The Manifestation of Authoritarian Populism in Europe

Tiedemann, Norma; Bolldorf, Heiko; Caterina, Daniela; Huke, Nikolai; Opratko, Benjamin; Syrovatka, Felix

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THE CRISIS AND FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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THE CRISIS AND FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

	CUTILLAS	SAAD-FILHO
BAILEY	DONOGHUE	SHIBATA
BOFFO	ESKELINEN	STANDRING
BOLLDORF	HUKE	SWEETAPPLE
BONFERT	LOSONCZ	SYROVATKA
CANNON	OPRATKO	TIEDEMANN
CATERINA	PASTORINO	TOSCANO
CLUA-LOSADA	PETZEN	TSONEVA
COTARELO	ROTH	YILMAZ-GÜNAY

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INTRODUCTION

ADA-CHARLOTTE REGELMANN

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DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

Is democracy in jeopardy? The institutions, processes and values underpinning liberal representative democracy have been on the defensive for the last decade or two, both domestically and internationally. The rise of authoritarian populism as well as the accompanying polarisation of politics and sustained attacks on the foundations of liberal representative democracy have made this abundantly clear. Around the globe, authoritarian populist parties and leaders have made huge electoral gains across all levels of governance. Internationally, the tone has become much more acrimonious, with the rekindling of old or 'frozen' conflicts. Domestically, authoritarian populists have been able to shift and shape policy agendas, exerting a profound influence on the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political culture in their respective countries and beyond.

The societal, economic and political fallout of the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced these tendencies. The political responses to the pandemic have faced bottom-up mobilisation, often intermingled with opposition to other political and social developments. Bubbling beneath the surface of their calls for 'freedom', these protests take the same line as authoritarian populist parties in agitating against democratic values and institutions, while using anti-feminist tropes and directing hate speech and violence at migrants and minorities.

Yet, simultaneously, other trends appear to suggest a re-politicisation, rather than a decline, of liberal representative democracy. Radical demands for participation from a variety of societal interests abound. Societies are once again acknowledging the rise of inequality and a growing precariat; they realise that the lack of recognition for broad swathes of the population is hurting democracy. There is a revitalised interest in democratic regulation of key sectors and societal spheres, much inspired by the experience of the global pandemic. Equally, demands for inclusion, equality and redistributive justice for those affected by political decisions suggest that not everyone views democratic norms as being past their 'sell-by date'. New political actors are emerging who are engaging in alternative forms of political organisation, while others are pushing the tenuous idea that democratic norms can only be respected by ensuring the direct transmission of voters' political will.

These trends are undoubtedly reactions to a democratic system that in the eyes of many, no longer offers satisfactory solutions to the problems facing

them. As crises abound, in an age when the world seems to be out of control, the political institutions in democratic countries appear increasingly ill equipped to address the fundamental conflicts underlying these problems. As they struggle to tackle the multiple crises arising from the pandemic, climate change, capitalism, racism, sexism, the representation gap and other challenges, polities are changing how they deal with the most basic democratic questions, i.e. who decides on what, for whom, and how.

SHIFTING NOTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

The above challenges are symptoms of a much more long-standing decline of institutions in contemporary liberal representative democracies. Low levels of participation in the electoral process and of trust in political institutions, the erosion of mainstream parties and party membership, the fragmentation of the political landscape and the decline of established channels to represent and mediate societal interests (such as political parties and unions) epitomise this long-term trend. Yet popular diagnoses of the "hollowing of Western democracy" (Mair 2013) or of a "post-democratic" (Crouch 1999) and even "post-political" (Mouffe 2005) era have limited explanatory force. As pointed out above, the decline is not linear, nor is the picture only one of decline. In addition, numerous critics have argued that talk of a post-democratic era projects an idealised image of the preceding 'democratic' era. What we are observing, rather, are shifts in our understanding of democratic practice.

