arose against the conservative-backed takeover of power by the self-designated "People's Chancellor" Herbert Kickl, which seemed inevitable from a formal perspective of majority democracy, even if this led to the erosion of all other elements that characterize democracies in terms of content, following the pattern of the Visegrad states and the United States: separation of powers, free press, critical culture, uncensored science. In other words, it leads to a tyranny of the majority, which, as the example of the Weimar Republic shows, can also take root in the center. Kickl's Freedom Party (Wodak/Rheindorf 2018) remains in first place in the polls.

In the member states of the European Union, the general trend is now less the much-discussed "polarization," i.e., centrifugal tendencies in both directions, than the rise of the extreme right at the expense of the original conservative party families and the left-wing center. Paranoid polarization is mainly the business of right-wing influencers in social media (Chavalarias 2022), sometimes echoed by a hysterical "wokism". The impotence of the center is reflected in the composition of the European Parliament since 1979, which was initially dominated by Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, and Liberals, and loosened up by the electoral successes of the Greens in Germany, France, and the Benelux countries (Pollex/Berker 2024), but since 2010 has given way to right-wing populist and radical right-wing forces, which today account for more than a third of the members of parliament in three different formations: e.g. Berlusconi's Forza Italia, Matteo Salvini's Lega, and Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Galbo 2024). Even the British Tories are not immune to competition from Nigel Farage's radical right-wing Reform Party (Kimura 2025). This trend has also reached the Iberian Peninsula with a certain time lag, where Vox took considerable votes away from the Partido Popular and Chega from the Allianca Democratica, supplementing the binary system with a third pole (Heyne/Manucci 2021). The left-wing parties that were once hegemonic there and in southern European countries have shrunk, in the case of the communists, who were aligned with the Soviet Union until 1991, to the point of insignificance; in the core welfare states such as Great Britain, Scandinavia, and Central Europe, socialists and social democrats lost their status as the predominant representatives of workers (Arens/van Ditmares 2024).

Roadmap for a Renaissance of the Center

Is the global shift to the right already the final word? Or, against this backdrop, what could be an attractive "democratic center" that counters radical system disruptors and halts the erosion of core democratic institutions? At least five aspects come into play: the renewal of a liberalism centered less on individual freedom "from" (all constraints, regulations and restrictions) and more on collective responsibility and freedom "to" (measures for a livable future for coming generations as well); the consolidation of a cross-party "climate coalition" (Charbonnier 2025); an institutional supplement to the classic separation of powers in the form of a deliberative component that can act as a "consultative" body without an imperative mandate but with strong appeal; alternative designs for cooperative government practice and a communication style open to mutual understanding.

Criticism and self-criticism of liberalism have always been at a level that surpassed corresponding questioning of conservatism and socialism. However, the current blanket condemnation of liberalism, originating primarily from the "Global South" and its academic offshoots in the North, throws the baby out with the bathwater and undermines the normative basis for the necessary answer to the autocratic, plutocratic, and imperialist tendencies in Russia, China, the US, and the proliferation of oppressive regimes in almost all former anti-colonial states. At the same time, political liberalism must finally break free from the grip of a supposedly meritocratic market rationality to which it had surrendered in the Clinton/ Blair/ Schröder years (Arestis/Sawyer 2005) and commit itself to the overarching goals of social equality and justice as well as ecological sustainability. This "C-word" (for climate protection) has been so discredited that advocates of social-ecological transformation hardly dare to mention it anymore.

So what might a policy of ecological and social sustainability look like? The heated debate is apparently less about economic and social policy decisions for a neo-industrial and post-carbon future; it reflects the culture war against a social milieu which, as surveys show, has blossomed from the minority corner of "alternatives" and "hippies" into a majority conviction, which, however, has not yet resulted in government majorities. Libertarian authoritarianism can essentially be understood as a fight against social and cultural change, and it refuses to be convinced of the advantages and successes of such a transformation. At the heart of the criticism are short-term additional costs for individual households; examples of this in Germany include the Green Minister of Economics' proposal for a gradual switch from oil and gas heating to heat pumps (Haas et al. 2025), and in France the imposition of a gasoline tax, which led to the iconic yellow vest protests (Fillieule/Dafflon 2022) and has recently continued in the "Bloquons tout!" (let's block everything) movement (Della Suda 2025). The gains, including economic ones, that can be expected from a socio-ecological transformation are offset by possible deductions from the wallets of "ordinary people," who are essentially not only opposed to economic disadvantage, but are also targeting the "left-wing green" milieu of supposed high earners. It follows that an ecological transformation must be complemented and combined much more strongly than in the "post-materialistic" phase of a "silent revolution" (Inglehart 2015) with social and fiscal policy efforts that reduce social inequality and injustice, especially in the hinterlands of metropolitan areas (Ziblatt et al.2024). The issue of ecological transformation, which is anything but unpopular in itself, gains considerable momentum when it is linked to stronger and fairer taxation of high incomes, wealth, and inheritances, which can be used to finance the fight against climate change and species extinction.

If antagonistic coalitions tend toward instability (and those involving right-wing extremists should be ruled out), then patterns of governability must be considered that have been avoided until now because they were thought to cause too much instability. To resolve the Austrian government crisis in 2024, Federal President Alexander van der Bellen presented four scenarios: immediate new elections, resumption of the failed consultations, the establishment of a "technical" cabinet of experts, and the installation of a minority government. Experience shows that new elections usually result in the same dilemma of ungovernability (Offe 2019, Offe/Keane 2018), exploratory talks drag on indefinitely, and experts lack legitimacy. However, government leaders do not even want to consider the fourth option of changing majorities. They shy away from fragile temporary majorities, which would have to be re-established for each budget and individual bill (Russell 2023). This means, however, that they distrust parliamentary legislation, which, following the abolition of party discipline, actually comes from the center of the representative body and must be ensured on a case-by-case basis on the basis of the free mandate of the members of parliament. Such an operation does indeed require a high degree of political "moderation" if a negative coalition cannot constantly threaten with the sword of Damocles of a vote of no confidence (as is currently the case in France's Fifth Republic). But sometimes, to paraphrase a well-known bon mot, it may be better to govern alone than to govern badly. The idea of a "climate coalition" is moving in the direction of a cross-party alliance, a parliamentary caucus that addresses the seriousness of the "overshoot" that has long since reached planet Earth, without foregoing the pragmatic use of the "abundance" offered by technological innovations, transformative public and private investments, and the aforementioned fiscal policy reform of taxation of the "super-rich."

A procedural argument must be added. The crisis of legitimacy and representation in liberal democracies favors techno-bureaucratic forms of government, under which growing sections of the citizenry no longer feel heard or respected. The reputation of political parties is at rock bottom in almost all old democracies and hardly established in the new democracies; they are seen as out-of-touch cartels of power sharing that are preying on the state. Parliaments can hardly compensate for this deficit, so new participatory elements such as purposefully moderated citizens' councils and constitutionally embedded referendums should be installed, which should have a higher degree of representativeness, especially for local agendas of a comprehensive "environmental policy." Neither of these abolishes the separation of powers, but both should bring about a deliberative strengthening of representative democracy (Nanz/Leggewie 2019). The best remedy for disenchantment with democracy remains a lived and activating democracy that sometimes closes the laptop and turns off the cell phone, i.e., one that relies on direct encounters and personal exchange.

In view of the notorious budget deficits, but also the growing inequality gap (and diverging from the radical left's appropriation of the issue), taxation of high incomes, wealth, and inheritances is overdue, necessary, and popular. However, this does not mean simply squeezing the "super-rich," but rather transferring additional revenue into a dedicated climate fund, which is also fed by CO2 taxes and revenue from emissions trading. Detailed plans for such a fund solution are already available (Löw-Beer et al. 2018).

The significant loss of young voters affects all parties in the democratic center. They have lost appeal among millennials and Gen Z, with some considering them too left-wing and others too conformist and not "anti" or "post" (-fascist, colonial) enough. The voting behavior of first-time and young voters is volatile. While first-time voters in the penultimate German federal election were still divided between the Liberals and the Greens, in the last election they defected to the Left Party and the AfD. The centrist parties must become advocates for younger people, who are the main victims of dangerous climate change, are being called up for military service under the threat of war from Russia, and are expected to reduce an enormous debt burden that threatens their prosperity. This burden must be shared by all (Deckman 2024).

The secular upheavals in the European party systems do not overcome the traditional dividing line between right and left (aka capital vs. labor or market vs. state); the privileges that have grown out of large fortunes and inheritances have rather brought the issue of social injustice to the fore again. One can identify this as a "class struggle from the right", most clearly seen in the Trump Republicans, who exploit the disadvantages and traumas of marginalized lower classes and regions (such as the "hillbillies") to establish an autocracy dominated by the super-rich. The radical right largely pursues neoliberal economic concepts, coloring them with "national socialist" rhetoric of "Volksgemeinschaft" and directing aversion toward migrants and a presumed immigration-friendly "globalist"elite, which, in this view, is pursuing a project of "population replacement" or a "great population exchange." (Sedgwick 2024, Dennison/Kustov 2025).

Anyone who addresses "migration" as a vague, complex issue, either leniently, indulging in illusions and concealing problems, or know-it-all, focusing on "successes" and demographic "facts," has already lost, if the aim is (only) to push back the right-wing radicals. The latter can either say, "We always said so," or "They still don't understand anything." The centrist parties are currently entangled in this dilemma. What is needed is a more serious debate that acknowledges the reality of permanent global migration and urbanization and names the sectoral deficits in migration and refugee policy, without overlooking

the fact that poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, violence, etc. are all home-grown problems that cannot be solved here (not easily!) and certainly not through deportation.