The post-war era of, say, the 1950s and 1960s is often described as the most 'democratic' era in Western liberal representative democracies. Both the corporatism and the expansion of social-democratic welfare regimes in this Fordist period allowed political parties to provide class-based interest representation. This, of course, served to ensure social peace rather than bring about general political participation. However, the resulting strength of social democratic parties led to a strong party-political identity, membership of such parties, electoral turnout, consolidation of the political 'centre' and ostracisation of fringe parties. It also had profound impacts on all areas of life, including work, family, leisure and lifestyle, and came at the expense of ignoring other forms of conflict of societal interest, although fundamentally based on the widespread acceptance of exclusion from much of the democratic process on the basis of race, gender, sexuality and ability.

However, corporatism and Keynesian regulation turned out to be increasingly at odds with the limitations of the old and the challenges of the new modes of production globally. The 1980s saw a new 'dynamic' liberalism of deregulation of the markets served up as a response to economic stagnation, saturation of the markets, ecological limitations on the model of economic development, overproduction and perceived overregulation. New forms of global competition and the shift from industrial to financial capital translated directly into wage pressure and a deterioration in working conditions as well as the restructuring of production. In turn, welfare retrenchment and the ensuing decline of the unions revoked the social and democratic 'compromise' of the Fordist era, dismantling established forms of interest representation. Yet the shift in democratic representation during the period of dynamic neoliberalism was one in the underlying paradigm rather than simply a shift to the political right (Reckwitz 2021), with major implications for democratic practices.

This 'dynamic' period involved both neoliberal and progressive liberal elements. The economic individualisation witnessed at that time corresponded to the socio-cultural idea of empowerment of the individual. During the previous era, feminist, civil rights and green movements had gradually become more vocal, battling ever more forcefully to move beyond the limits of white and male-(breadwinner)-based representation and face down the ecological destruction of capitalist accumulation. Representation gradually lost its class-interests-based function, with political interests organising through civil society organisations, issue-based interest-representation and claims for individual rights (Demirović 2016). This was bolstered by the expansion of labour to women and changes in lifestyle owing to the pressures of consumerism and also a gradual liberalisation of social relations. New social movements achieved (admittedly limited) democratic inclusion for a large number of societal groups who had been 'invisibilised' in the previous era (BIPOC[1] communities, women, LGBTQI+[2] people, migrants, and other groups) and gave rise to the mobilisation of new political movements as new problems caused by the capitalist exploitation of the planet became apparent (the Greens). These proved key to the development of international and domestic structures for the protection of rights – however contested these might be – to regulate or contain the excesses of neoliberalism.

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1   Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

2   Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and other sexual identities

THE CURRENT STATE OF DEMOCRACY

In response to the challenges posed by political decision-making in a globalised, deregulated world and to the demands coming from emerging political actors, new institutions and processes emerged to channel the electorate's political will. Rather than organising interest representation on a class basis as had previously been done through parties and trade unions, over the past three decades or so the political landscapes in liberal representative democracies have become more pluralistic and yet also more fragmented. In an attempt to tackle global problems, political decision-making in many domains has shifted to the supranational level (e.g. the institutions of the European Union). In response to the complexity of the issues they have to deal with, governments draw on expert communities. In the name of economic efficiency, public-private partnerships in practice move political decisions out of the democratic realm, leaving them vulnerable to private interests. Elsewhere, we observe technocratic government and executive decision-making, in parallel with an enhanced role for the courts.

What is effectively the replacement of government by governance processes is characterised by low levels of information, legitimation, transparency and democratic control, as elected democratic representation is bypassed. In addition, parliaments reflect less than ever the socio-economic core of society, leaving the wider population more and more excluded from democratic processes. In effect, the globalisation and deregulation of post-Fordist age have affected states' ability to respond flexibly and effectively to the challenges associated with neoliberal democracy. As political parties across the board rally behind the flag of dynamic liberalism, they lose their function as representatives of groups' interests and, consequently, political institutions lose their ability to exert power and regulate economic and social processes, redistribute wealth and channel discontent.