Contrary to popular belief, climate change remains an issue that concerns the majority of citizens and motivates a significant proportion of them to make lifestyle changes (Baiardi 2023). As polls show they advocate more decisive climate policy at the European level and a "green market economy." If there was anything to criticize about the climate policy of Germany's "traffic light coalition," it was its technocratic allure and the lack of democratic deliberation (outside of social media and talk shows), especially at the local level. Socio-ecological policy must not be reactivated as the sole trademark of the Green Party. Along these lines, concrete utopias of a better life can be regenerated: better cities and more pleasant landscapes, better health, sensible mobility (and much more). Environmental policy is not (only) about sacrifice, but (much more) about gain. To this end, parliaments should strive to form a cross-party "climate coalition of the willing", which can also function as a "democratic center" against the far right and right-wing conservatives.

Stylistic issues in political communication are not unimportant here, as the failure of the German "traffic light coalition" shows. It certainly helps to moderate democratic debate when coalition partners refrain from well-known skirmishes aimed at raising their profile, which are despised by the public, and do not talk down compromises that have already been made, which is then picked up on by combative media reporting. On the other hand, this requires citizens to abandon their blanket consumer behavior, demanding that "politics" must "deliver"on highly complex issues as quickly as possible, referring to hasty announcements of immediate policy changes "from day one." The rhetorical "excess" that characterizes the hectic pace and one-sidedness, as well as the bubble formation and manipulation of social platforms, and ultimately serves the patterns of ultra-right agitation, must not become the communication style of a democratic center.

Conclusion

The simultaneous rise of revisionist denial of climate change as a human problem, libertarian authoritarianism, and neo-imperialist geopolitics is no coincidence. The objective effect of the rise to power of right-wing extremist movements and parties is precisely the dilatory treatment and reversal of all global agreements and local policies that were initiated with the aim of decarbonizing production and reproduction. In neo-imperial competition, the primacy of the appropriation and extraction of raw materials (Chagnon et al. 2022), from classic ones such as coal and oil/natural gas to critical raw materials (which are also needed for ecological modernization) counts in an anachronistic and brutal way - as President Trump put it: "drill! baby, drill!". This is the material and political-economic basis of authoritarianism. The representatives of the status quo ante are mainly autocratic regimes, which often take on a directly plutocratic form. "Climate skepticism," illiberal democracy, and social inequality thus work closely together. In contrast, the formation of a broad climate coalition across the entire spectrum of society, as well as in local, national, and supranational parliaments, is underway. As an "ecological class" (Latour/Schulz 2022), it transcends traditional social structural and ideological antagonisms by representing a single-issue movement on the one hand and referring to planetary human interests on the other.

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Part III

A Different Diagnosis

Democracy, Capitalism, Materialism and the Ethical
A Post-Liberal Democratic Manifesto

John Milbank

Abstract

Liberal Democracy served the convenience of rulers and it depended upon sustained capitalist growth in an industrial era to ensure its legitimacy. Those conditions no longer pertain. To this degree a materialist analysis of the current collapse of liberal democracy is correct. But only because capitalism like liberalism itself assumes a mechanical materialism within which Marxism is also still trapped. Outside such assumptions we must reassess the premodern as involving much real participatory democracy besides the unacceptably authoritarian. Today, in order to extend such participation we must advance to a real economic democracy and to a plural corporatism which represents groups besides individuals and localities.

Keywords: Liberalism; Capitalism; Investment; Finance; Corporatism.

1

We live in an era of panic. It is perceived that liberal democracy is in crisis, rejected by a new far-right authoritarianism. This is also regarded by many as an aberration that must be explained in terms of the operation of malign forces which capture mass attention through the manipulations of opinion made possible by new social media.

In this essay I will instead contend that it is liberal democracy that has inevitably undermined itself, alongside its economic condition of possibility, which is capitalism. The circumstances of its undermining mean that it is unlikely ever to return in any form that we have known. But it should not be mourned. Liberal Democracy was always to a degree a sham democracy, and other, imperfect but more participatory modes of democracy existed in the premodern past. However, the possibility of a real and much more extended democracy still lies in the future.

To make this case I will first reconsider the recent history of capitalism and liberal democracy, and then how we might shape a different political order in the future.

2

Liberal democracy as we know it is not very old. It began partly as an attempt to appease economically disgruntled popular forces, but more especially as an attempt by elites to control an emergent and complex urban society more directly than traditional clientage networks allowed (Lizerì & Persico 2004). In its completed form it only became normative in Europe and North America and then elsewhere in the wake of the Second World War. So much is this the case that we may regard it as an essentially military achievement: the consequence of mass

mobilisation and the price that the élites had to pay for that, along with economic redistribution and the extension of state welfare (Benanav 2025a).

In the "thirty glorious years" that followed that war, the exercise of democracy and the granting of individual rights always ran concurrent with a qualified embrace of market capitalism. So much is *that* the case *that* we can also say *that* the allowance of suffrage to the entire population was balanced-out by the submission of the same population to the rigours of market discipline, however ameliorated.

Given this conjunction, it was tacitly assumed that any mass vote to transcend the capitalist economic order would constitute a crisis for liberal democracy as such. This explains the McCarthyite phenomenon in the United States, besides the deliberate placing of obstacles in the path of pure democracy by the EEC, later evolving into the EU. It also explains in part the international absolutisation of extended notions of human rights and dignity intended to resist any mass populist overthrow of Western civilisational norms, as had occurred under Nazism, Fascism and Soviet Communism.

At the same time, lessons had been covertly learnt from totalitarian experience. There was no return to the dogmatic liberal democracy of Weimar, that had proved so fragile. Instead, from Austria to the United States, formal constitutional democracy was pragmatically balanced by an informal, corporatist democracy that involved the continuous state-consulting of various established economic, local, cultural and religious bodies. This involved a tripartite mode of coordinated administration between the State, Management and Trade Unions. These mediations were not seen as dispensable, if economic and social harmony was to be sustained (Wiarda 1997, pp. 71–151; Lind 2021).

The mixture of liberal democracy and capitalism proved viable and successful for three decades because, through the

transferred energy of military organisation and the resultant industrial catch-up of so many European countries, the economy generated an enormous surplus, including a high level of demand, given the feasibility of the raising of wages and salaries. This remains true, even though one should not, as Aaron Benanav seems to do, omit the corporatist role played by targeted state investment, or play down the importance of welfare redistribution, that ensured much improved levels of health and education, besides the considerable extension of women's role in the labour market. Yet despite the great increase in government expenditure in these areas, it was vastly exceeded by the paying-off of past accrued debt, especially during the war years (Benanav 2022, pp. 65–79).

Fundamentally then, the long post-war years of peace and prosperity depended upon unprecedented economic growth, and also on the varying Social or Christian Democratic modes of redistribution which that rendered possible.

But this stability was not to prove eternal. It was theoretically governed by Keynesian theoretical auspices. Yet in England itself John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge had never supposed that the cyclically corrective State stimulation of demand was the ultimate aim. Rather, they saw it as but a staging-post on the way to a post-Capitalist utopia in which capital investment would become so abundant as to negate its own significance, and the pursuit of profit could give way to the mass pursuit of beauty and the individual enjoyment of leisure (Keynes 2025, pp. 176–262; Crotty 2019; Benanav 2025a).

What they did not sufficiently reckon upon was the degree of capitalist resistance, because their liberal socialism, while intelligently focused, in excess of Marx, on the organisation of investment, refused Marx's account of the capitalist mode of production as inherently involving a conflict with labour and an inherently unfair appropriation of labour value. Over the course of time, capitalists and managers did not therefore

become resigned to the growing size of the wage-budget, or accept that its eating into their profits could be compensated for by an ever-greater extension of publicly-assigned investment, based upon the Keynesian principle that available money would follow-upon successful action – rather than being its necessary requirement. The limits to corporatist collaboration within a capitalist order were therefore encountered at the point where the finance and business class was not prepared to cede too much power either to the unions or to the State.

However, the excessive growth of income, from a capitalist point of view, was not the only factor in an emerging crisis of the postwar economy. Not only did the rate of profit once more start to exceed the rate of production (a secular tendency of capitalism only seriously interrupted by war: Piketty 2014), also the rate of profit started to decline, as Robert Brenner has argued, not just because of rising wages and taxes, but also because of the inherent logic of market competition. The more the number of competing firms and countries increased, the more over-production tended to ensue – something that the capitalist process cannot really inhibit because the entire system demands the taking of risks, even against the probable odds (Riley & Brenner 2025; Benanav 2025a).

One can argue that the multiplication of firms within and across borders has only spread profit more thinly, rather than diminishing its total. But both statistics and logic belie this conclusion: the more that particular profits are harder to come-by, the more it becomes harder to attract investment, and so fragmentation and dispersal reduces the overall profitability of capital as such.

The only salve against inevitably increasing over-production is consequently the transfer of capital investment into financial speculation, which involves the gradual build-up of capital unrealisable as profit. For a time, profits can be generated by the sterility of a trade with the mere means of trade

which is money, but in the long-run bubbles and crashes always await in the offing, as in 2008.

Because a sustained Keynesian solution implied the end of capitalism itself and this was socially and politically unthinkable, Keynesian approaches as such were abandoned, or took strangely mutated forms from the later Nineteen-Seventies onwards. Initially, it was insisted, in a Friedmanite manner, that growth must be left to the "natural" operation of market-forces, giving rise to a huge worldwide process of deregulation and privatisation, which has eroded the state capacity that is vital to the more-than-economic coordination of incredibly complex and diverse modern societies. Yet by the dawn of the current century, this "neoliberalism" had in effect given way to a Hayekian version of "ordoliberalism" which involved the deliberate attempt artificially to promote the discipline of competition in every sphere of organised life, including health, education and policing. This was supposed to promote eroded governmental efficiency in a new way, but it has only had the consequence of a still further erosion.

And yet, even from the Seventies outset a certain perverted Keynesianism had been apparent. Instead of primarily trying to reduce debt, government and central banks were themselves involved in indirect attempts to boost private investment in the form of public loans (Benanav 2022). Furthermore, given the political impossibility of totally reneging on the welfare contract, welfare was itself increasingly paid for through debt, rather than through taxation. Indeed, a large proportion of taxation now went upon the upkeep of state indebtedness, which meant that the mass of people, including many of the relatively poor, were taxed in order to transfer wealth to the rich, who were the beneficiaries of government repayment of loans incurred through the issuing of government bonds. Rightly it has been said that this is exactly like a postmodern mode of tax-farming (Riley & Brenner 2025).

Even when it has become apparent, after many decades, that the stagnation and eventual diminution of real wages and salaries impacts badly upon demand, and so upon the realisation of capitalist profits, the perceived social dangers of Keynesian demand-stimulation mean that it has been less resorted to. Instead, householders also have been encouraged to increase their indebtedness.

This is only rendered bearable by two things. First, by the encouragement of householders to sink what surpluses they have in unproductive property and to supplement their income through buying and selling of the same. Secondly, by the increased availability of cheap consumer goods produced by exploited labour in the global South. Since 2008 this has gradually stopped being the case, and yet the vicious triply-sustained spiral of state, bank and private indebtedness has not been in any serious way modified (Beckert 2025).

At this point, a serious risk ensues of capitalism losing even the legitimacy that it has enjoyed within strictly capitalist terms of reference. No longer can it be claimed that a system benefitting mainly the rich also benefits everyone in the West to a certain degree, both through the "trickle-down"of expanding wealth, and through the greater exploitation of other parts of the globe. And popular alienation is compounded by the ever-increasing shifts of the capitalist market towards profits through rent on land and other assets, and towards services. Rent appears increasingly as naked extraction, with diminishing returns in terms of the care of property and assets exercised by their owners. The shift to services involves often lowered pay, job insecurity, poor working conditions and the non-viability of collective worker self-organisation and resistance.

Nor can the transition to predominant finance, rent and services, besides digital information, be understood as simply the evolution of the richest parts of the world towards a

"post-industrial" outcome that is mainly the consequence of "natural" technological advance.

For one thing, it is impossible to extract the same level of surplus value from services as from manufactures, where a far greater element of transformation of original raw materials is involved – indeed, any analogy in the case of services scarcely even applies. This is evidenced by the fact that even when manufacturing accounts for a much-lowered proportion of the workforce, it continues to contribute a disproportionately much larger share to the GNP of every country in the world, and a massively greater proportion of global export trade compared with services (Benanav 2025a).

It is in part automation that accounts for this seeming anomaly, but this does not at all mean that automation is the prime reason for an overall ever-diminishing drop in the general demand for labour. Productivity has only increased in relation to output, but levels of output themselves have consistently fallen, which means that the first increase is something of an illusion. The main cause of underemployment (now more frequent than outright unemployment) and the falling demand for labour, is not automation, but once more the longterm tendency for the rate of profit to fall within modern capitalism (Benanav 2022).

It follows that, in general, the transition from manufacturing to services marks not natural progress but rather contingent capitalist decline, because it represents a resort to at least some mode of profit and at least some form of available labour, given the negative pressures upon production that I have outlined. This is massively confirmed by the fact that the same transition is not just a European and North American phenomenon, but has been soon repeated in all the industrialised countries of the world, not excluding China itself.

There is also nothing stable about the division between a funding and consuming West and a borrowing and producing

Asia. Both are thereby exposed to dangerous social pressures (loss of good jobs in the West, exploited workers unable to afford things in Asia) and to inherent economic contradictions. Insufficient domestic demand and the deliberate subordination of parts of the populace has eventually hobbled domestic wealth in the case of China, this being compounded as the export market starts to dry up. In the case of the West, the dependency on finance and the growth of national debt constantly risks eventual foreclosure.

Reliance either upon export production, or upon finance and information, is therefore inherently unstable. Either side will eventually seek to redress the balance within their own boundaries, but even here no stability is truly available. For the retreat to finance, rents and services is a sign of decline of the main capitalist engine which remains real production, and yet this retreat further weakens that engine, and further ensures that abstract wealth can eventually not be tested and cashed out in real terms. Capital becomes ever more floating rather than fixed, yet must be secured ultimately upon something measurable which is no longer gold. Sheer land is not here sufficient: as we saw with the 2008 housing bubble, that simply renders ownership itself less secure, as it is sucked into a financial logic. The only real security lies in industrial production which is now progressively weakened by an endemic crisis of over-production.

The geographical shifts of finance are therefore never permanent and are becoming inter-regional as well as global. The same applies to production, where lower labour costs may initially encourage long supply chains, but then, as the global cost of labour tends to equalise, money needs to be saved by shortening the supply chains and returning somewhat to "in house" and national production. It is a parallel oscillating push and pull as in the case of the relation between money-trading and production.

Likewise with Labour: there is no predominant overall tendency for labour to migrate from some specific countries to others. Rather, most movement of labour across the world is locally from countryside to city, with this only sometimes and in a minority of cases involving long journeys across the world (Beckert 2025, pp. 963–1046). The movement will fluctuate with the fortunes of national economies, as with so many Polish workers now returning from the UK to their native land. It will fluctuate also with the growth of homeworking that can redisperse people to the peripheries, and with the needs of countries to reassure and retrain their own discontented and underemployed native populations, in accord with the exigencies of onshoring just described.

3

What are the social and political consequences of all the above? The most striking global fact is the comparative failure of any leftwing parties to benefit from new moods of discontent. This is most plausibly explained in terms of the absence of any sense of overall worker solidarity within the new arrangements of work and exchange that I have described. Instead, both working and middle-class employees have turned to a defence of their own relative sectional interests in a context where a more general solidarity is not forthcoming, and nor can one obviously imagine any plausible future alternative perspectives.

The line of sectoral division, as Brenner and Dylan Riley argue, runs primarily between credentialed and non-credentialed workers, such that it is those with college and vocational qualifications who tend to achieve jobs within the public sectors of health, education, law and the civil service. Those in the working and lower middle classes without any higher

education are much more employed within the less secure private economy. Accordingly, the former group, in which women predominate, is aligned with the interest of the administrative state and its associated values of utilitarian procedure, and the extension of rights to more and more categories and identified sensibilities. The latter group, in which men often predominate, is instead aligned with the interests of market capital, even if its benefits from this sector are both precarious and diminishing (Riley & Brenner 2025).

In consequence, one sector of the working classes resents the comparative privileges and bargaining power of those in the unionised public sector. It equally resents the proceduralist ethos of the professional managerial class which dominates that sector, besides the more successful corporate monopolies. Yet with the increasing precariousness also of public sector jobs, for example in universities, the division is becoming increasingly one between public sector workers totally in hoc to the arid Human Resources ethos that dominates their lives and those increasingly alienated from it, and starting to realise they have something in common with populist sensibilities.

The same division naturally tends towards a division between relatively internationalist and relatively nationalist primary political allegiances. The most apparently successful parts of the global economy, generating enormous wealth for a very few, and considerable wealth for their lesser adherents, is concentrated in a string of large metropolitan areas across the globe. Often these are effectively closer to each other in their interests and culture than to their own hinterlands, increasingly occupied by the insecure, nostalgic and despairing (Beckert 2025, pp. 963–1046). Naturally, the latter "somewhere" people tend to identify with the interests of the national economy which once afforded them more benefit and welfare sustenance. Their discontent is reinforced by the real economic, besides cultural pressures on their lives brought

about through unprecedentedly high immigration. The working class is thereby further divided between the indigenous (that includes many long-settled immigrant citizens) and the more recently arrived who in global terms relatively benefit from global fluidity.

Yet it is not necessarily the case that the "somewheres" are tending towards "national socialist" attitudes. It is the management class which they directly encounter that they tend to resent more than remote financiers (Davies 2019). Indeed, their dislike of public bureaucracy can often manifest an outright admiration for a Trump-style buccaneering entrepreneur, however ill-gotten his gains. For this reason, they may be content to embrace a national protectionist approach that is far from a reversion to solid social democratic norms, but rather hopes for a revival of industry and indigenous employment through the deployment of tariff walls and immigration restrictions. Under such a Trumpian strategy the internal economy starts to take on a somewhat "Chinese" appearance of a combination of market deregulation, low levels of welfare and yet also of increased state involvement in corporate investment.

There are therefore strong materialist, economic factors lying behind the rise of the populist Right today.

But at the same time, one cannot simply discount the relative importance of cultural motivations. Given the paucity of the material goals now collectively obtainable, emotions are less invested in class than in national solidarity. Nor is this just negatively determined by economic processes, as a purist Marxism of Brenner's kind might imagine. Regional and religious and national loyalties have always been present, beyond any supposedly primary material determination. It is simply that these are coming more to the fore in the face of peculiar economic circumstances, including a much-increased global flux of populations which tends to throw national identities into crisis.