Of course, it has never been the purpose of liberal democracy to eliminate the contradictions and limitations of participation. Liberal democracy is not a radical concept of democracy that envisages, let alone guarantees, the equal participation of all in creating and shaping society (Lorey 2016: 266). However, dynamic liberalism also managed to soak up some of the 'progressive' new political currents, opening itself up to many of their demands and indeed incorporating them into its own agenda, e.g. through elements of direct democracy and other participatory processes. Usurping these currents,

it attempts to establish its own version of social peace in the name of individual development and a consumerist, apolitical notion of self-fulfilment and 'empowerment', thereby draining these movements of their critical political and transformative power.

The observation that democracy is flawed, paradoxical and insufficient is, of course, nothing new. For decades, political theorists and analysts have delivered scathing verdicts on the state of democracy, variously described as a crisis of democracy, of representation, of legitimacy or of accountability. They speak of oligarchies rather than democracies and of state capture by big money. They declare these democracies unfit to govern efficiently and effectively and ill prepared to respond appropriately to the long list of their own shortcomings. Democracy, it seems, is a delicate flower, a "fragile compromise", as Norma Tiedemann and her co-authors put it in this volume, and one which is contested and subject to changing and multiple perspectives, closely tied to the social structures out of which it emerges and which it is built to govern. What is at stake here is the essence of democracy itself in the period of liberalism we are currently living through. This also raises the question what the political left should do about it.

ABOUT THIS VOLUME
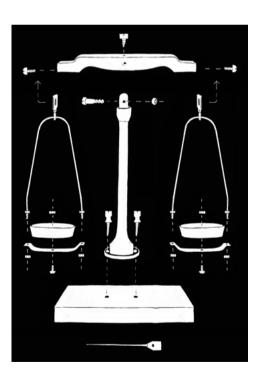
The aim of this edited volume is to take stock of some of the key problems permeating contemporary liberal democracy in Europe and to discuss proposals for bottom-up restructuring of politics and society with a view to a radical democratisation process. It seeks to explore approaches to transforming the conditions of democratic representation and participation at all levels, including local, regional, national and supranational/transnational, with a view to forging an inclusive, equal, free and just society.

The volume is divided into five sections. The first of these takes its cue from the upheavals in the political landscapes of liberal democracies, as discussed above. These processes are traced here for Austria, Croatia, France, Italy and Slovenia by Norma Tiedemann and her co-authors, for Brazil, the United Kingdom and the United States by Alfredo Saad-Filho and Marco Buffo, and for Hungary and Serbia by Márk Losoncz, thereby raising the question of the severity of the threat that authoritarian populism poses to the functioning and existence of liberal democracies as we know them. Tiedemann et al. attribute the emergence of authoritarian populism to the erosion of the political

(centre-)left and the disempowerment of states, originating in the latter's ill-advised responses to pressures of globalisation and deregulation. Then, in the next chapter, Saad-Filho and Buffo show how neoliberalism has provided fertile ground for authoritarianism – with its fundamental paradigms of individualisation and economisation diffusing out across all social relations – to flourish, thus creating a representative vacuum that authoritarian populists were well equipped to use to their advantage. Losoncz, who closes this section, demonstrates how authoritarianism is building on a formally liberal representative democratic institutional context. According to him, the very institutions constituting this framework are often indispensable resources offering purported 'legitimacy' for authoritarian regimes, which subsequently alter and exploit this scaffolding instead of dismantling it.

The second section picks up the thread of the intrinsic contradictions running through neoliberalism. They address the question whether liberal democracy is, in fact, compatible with the inclusive, equal, free and just society it claims to represent. All three chapters in this section home in on tendencies in contemporary democracies to "save democracy by limiting it", in the words of Teppo Eskelinen here. His critique concentrates on attempts to rescue democratic governance from its authoritarian challenges by making status quo democratic institutions more 'efficient', thereby undermining democratic legitimacy. He proposes starting points for an alternative strategy to "deepen democracy", rooted in a radical concept of democracy that is marked by egalitarianism, political community and a fundamental openness pertaining to which policies can be considered rational or, indeed, possible. Jana Tsoneva, for her part, examines the grip that what she labels a "new technocracy" has on us in the form of the unprecedented concentration of private power in the hands of a few so-called tech giants. She traces the role of the technological responses to COVID19 in augmenting corporate power and subsequently points to the need to extend public protest to those hidden violations of democracy. Meanwhile, Beatriz Toscano addresses the foreclosing of democracy in the urban space through privatisation and militarisation. She reminds us that the public domain is indispensable for democracy not only to 'function' but also to fulfil the ideas of equality, inclusivity, justice and freedom, making the point that the *polis, after all, is a structure, where political agency flourishes.*