Does this rise of new Right populism threaten liberal democracy? It is rather the case that the ongoing crisis of capitalism since the Seventies, as outlined above, has of itself thrown liberal democracy into crisis, since its widespread success was always predicated on the unusual capitalist success of the thirty glorious years, and the consequent possibility for considerable state redistribution of wealth without alienating capitalist interest. The semi-corporatism that was part of that settlement was ideologically undone by Thatcher and Reagan, supposedly in the name of pure aggregated representative democracy. Yet the Hayekian ideology that they espoused had always been ambivalent about even this mode of democracy. It had been more than happy to support the brutal combination of an elitist corporatism and a generally unregulated market in the case of Pinochet's neo-fascistic Chile (Wiarda 1997, p. 115; Beckert 2025, pp. 963–74). More generally, Hayek had favoured an international ordoliberal establishing of a legal framework for a global market that would deliberately inhibit any powers of national democracy to call it into question – a perspective eventually half-embraced by the European Union.

In the case of North America, Europe and much of Asia, the epoch of neoliberalism has therefore been accompanied by a weakening of both plural corporatist and representative democracy.

This has happened in two specific ways. First, more and more government tasks have been outsourced to apolitical and opportunistic consultancies and other agencies, or have been directly privatised. The results are eventually catastrophic even for the economy, because they discount broader than profit objectives that nonetheless eventually have economic impact. Lorries cannot so easily drive down potholed roads, poisoned water causes disease, children deprived of public libraries and well-equipped schools prove less employable.

Secondly, more and more democratic decisions are replaced by the adjudication of rights in the courts, thereby often crippling government and even military action. Although many of the professionals who now dominate the scene are both opposed to neoliberalism and strongly supportive of the primacy of human rights, the two things are in reality conjoined. For the dominant materialist and "scientific" outlook of capitalism, only material utility, and freedom defined mechanically as negative non-resistance are ultimate values. It follows that the extension of individual market liberty and of personal liberty naturally go together, even if the one is the freedom to make and abide by formal contracts, and the latter is the freedom to abstain from involvement or assert oneself in a supposedly purely private way.

From this purview, any democratic aggregation of wills tends to be unacceptable, as infringing the supposedly absolute rights of some minority or other. This suspicion remains, even though it proves increasingly impossible to mediate any claimed clash of rights in the absence of any shared metaphysical beliefs, as we see increasingly in relation to public debates about gender, sex, birth, death, policing and intoxicants (Michéa 2025).

Given this reluctance, both liberalism concerning rights, and democracy concerning the general will are tending to be displaced by differently aggregated identity, including racial politics, whether on the Right or the Left. Even if these identities are filled with an irrational expressive emotional core (characteristic of the new subjectivist culture that has succeeded postmodernism) they do not escape the liberal celebration of the ultimacy of the will that grounds rights in self-possession rather than in a share in the objective Good and correlative duties. So once in power, as in the case of Trump and Victor Orbán, National Populism tends to override even the legitimate operation of law and due procedure in the dangerous name of the will of the people.

This ultimate voluntarist logic in liberalism corrodes democracy and politics as such, by eventually handing over all collective agreement to the verdict of the market (Michéa 2025). Yet at the same time, because the capitalist market is only sustained by state legality, and because it is subject to ongoing contradiction, a politics ceding to the economic is equally and paradoxically an economics ceding to the political in the form of rental and fiscal control requiring constant government support (Beckert 2025). There is a consequent tendency in our times towards a new mode of totalitarian corporatism.

And once again, this is subject to a dialectical shuttle. In the long neoliberal phase, an international legal escape from national economic regulation was favoured. But given the persistence of states and national identities and the competition between them, local concerns have eventually put pressure upon this. Moreover, outright "piratical" modes of capitalist operation have long sought escape from even international regulation in various enclaves and literal islands (Beckert 2025, pp. 1047–97). Today, the USA itself has started to operate like a vast enclave of this kind. Thus, rogue financiers deceive vast populations by seemingly linking their own interest with theirs, rather as Caesar once broke with his fellow Republican oligarchs to side with the Roman plebs.

Indeed, liberal deregulation had started to associate itself with Hindu and Islamic nationalism as long ago as the postwar years. Since formalism is empty, it can either serve only formalism or embrace with indifference any random content. Today we see overwhelmingly a sterile contest between the pure liberal formalists and a "Schmittian" combination of the formally voluntaristic with the atavistic.

Within that contest democracy must be damaged, because, by a crucial paradox, democracy requires, beyond itself, some sort of faith in the possibility of a just social harmony that truly

reflects the good, true and beautiful. In consequence, it also depends upon the relatively wise, in every field of endeavour, who better discern the transcendent grounds of that harmony, to persuade towards it and to encourage a widespread debate as to the time and space-bound possibilities of its realisation. This was Socrates' and Plato's "postliberal" insight against the Sophists in democratic Athens.

4

Such an unabashedly "spiritualist" conclusion may seem to run counter to the apparent prevailing materialism of my analysis of our recent history, drawing freely upon Marxist thinkers. But my case here would be that a modified Marxist account of capitalism is accurate, just because capitalism, like individualist liberalism, assumes in effect, ever since Thomas Hobbes, the primacy of mechanical, material causation, and of human motivation, only in terms of the amassing of wealth and the gaining of a greater negative freedom of choice and spatial scope.

But what Marxism thereby begs is the question of whether such a metaphysics only applies socially to the world created by liberal capitalism ever since the Seventeenth Century, and to a degree deliberately erected upon such a metaphysical basis? We should ask whether a deeper historicism than that entertained by Adam Smith and Marx is able to identify a shift in mentality profounder than any mere alteration in material conditions?

This question also bears upon that of our future historical hope. We have seen how a Marxist analysis can tend to conclude that a divided work force is simply acting in its own self-interest, even if this negates the possibility of a future socialist society beyond scarcity and gross inequality. But then the question arises as to exactly why, in materialist terms, one

might not consider capitalism to be the final form of rational humanity, the veritable end of history?

To be sure, it is contradictory and never stable, but then so is nature herself, according to Marx and Engels. And if it is a lived "ideological" fiction, then is not this akin to the very illusion of subjectivity and self-identity that nature inevitably throws up, according to a certain plausible reading of Hegel, as with Slavoj Žižek? It can seem as if a sheerly materialist vision is unable to explain why workers in the present should abandon attainable if pathetic current goals for the sake of pursuing a just future which they may not live to see. Nor should one discount the idea that oppressive relations are refused not simply because of the material felt weight of oppression, but because they are perceived to be inherently unjust, and unjust in such a way that their ethical deficiency lies at the core of the apparent impossibility of attaining a balance of social forces. They cannot be balanced precisely because they are only perceived as forces, rather than as the spiritual, human contributions made respectively by labour and by valid modes of economic organisation and coordination.

It is at this point that the claims of a more spiritual socialism and of Catholic Social Teaching assert themselves (Milbank 2008; Milbank & Pabst 2016). Those traditions argue that the primacy of material motivation is simply something inculcated within the materialist logic that capitalism has managed to turn into a perverse common sense. Equally, they can argue that the primacy of class conflict is true for capitalism and yet not for the entirety of human history. It is capitalism that constitutively pits the interests of the owner of capital against the interests of the worker, whereas "feudalism" (the accuracy of which term historians now dispute: Reynolds 1994) assumed a shared social interest, however debatable aspects of the content of this interest now appear to be, and however much "feudal" overlords exploited this mutuality in practice. The ensuing

irony is that the Marxist materialist reading of history remains an uncriticised capitalist reading, in ultimate continuity with Adam Smith's liberally reductive historiography.

It follows that we cannot take the "interests" of various social groups as simply given because, for example, it still remains possible to think of all workers, by hand and brain, as ultimately limited and exploited by "political capitalism". But to decide upon a primacy of identity and a primacy of aim, including its timetable, is a matter of free spiritual imagination.

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So how could we imagine things differently? We first need to realise that in the longer Western term the rise to prevalence of mechanical "scientific" social norms involved the gradual abolition of both the vertical estates and the horizontal corporate organisation of the Western past (Wiarda 1997, pp. 30–34). There had been a natural quadripartite division, shared by most civilisations, between the religious advisors, the political protectors, the working producers and the necessary but dubious merchant class. But within all these sectors there had also been sub-groups honourably committed to internal standards and external social function, if, inevitably also inclined to excessive self-interest (Wiarda 1997).

In terms of the first vertical division, the legally-bound collaboration of estates with the Crown engendered the first modes of post-Roman constitutional governance. In terms of the second horizontal division, much dispersed democratic participation and cooperative action and "crowd-funding" was fomented, something surely more substantive than one person, one vote every four years – however necessary a collective corrective and safeguard against tyranny that may be under our modern conditions (Kehnel 2025). Indeed, earlier modes of

restricted suffrage often much more successfully represented the shared local interests of even those who enjoyed no voting rights (Tombs 2015).

Now that we are faced with the evident metacrisis and exhaustion of capitalism and liberal democracy – dissolved into unmediable rights and uncontainable oligarchic greed as symbolised by the Epstein scandal – we have two options before us.

Either we will advance further into a post-Christian nightmare, or else we need to reconstitute, in a more egalitarian way, the Christian corporatism of the past. Although both estates and corporations are found in all ancient civilisations, it is arguable that in Christendom constitutionality and free association much more overrode imperial central control – although just this lack, as compared with China, eventually undid Western Christendom itself.

Today, then, we need to think about how to combine a more successfully free and participatory equality with civilisational and eventually global unity. The key here is to craft a more dispersed and democratic mode of unity by sustaining processes of just economy across the widest horizons of human gift and ritual exchange, as in the prehistoric past, freely mixing (as again in that prehistory) the hierarchic and the egalitarian as appropriate (Graeber & Wengrow 2022, more than Kemp 2025). The very unleashed postmodern global "anarchy" of unmoored exchange and global "tribal" immediacy of all to all makes such a diversion into the neo-prehistorical paradoxically feasible.

But this means that once more we have to "re-embed" the economy in the social by abandoning the curious and purely modern notion that the ethical and the relational is not at stake in each economic transaction, however near or however remote. Inculcating this has to be at once a matter of ethos and of legality.

For certain, as Keynes taught, a much greater socialisation of investment is key to both processes, in order that a de-ethicised and socially purposeless market on the one hand, and an overbearing and impossible state planning on the other, are avoided. And for certain also this will involve a return (as already with both the USSR and China), in some fashion to the pre-capitalist segregation of different types or circuits of money, such that both the gross speculative exploitation of the private and the private seizure of collective processes are inhibited (Benanav 2025b). Variation in types and scopes of money will tend to inhibit the illusion of capitalist commodification that all can be rendered equivalent on a single univocal scale, and to restore some unity between real cultural value on the one hand and purely monetary value on the other.

Naturally, however, if reasonable profit and returns on investment are still allowed as a just reward for the undertaking of riskier losses of income, these diverse moneys cannot be totally "sunk" in unilateral expenditure – as for certain socialist proposals, including Benanav's – and so public bodies adjudicating the exchange equivalences between them for certain occasional transactions will be required.

This qualification follows, because Catholic Social Teaching, in line with Thomas Aquinas, has been right to refuse those modes of socialism, including mainline Marxism, that simply want to abolish all private property, all monetary transactions and all private returns on investment.

Such abolitions seem once more to sustain a specifically liberal and materialist divide between the utilitarian, now consigned to public management, on the one hand, and the merely private and negatively free on the other. They tend to disallow that the questions of just what is useful and what renders us free, both as individuals and in groups, should be matters of continued relational debate in the course of all our interactions, including decisions regarding investment and

problematic questions of "equivalence" which necessarily transcend the uneasy divide between collective decision and private choice.

Equally, though the welfare safety-net should always be generous, the ultra-socialist detaching of the existential from the labouring (in defiance of 2 Thess 3:10: "if any would not work, neither should he eat"), favoured by Benanav, tends to conceal the ultimate gift-exchanging reality that even the individually existential is reciprocally upheld by the productive and policing work of other human beings. Therefore, if you convert the right to a secure and adequate existence into a subjectively-grounded right (in a liberal fashion) as opposed to a right correlated from the outset with the duties of others under a shared sense of distributive justice, you must in effect hand over the duty that alone realises the right to an absolute power of the collectivity and so of the state (again in accordance with a still Hobbesian outlook). It is inherently more democratic, corporatist and cooperative-socialist to remain with a Pauline logic and thereby allow the inescapably mutual bond of working and existing to be immediately and continuously expressed at the relational and interpersonal level.

It is also not enough simply to go beyond Marx, with Benanav, in commendably recognising shared ends beyond those of accumulation, but then to hand these over to private preference, beyond the utilitarian general distribution of the "necessary". For even if the instantiation of the true, good and beautiful and their ultimate eternal nature are necessarily matters of sustained dialectical questioning, we need also collectively to believe in their objective spiritual reality, and moreover in their ultimate possible harmonisation, beyond inevitable democratic contestation.

Without that horizon, anything that is a matter of merely individual or group preference will once again be subject to antagonistic market mediation and sophistic persuasion.

Without trust in that horizon, we cannot be pursuing real goods, true beauty and ultimate truth, since any assumed inevitable clash within these values or between them implies their impairment and ultimately illusory character. For the specific good, beauty or truth that conflicts with other exemplifications of these transcendentals is by that token involved in a violent contestation and contradiction of its own inherent value beyond a limited, and so in the end sheerly "individual" scope. The good to be the good and not a mechanical manifestation of resistance, or a passionate expression of mere vital need, has to share in a common good, and the same goes for the aesthetic and the cognitive.

A liberal and mechanical duality also tends to haunt any rigid division between the equitably shared work of necessity and the predominance of free leisure time, for all that this has often prevailed in the socialist vision from More through Cabet to Marx (More 1995, pp. 50–55). Once again, only a liberal-utilitarian mindset can conclude that the definitions of either necessary or free are stable, or that any work is necessarily boring and that any leisure time is free of obligation. Beyond what Eric Gill termed "the life of fretwork and frustration", John Ruskin had imagined all work as creative art and Gill himself had suggested that work is the site of creative liberty, but leisure of bound liturgical contemplation (Gill 1929).

Most supremely, a real democracy of the future needs to break with the liberal notion that politics is the realm solely of public formal regulation, and economics the realm solely of private choice – both in evasion of the ethical, aesthetic and transcendently true. As we have seen, this secretes the economisation of politics as contract, and the politicisation of economics as the primary site of natural, "disorganised" and spontaneous governance.

It follows that every economic body must be licenced by law and guild regulation to pursue a specific social purpose.

Within the firm, industrial democracy must prevail, with varying degrees of outright cooperative ownership and organisation. There must be set up tribunals consistently to determine just levels of profits, wages and returns on investment, and public investment boards for a large number of economic purposes, though without precluding private investment altogether, or processes of fluid horizontal exchange (since equitable judgement should be exercised at every "subsidiary" level), and the naturally unavoidable exercise of judgement by the singular individual in the specific moment be tyrannically denied or overridden. Under such a polity, the supply of money will cease to be a problem because, in line with Keynes, its availability will follow discerned need and willed action rather than being its precondition.

The quid pro quo for the subordination of the economy to society must be the political representation of corporate bodies, including firms and guilds, besides other sorts of social and religious organisation, alongside the checking representation of regions and aggregated individuals, as at present. Such a system should also allow a mixture of relatively more "incorporated" associations that are a more or less regular part of government, and entirely free and independent associations that more encourage independence, innovation and creativity (Benanav 2025b).

In this way, both liberalism and the inevitable degeneration of its technocratic bias into fascism can be avoided. It is only this future turn to a benign corporatism that can overcome the increasingly sinister corporatism of the present.

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The Realist Turn
Freedom, Democracy and International Order After Liberalism

Adrian Pabst

Abstract

This article argues that the return to realism marks a rupture with the hegemony of liberal ideology since 1989. Faced with the brazen realpolitik of the Trump Administration and the rise of civilisational state power in China and Russia, it is not simply the "rules-based international order" that is in question but also more fundamental principles such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law. In each case, there are non-liberal alternatives anchored in richer traditions of philosophical and political realism, which transcend the contemporary liberal logic of fusing idealism with materialism. These alternatives are social freedom as mutual restraint, a renewed mixed constitution and representative government, as well as an international order based on social and cultural ties, infused by an ethical realist vision of *ordo amoris*.

Keywords: Realism; Liberalism; Idealism; Materialism; Freedom; Restraint; Democracy; Mixed constitution; Order; Ordo amoris.

Introduction: a New Era After Atomistic Liberalism

At the 2026 Davos summit and the Munich security conference there was widespread acknowledgement that the old order of multilateralism, global governance, free trade, mass immigration and cosmopolitan identity will not be resurrected and that a new era is taking shape – an era characterised by great power rivalry, spheres of influence, protectionism, border enforcement and nationalism (Pabst 2025). If the dominant philosophy and ideology of the old order was a strand of liberalism associated with market individualism, procedural neutrality and technocratic rule (Michéa 2007; Milbank & Pabst 2016), the ideas shaping the new era fuse nativism with libertarianism in the USA and ethno-centric atavism combined with the rise of civilisational states in China and Russia (Coker 2019; Lind 2025). Meanwhile, middle powers across the Western hemisphere have belatedly acknowledged that the idealism of liberal democracy, human rights and "perpetual peace" has already given way to authoritarianism, raw power and war both between and within states. The Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney spoke of "values-based realism" while the German Chancellor Friedrich Merz called it "clear-eyed realism".

This article argues that the return to realism marks a rupture with the hegemony of contemporary liberalism since 1989. Faced with the brazen realpolitik of the Trump Administration and the rise of civilisational state power in China and Russia, it is not simply the "rules-based international order" that is in question but also more fundamental principles such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law. In each case, faced with present-day liberal conception of negative liberty, formal democracy and the rule of positive law, there are non-liberal alternatives anchored in richer traditions of philosophical and

political realism, which transcend the contemporary liberal logic of fusing idealism with materialism. Just as liberal ideas are not the sole cause of the current crisis, realist alternatives will involve not just different ideas but also different material arrangements, transforming both the logic and the operation of globalised capitalism and centralised bureaucracy. The aim of realism which this article advances is to establish the primacy of democratic politics over technology, technocratic rule and legalism as well as strengthen intermediary institutions, trust and cooperation on which democracy in the sense of representative government depends.

Section 1 shows that the dominant forms of contemporary liberalism are anti-realist, rejecting both the philosophy of realism and anthropological and ethical traditions grounded in realist ideas, including human beings as political and social beings, embodied and embedded in relationships and institutions and virtue being as primary in human nature as vice. Section 2 contrasts negative liberty in much of contemporary liberalism with the realist notion of social freedom, while section 3 distinguishes between liberal democracy and the formal separation of powers, on the one hand, and representative government and mixed constitution, on the other hand. Section 4 suggests that the "rules-based international order" was always de facto predicated on US hegemony and that alternatives to both liberal idealism and amoral realpolitik can be found in traditions of ethical realism. The final section outlines some brief concluding reflections.

Contemporary Liberalism Is an Anti-realism

In *Not Thinking Like a Liberal*, Raymond Geuss argues that we face a "total ideology of our era, the conjunction of democracy, liberalism and capitalism" (Geuss 2022, p. xiv).

At the heart of this conjunction lies the contemporary liberal fusion of idealism with materialism: abstraction from reality combined with the reduction of the real to its most basic materiality. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century *laissez-faire* uproots the economy from its social embedding and ends up commodifying money, labour and land, as Karl Polanyi (1944) showed, which sunders physical things from their symbolic significance. Contemporary liberalism also reduces nature and existence itself to its mere material existence, "bare life" (Agamben 1998; Foucault 2008), stripped of its rootedness and embodiment as well as its intrinsic meaning and dignity.

As a philosophy, much of modern liberalism is caught between a supposed natural anarchy and the human artifice of the social contract, as first theorised by Hobbes' "war of all against all" in the state of nature and the absolute sovereign power of Leviathan. As an ideology, contemporary liberalism is caught between an order based on individual rights and legalistic procedure, on the one hand, and the anarchic chaos it ends up bringing about in reality as a result of unleashing the forces of individualism, on the other hand. In reality, the triumph of contemporary liberal ideology ever-more brings about the "war of all against all" and the oscillation between the freedom of the sovereign individual and the coercion of the sovereign state that were its assumptions (Michéa 2007; cf. Manent 1987). But "really existing liberalism", notably during its hegemony from the end of the cold war in 1989 to the financial crisis in 2008, does not thereby prove the universal validity of those presuppositions, because contemporary liberalism has produced in practice the circumstances that it originally assumed in theory.

The fundamental philosophical problem with contemporary liberalism is that in the final analysis it collapses back into the base materialism that is one half of its dualist outlook, evacuating the ungrounded abstract idealism that is

its other half. Already in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, certain strands of liberalism tended toward a procedural formalism and a cultural vacuity, elevating the individual, negative liberty, utility and purely subjective rights into absolutes (as in the work of Kant, Bentham and J.S. Mill). These formal principles were challenged by the materialist philosophies of Communism, Fascism and Nazism that sought to reconstruct positive liberty on a non-religious, supposedly scientific basis. Marx, for example, opposed Kantian deontological ethics and law and he rejected the idea that negative liberty is sufficient to overcome alienation. Attaining emancipation *qua* self-realisation involves far more than individual autonomy or political rights. It requires moving from the "realm of necessity to the realm of freedom", conceptualised as the condition to bring about the true essence of humankind – though Marxism shares with contemporary liberalism a determinist logic that undermines human dignity and creativity.

Following the eventual collapse of materialist ideologies in the twentieth century, contemporary liberalism has insisted on its own latent materialism. Not only has the soul disappeared, but also the subject and along with it the citizen and ultimately the idea of humans as political, social and creative beings. Humankind is now no longer *homo faber et mercator* but just *homo œconomicus* – the pursuit of short-term profit as advocated by Milton Friedman (1970). Everything is reduced to its mere material utility with roots in Comte's positivist philosophy (Cowling 1963).

Individual utilitarian calculus is aggregated into a collective whole unified around a spiritual idea with spiritual representatives who are now scientists, the priesthood of a new "positive" religion (Milbank 2022). Here contemporary liberalism elevates the materialism of cold utilitarian calculation even above the idealism of individual rights, as the

ever-increasing extension of subjective rights leads to clashes with rival rights, e.g. the attack on women rights by trans activists who clamour for absolute rights overriding biological reality (Joyce 2021; Stock 2021). To counterbalance the anarchic violence unleashed by rival rights, many contemporary liberals promote the relentless expansion of rights that are supposedly universal but undermine the reality of human life by abolishing ever-more ethical limits on human volition, notably liberalising abortion and legalising euthanasia.

The reason is not some form of deviation from all liberal norms or subversion of liberal principles but rather the fulfilment of contemporary liberalism's inner atomistic logic. Liberal atomism is based on the ontological primacy of the individual over not just groups such as family, community, association and nation but also all forms of substantive relationality – the reality that all beings share in the same source of being through analogical participation (Pabst 2012). Linked to this is the primacy of subjective rights over substantive goodness (Berman 1983; Tierney 1982; Villey 1983, 2003) and the substitution of formal social contract for the substantial unity of covenant (Glasman 2022) which precedes choice, contract and commerce.

The application of formal rules cannot by itself achieve pluralism. Contemporary liberalism is incorrigibly atomistic and oscillates between the isolated subjective individual and collective unity either objectively compounded or artificially supposed – "Leviathan" is both at once. This rests on the rejection of the real, namely all the relationships that constitute society which is more primary than either the polity or the economy (Pabst & Scazzieri 2023).

Of course, various liberal thinkers defend non-atomistic accounts of the individual and emphasise the social and institutional conditions of freedom, including the pragmatist liberalism of John Dewey and the egalitarian liberalism

of John Rawls, but perhaps most clearly the new liberalism of T.H. Green, J.A. Hobson and L.T. Hobhouse (Freeden 1978) as they seek to blend negative with positive liberty, thereby fusing formal with substantive goods. Neither these thinkers nor critics of liberalism such as Judith Shklar, Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Walzer, Jean Bethke Elshtain and Michael Sandel were able to shape political ideologies in such a way as to temper the forces of market individualism, procedural neutrality and technocratic rule. Fundamentally, there are material forces that underpin these developments, above all the power of capitalism and technology.

However, contemporary liberalism has played a crucial role in creating the conditions for the triumph of liberal atomism. Liberals either bracket substantive goods out of the court of public discussion (e.g. Joseph Raz and Ronald Dworkin) or foreground such goods with formal ground-rules (e.g. John Rawls). Thus, they replace metaphysical conceptions of the good and justice with purely political conceptions of fairness which implies the substitution of practical law and positive rights for natural law and natural rights (Finnis 1980). In this manner, liberalism advances a formalist framework that not only struggles to resist capitalist globalisation and technological power but facilitates it by undermining substantive barriers such as goods that are more primary than contractual ties. As John Gray has argued

> If there is a single characteristic that typifies liberal political philosophy in the United States over the past quarter of a century, it is its domination by a jurisprudential paradigm […]. The model of reasoning presupposed in this turn to legalism in recent American theory is that of the judicial interpretation of constitutional rights rather than of the formulation of public policy in public discourse […]. Yet even the Rawlsian project of specifying a set of fixed and determinate liberties exemplifies the legalist illusion that animates recent liberal thought in America (Gray 1993, p. 238).

Negative Liberty vs. Social Freedom

Liberal liberty leaves us in an impasse. Contemporary liberals have championed a conception of freedom as "negative liberty" – the absence of constraints on individual choice except the law and private conscience (Berlin 1969). Negative liberty is "freedom from" any restrictions on our ability to choose how we wish to live as long as our actions remain within the law. Initially, this was seen as emancipatory and liberating, helping people out of exploitation, oppression and discrimination. And certainly many minorities and members of majority groups constrained by old cultural conventions or legal barriers – women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities – experienced gains thanks to these "freedoms from". Economic and social advancement went often hand in hand with the extension of the political franchise and the extension of democracy.

But over time "negative liberty" has mutated to the point where it flips over into the tyranny of individual choice abstracted from any relational constraints of family, community, history or nature. An older liberalism of the civil rights movement in the USA and of the postwar models in Europe, infused by both Christianity and realism (Moyn 2015, 2023) morphed increasingly into progressivism. The latter blends the idea of total social equalisation with untrammelled cultural individualism and the reign of the free market over all other forms of social organisation – an ideological convergence by the centre-left and the centre-right since 1990s around the double-headed hydra of social and economic liberalism (Michéa 2007). Thus, "the right won the economic war, the left won the cultural war, and the center won the political war" (Wolfe 1999, p. 32).

Moreover, the idea of emancipation became debased to mean liberation from almost all restrictions on individual

choice grounded in unmediated human volition. As the unleashing of choice always involves new restrictions of the choices of some by the choices of others, it leads to new and increasingly draconian restrictions on citizens' freedoms (Milbank & Pabst 2016).

But since rival rights and individual freedoms collide, it is the central sovereign power of Leviathan which decides, such that contemporary liberal ideology results in an oscillation between release and control – as with self-expression in the name of free speech and surveillance combined with censorship. That is why, when they are in power, progressives and populists engage in mutual "lawfare" and a process of cancelling and counter-cancelling, each undermining both free speech and the rule of law.

The unity of contemporary liberal ideology ends up in a position where it promotes an empty liberty of endless self-release where will and desire define what makes us free and ultimately human, namely the ordering of relations within society, mutual trust and interpersonal cooperation, all of which are more primary than the social contract or the pursuit of maximal utility. This tendency for contemporary liberalism to erode the basis for common life renders the liberal creed inherently unstable and ultimately self-liquidating (Lind 2025; Pabst 2025).

To avoid a false choice between autonomy and coercion, we need an alternative account of liberty as "social freedom". It rests on a conception of mutual obligations anchored in common culture and a sense of limits. Our first obligation is to respect natural, human and social limits. This emphasis on restraint echoes Burke's conception of "that state of things in which liberty is secured by equality of restraint" (Burke 1789, p. 507), limiting vice and human wrongs. Burke conceptualises restraint in terms of social virtues limiting humankind's natural vices:

> Men are qualified for civil liberty, in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption; in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters (Burke 1791, p. 615).

Positive liberty, if it is to be freedom for a higher purpose than mere material self-realisation or self-release, involves a quest for meaning that fuses individual fulfilment with mutual flourishing. Such a teleological conception of liberty is realist insofar as it links liberty and equality to a sense of self-restraint and solidarity. The bonds of family and friends, the givenness of our biological selves, the constraints of law, custom and faith, as well as our obligations to one another, all confer limits on personal autonomy. Yet they are also rich sources of relational meaning and dignity.

Social freedom means that we need to be wary of claims about measureless acquisition and endless economic expansion in a finite world in which humankind transgresses all manner of physical and moral boundaries at its own peril. Missing from purely secular thought that denies any possibility of a transcendent outlook on reality is a sense of limit based on self-restraint – limits on our insatiable desires that are artificially produced by a capitalist system combined with what R.H. Tawney (1921) describes as the acquisitive society.

Thus, the materialist and idealist logic at the heart of liberal liberty is deeply anti-material, while also being destructive of the ideal forms in which real things participate. The plain thereness of the physical world shows that

human volition is not the foundation or finality of everything, but that reality itself discloses its transcendent source and outlook – the givenness of existence that intimates the gift of life given freely to humans who are political, social beings by virtue of sharing in the same source of being. Whereas liberal liberty subjects us to the despotism of our own unmediated will, social freedom liberates us through reciprocal obligations vis-à-vis others, society and nature.

Liberal (or Illiberal) Democracy vs. Representative government

Progressives and populists demonise each other in their pursuit of power even as they define democracy in relation to liberalism, viewing them as synonymous or antithetical. Democratic rule is either seen as an extension of liberal principles in contradiction to autocracy. Or else democracy is defined in terms of sovereignty against liberal ideology – illiberal democracy that is "sovereign" (as in Hungary) or "managed" (as in Turkey). This ignores not just how each undermines the other. Contemporary liberalism threatens democracy by unleashing the forces of oligarchy, demagogy, anarchy and even tyranny in the sense of voluntary servitude (Pabst 2019; cf. Crouch 2004; Wolin 2008). Conversely, democracy in the sense of majority will threatens liberal principles such as the constitutional balance of executive, legislative and judiciary power, the rule of law and the rights of individuals defined as belonging to recognised minorities (Tucker 2020).

Yet at an even more fundamental level, liberalism as the defence of individual liberty and democracy as majority will risk abolishing each other insofar as unrestrained volition underpins the will-to-power of the strong, wealthy and healthy over the weak, the poor and those who are ill. Like atomistic liberalism, pure unqualified democracy enables the

triumph of human will – the many real wills aggregated into a single fictional will of the sovereign – over human intellect (Milbank & Pabst 2016). The latter is the natural desire for, and pursuit of, knowledge allied to truth and wisdom, which are neither democratic nor liberal. Like beauty and goodness, these notions are non-democratic and non-liberal in the sense that they involve foundations and finalities above and beyond mass will, individual will or formal law.

A necessary foundation of true democracy and mediated liberalism is the tenet of representative government (Manin 1997; Brito Vieira & Runciman 2008). Representation is not only beyond popular majority will and the power of the executive allied to the oligarchic interests of a few (democracy) but also beyond the sovereign power of the autonomous unencumbered self (liberalism). Key to representative government is the blending of "the one", "the few" and "the many" in a more organic "mixed constitution" (Maitland 2008). These are principles of Greco-Roman philosophy and biblical ethics, denoting (in modern and contemporary terms) the rule of the sovereign leader, "wise experts" and the voice of the people, reflected in the respective power of the executive, the judiciary and the legislature.

Insofar as these three branches of government cannot be entirely separated from one another (even in republics such as France where the president is the titular head of the judiciary), modern models of formally liberal democracy contain remnants of the ancient and medieval logic of "mixed constitution" (Milbank & Pabst 2016). In reality, human rule over humans always requires a balance of the consent of "the many" (the people) with the advice of "the few" (whether elected or appointed) and the executive decisions of "the one" (or his representatives), which normally has to be embodied in one person, as it still is today across the globe in the mode of monarchic, presidential and prime ministerial functions.

But relative to the more embedded, organic logic of mixed constitution, contemporary liberalism is only able to recognise (as Hobbes saw with prescience) as politically relevant either the literal individual who supplants the real person or the artificial, aggregate "personality" of the sovereign state (Oakeshott 1991; Runciman 1997) – a fiction that must be sustained through monopoly power (as Weber theorised). Leviathan's absolute sovereignty underpins the social contract and the negative peace of a suspension of natural hostility, which is only ever temporary and not the same as reconciliation. Contemporary liberal ideology rests on the freedom of the contracting individual who is a self-possessing animal (Macpherson 1962). More fundamentally than the free individual is the sovereignty of Leviathan as the expression of mass popular will. It is the source both for the ideology of absolutism and the ideology of modern liberal democracy. Suspended between the many real wills and one, armed fictional will, contemporary liberalism has evacuated mixed constitution and a more organic ordering of government (Milbank & Pabst 2016). Thus, the shadow of absolutism always lurks over liberal democracy.

This is even more the case since the fusion of contemporary liberalism with formal democratic rule requires either the ruler or rule in the form of absolute law (as in the US constitution or German "basic law") to protect the social contract and the market freedom of the contracting individual. On this logic, the formalism of liberal democracy replaces the mixed constitution with the supposedly more democratic separation of powers that purports to guarantee greater accountability. Yet in reality, it ends up producing the potential tyranny of the executive, the factional divisions and interests of capitalist oligarchy linked to expert technocracy as well as the anarchy and violence of debased mass will. This marks the subversion of mixed government whereby the executive provides political unity and the defence of the realm, the judiciary (and

other instances of the "few") offers wise counsel and popular democracy both consent and courage on which true freedom depends.

Subverting mixed constitution concentrates power in the hands of the sovereign "one" at the expense of the mediating role of the "few" and the participating role of the "many". Examples include increasingly unrestrained executive power, as in the case of the second Trump Administration, rules in collusion with the oligarchy of a politicised judicial class (in the form of the Supreme Court and partisan judges). Meanwhile, the people's participation in both the political and the economic governance is reduced to periodic voting and consumer choice rather than being genuine partners in power through modes of participatory and associative democracy (Hirst 1996; Hirst & Bader 2001). In this manner, "really existing" liberal ideology is really a suspension between the entirely political one and the depoliticised many, bringing about the hollowing out of substantive democracy, while leaving formal processes in place that conceal the "ruling of the void" (Mair 2013). Hence the anti-realist outlook of modern democracy:

> Modern democracy is the only regime to signify the gap between the symbolic and the real with the notion of a power that no one, prince or few, can seize; where an empty place appears, there is no possible conjunction between power, law and knowledge […]; the being of the social eludes or, better said, is given in the form of an interminable questioning (Lefort 1986, p. 268).

To defend and deepen the democratic element of constitutional government against authoritarian oligarchy at home and autocratic dictatorship abroad, democracies need more than formal liberalism. A strict, formal separation of powers has neither prevented a concentration of power and wealth nor enfranchised the excluded nor enhanced popular assent.

Western liberal democracy needs to strengthen the mediating role of the few and the dispersed sovereignty of plural corporate bodies, which means strengthening intermediary institutions such as manufacturing and trading guilds, cooperatives, ethical and profit-sharing businesses, trade unions, voluntary associations, universities and free cities (Hirst 1996; Black 2003).

Key to building a more robust and resilient democracy is bringing together the interests of capital and labour in a negotiated settlement, which has to be anchored at once in stronger state capacity and in a greater involvement of both local government and civic institutions. One core aspect of such a settlement is social corporatism, i.e. building a renewed partnership between government, business, trade unions and communities to break with free-market globalisation and central state nationalisation in favour of a more plural and democratically governed corporatist model (Pabst 2021). In other words, an economic democracy that complements political democracy involves a democratic, non-state and non-market corporatism in which government at different levels helps to broker negotiations between capital and labour.

Social corporatism starts with collective bargaining between organised business and organised labour in unionised sectors. A more resilient liberal democracy requires the creation of tripartite bargaining between labour and capital mediated by governments at all levels. It is illusory to expect individual workers to be able to negotiate wages or working conditions in large businesses, just like state control or ownership of the means of production will not empower workers either.

Another arrangement that would help businesses and trade unions to have greater social purpose is co-determination: worker representatives on company boards to help shape key strategic decisions and thereby improve trust and cooperation within an enterprise in the long-term interest of all stakeholders. Wage boards should also be considered in

service sectors that have low levels of unionisation, many small employers, and poorly paid with low skills. A key advantage is that wage boards can be local, regional, or national and that representatives can be chosen by workers through elections or enterprise works councils. This can be a more effective way to represent the labour interest than old-fashioned site-based collective bargaining involving long-established trade unions that are absent from most service sectors in advanced economies. Corporate governance reform should begin with the inclusion of workers on remuneration committees and company boards but also extend to the representation of other stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, and local communities where businesses are located. A specific policy enabling workers to have a say in the running of companies would be to introduce a legal requirement that a minimum of, say, 20 percent of shares be held by employees (Lind 2023).

All these reforms aimed at strengthening corporate bodies rest on the argument that we need to shatter the artificial and illusory wall between economic and political life, state and market. These apparent walls are simply veils that conceal the covert alliances of a corrupt corporatism in which big business and big state enable each other's ceaseless expansion. Ultimately, the demand that corporate bodies exercise social responsibility must be matched by a recognition that businesses and individuals as workers deserve political representation alongside that which is due to location and to individuals as dwellers in locations. This has to involve some form of formalised representation of all corporate bodies at every level of government from the local to the national and even the international.

Ethical Realism: International Order Beyond Liberal Rules and Realpolitik

From the outset, the liberal international order was caught in a fundamental tension. On the one hand, the US role as "Liberal Leviathan" (Ikenberry 2011) that upholds the rules-based structure and provides public goods such as defence and security. On the other hand, the forces of national self-interest in America and elsewhere in the West that undermine the liberal order and threaten to curtail the provision of public goods. Tensions over UN mandates for NATO's military intervention in Bosnia in 1995 but not in Kosovo in 1999 exemplify this tension. One corollary is the irreconcilable ambiguity between international law as an ordering of anarchic international relations or as a means to pursue national interests.

Linked to this is one enduring myth that underpins liberalism's self-understanding of the order it has built – the idea of a rules-based system as opposed realpolitik and notions of might as right. Yet far from being grounded in universal rules, the liberal order is based on spheres of influence in the sense of a conception of international order and an idea of due (or undue) influence on its constituent parts (Hast 2014). These spheres oscillate between upholding national sovereignty and launching foreign intervention, as they involve the possibility of interfering in the sovereign affairs of formally independent countries to preserve order and defend certain liberal values such as individual freedom, human rights, democracy and global free trade.

Therefore, the liberal international order is wholly compatible with a specific Western sphere of influence that differs from other spheres of influence (e.g. China's or Russia's) insofar as it rests on the logic of economic and political liberalism promoted by "great powers" beyond their borders, notably the USA, the UK, continental European countries and

Western allies elsewhere (Mearsheimer 2001). In the 1990s and 2000s the international order which had emerged from the ruins of two world wars became more fully liberal, stripped of its more Christian democratic and social democratic elements (Moyn 2015, 2023; Pabst 2018).

Besides, far from upholding Western universalism, successive US administrations defended American exceptionalism and America's "manifest destiny" to be the hegemon and the defender of both democracy and the rule of law (Pfaff 2010). This marked fusion of realpolitik with idealism that has shaped US foreign policy since Woodrow Wilson's 1917 address to Congress in which he declared that "the world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion".

Paradoxically, the liberal rules-based order – with deep roots in the late eighteenth-century anti-colonial project in 1776 as a republican alternative to imperial monarchy (especially after 1789 and 1848) – morphed into a novel kind of imperialism led by the United States. Following the Wilson doctrine, the US elevated the Westphalian principle of national self-determination into the overriding criterion of the international system and

> the prime test of state legitimacy, rather than dynastic inheritance or imperial rule. Here indeed was a "seismic shift" in European history. Yet the principle of nationalism was an artificial construct, almost an anthropomorphic fantasy. Consider some of its cognate terms – national consciousness, national will, self-determination: in each case the nation is treated as analogous to an individual human being. […] In short, [the aim of the US is] to recast the world in America's self-image (Reynolds 2013, pp. 15, 37).

Since Wilson, the US views nation-states as liberal egos writ large. This conception rests on liberal norms of individualism

and voluntarism that are deeply rooted in American political life and have been exported by successive administrations, promoting national ends by quasi-imperial means. The Wilsonian tradition of US foreign policy shows how liberalism and nationalism converge and collude in linking executive power at home to military might abroad

The 1941 Atlantic Charter signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill added free trade to national self-determination as a foundational value. It represented a moment when Roosevelt became convinced of the "universal significance of the American historical experience" (Ellwood 1992, p. 21). A specific idea of universalism underpins the liberal world order with the US and its own sphere of influence at the core. From Wilson via Roosevelt and Reagan to the neo-conservative vision for a New American Century, the US replaced the balance of power and national interests (the settlement established by the 1815 Congress of Vienna) with a hegemony of fantasised universal values and global interests – a conception according to which American values and interests are synonymous with those of the rest of the world. This order became dominant during the 1990s when the West promoted the supposed ideals of multiculturalism, secularism and individual human rights while simultaneously deploying the materialist forces of financialised capitalism, digital technology and mass immigration.

Perhaps the greatest departure from the post-1989 era is Donald Trump's acknowledgement that we live in a multipolar world and that great-power rivals such as Russia and China have legitimate spheres of influence. That is why he wants to force them out from America's "backyard" while failing to stand up to them over Ukraine and Taiwan. His attack of Europe, also in line with US efforts of "divide and rule" since 1945 and especially 1989, is precisely because the EU lacks all the attributes of a great power and former European empires – notably the UK – are treated as little more than vassal states.

Faced with Trump's realpolitik and hostile foreign powers that believe in a "clash of civilisations" against the West, liberals like the Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney now recognise that the old era of liberal globalisation has given way to a new era of raw power in the national interest. Kant's utopia of a "perpetual peace" that commanded elite consent in the 1990s was always part of an abstract idealism based on vacuous values whose emptiness would be filled by an empty materialism – the pursuit of brute power and wealth. While great-power politics has been in the ascendancy following the end of the Cold War, inter-state conflict and civil war are by no means inevitable – as the advocates of "offensive realism" (Mearsheimer 2001) and "tragic realism" (Kaplan 2023) wrongly imply.

The alternative is an ethical realism that starts with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be, but also charts a transformation from nationalism, protectionism and the pursuit of security towards shared interests and mutual flourishing of peoples and nations. Such a realist tradition views peace and international solidarity as more fundamental than war and great-power competition. Drawing on St Augustine's vision of the two cities, Pope Leo XIV has begun to renew this tradition in his address to the Vatican's diplomatic corps on 9 January 2026. His theo-political realism extends the Augustinian order of love (*ordo amoris*) beyond both liberal globalism and populist nationalism.

The Pope starts with the argument that the new era dismantles the remnants of the post-1945 order. A diplomacy of dialogue is being replaced by a diplomacy of force. Limits on war, not least prohibiting countries from using force to violate the borders of other countries, have been abolished. Peace is not the pursuit of an ordered universe governed by universal justice but the dominion of aggressors who impose victors' justice: "this gravely threatens the rule of law, which is the foundation of all peaceful civil coexistence", which includes "the protection of the principle of the inviolability of human dignity

and the sanctity of life [which] always counts for more than any mere national interest" (Pope Leo XIV 2026). Nationalism undermines our shared humanity.

The Pope is no less critical about globalism. His critique is less to do with the dysfunction of global governance than with the debasement of language – the loss of meaning and a lack of conceptual clarity: "words lose their connection to reality, and reality itself becomes debatable and ultimately incommunicable". Without truth, there is relativism that barely conceals the absolutism of an unmediated will-to-power. Whereas language should be the site for encounter and mediation aimed at bringing people together, "language is becoming more and more a weapon with which to deceive, or to strike and offend opponents".

All this threatens fundamental freedoms, above all religious freedom which is "the first of all human rights, because it expresses the most fundamental reality of the person". Upholding the freedom of religion and freedom of conscience is a vital safeguard against the scourges of our times: from antisemitism to the persecution of Christians, from eroding the dignity of refugees and migrants to increasing the use of capital punishment, from undermining the family to systematic attacks on life itself – including abortion, surrogacy and euthanasia.

Here Pope Leo's renewal of the Augustinian vision of the two cities takes on its significance. Augustine's account is profoundly realist insofar as he begins with the city as it is – the earthly city – centred on "pride and self-love (*amor sui*), on the thirst for worldly power and glory that leads to destruction" which is nevertheless oriented towards the city of God, "eternal and characterized by God's unconditional love (*amor Dei*), as well as love for one's neighbour, especially the poor". Far from opposing eternity to time, Church to state or endorsing a dialectical role of faith in civil society, the Pope rightly insists that

the *City of God* does not propose a political program. Instead, it offers valuable reflections on fundamental issues concerning social and political life, such as the search for a more just and peaceful coexistence among peoples. Augustine also warns of the grave dangers to political life arising from false representations of history, excessive nationalism and the distortion of the ideal of the political leader.

To guard us against the errors and excesses of both nationalism and globalism, the earthly city requires a transcendent foundation and finality. For the tradition of Catholic realism, it is the common good that can help nations and peoples to pursue a peace which Augustine conceptualises as "the tranquillity of order" based on *ordo amoris* – the concentric circles of loving family, friends, members of the local and national community and indeed strangers in our midst who become our neighbours. Solidarity, the sharing of the burdens of this hard and merciless life, is the universal ethic of each particular society.

Concluding Reflections

This article has argued that the crisis of contemporary liberalism both nationally and internationally has sparked renewed interest in realist alternatives. The main reason is that contemporary liberal philosophy and liberal ideology combine idealist with materialist ideas, a fusion that abstracts from the relational nature of reality and reduces the real to bare materiality. By contrast, realism starts with the world as it is, not as idealism would like it to be. The realist traditions this article invokes focus on liberty as social freedom based on mutual restraint, democracy linked to mixed constitution and representative government (including elements of associative democracy), and international order beyond rules and realpolitik. The ghost of war has returned to haunt Europe.

And now this ghost demands of us the seemingly impossible: to recover our exiled traditions of statecraft and soulcraft, and to build polities based on bonds of national and international solidarity that reject the profane and uphold the sacred. But only the impossible may now be remotely realistic.

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Contemporary democracies are undergoing a period of unprecedented tension: authoritarian pressures, digital disintermediation, a crisis of representation, and an erosion of trust in institutions and the liberal international order. This is not merely an unfavorable economic climate, but a structural transformation that is undermining the very foundations of democratic governance.

This volume, born out of the 2025 ResetDOC Venice Seminars and bearing a title that explicitly evokes a book by Michael Sandel from thirty years ago, tackles a crucial question with interdisciplinary rigor: can the malaise of democracy be understood, and overcome, within the liberal paradigm, or does it require a radical rethinking? The collected contributions examine the resources of political liberalism, exploring the possibility of a renewal capable of rebuilding civic bonds and spaces for participation, and engage with post-liberal voices that challenge the very premises of the liberal tradition, proposing alternatives grounded in richer conceptions of community, ethics, and political order. This book captures the complexity of a theoretical debate that remains open. An essential contribution to thinking about the future of democracy.

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