The two chapters in the third section follow on from the contradictions discussed in preceding chapters and link them to the factors that determine political change in democracies. If liberal democracy has reached a turning point, what is the political order that is now emerging? According to Mónica Clua-Losada, David J. Bailey and Saori Shibata, the crises faced by neoliberal democracy bring about a spiralling "cycle of tension, dissent and authoritarianism" – as they call it in their chapter – between hardship, societal protest and government crackdown. Yet, despite the authoritarian tendencies identified, there is, paradoxically, the potential for societies to be transformed, on a path towards 'real' democracy based on bottom-up solidarity initiatives, which themselves have emerged in response to the abysmal effects of neoliberalism on society.

However, Barry Cannon's process-oriented approach, which he sets out in his contribution to this volume, demonstrates that democratisation and de-democratisation occur simultaneously. While public policy in contemporary liberal representative democracies is no longer made in the name of only a few, very specific societal groups, the question who makes these decisions and whether they enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of the many is a different story. To frame it in another way: the problem that democracy faces these days appears not to be primarily the exclusion of specific groups based on categories of oppression (at least, not to the same extent as in the past); rather, it is that the democratic process itself and the institutional 'throughput' is becoming less democratic.

The fourth section comprises three chapters looking at movements or organisations that address exactly this conundrum by examining the democratisation of democratic processes and its limitations. Pablo Cotarelo and Sergi Cutillas, from the cooperative Ekona, analyse three political movements in Spain (Podemos, Barcelona en Comù, the Catalan Independence Movement) and discuss the respective role of digital tools in making the political process more horizontal, inclusive and deliberative. Bernd Bonfert, for his part, analyses the strategies and tactics deployed by three transnational alliances that have organised across European countries (Blockupy, Change Finance and the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City). His contribution examines the links between internal democratic structures and procedures and the counter-hegemonic force emanating from these movements' practices. Lastly, Veronica Pastorino, sheds light on two recently formed networks of "new generation" organisations (i.e. organisations for people conventionally referred to as "second/third generations of migrants"). Notwithstanding the differences between the actors examined in these three chapters, all of them face similar dilemmas. Among these is the complex relationship with political institutions. In addition, activists have to contemplate the challenge of internal democratisation, especially in contexts that demand some level of centralisation to gain political clout. Equally fraught is the task of harmonising political strategy across a diverse set of activists against the backdrop of local or social differences. While there is no 'best practice', these three chapters allow conclusions to be drawn about 'dos' and 'don'ts' that should make political organisations more democratic.

What, then, are the prospects for democratic transformation in today's liberal representative democracies, and what is the role of left-wing political actors in this process? This is the question taken on by the three chapters making up the fifth (and final) section of this volume. Jennifer Petzen, Koray Yılmaz-Günay and Christopher Sweetapple write explicitly from an activist perspective arguing that any project to democratise democracy must face, and overcome, some inconvenient truths about the racist foundations of liberal democracy. Their chapter represents an urgent call for a reorientation and restructuring of the left, within the liberal political spectrum, that puts what they refer to here as the "intersectional insights and voices of people of colour, poor people and people with disabilities" centre-stage, complemented by actual power-sharing with, in their words, "people who have not traditionally held power". Meanwhile, Laura Roth demands a radical democratisation of politics, based on the scaling-up of practices deployed by solidarity initiatives and feminists. She makes the case for municipalism as a promising strategy to change politics locally – and beyond – from below, while always ensuring the maintenance of the connection between those who, as she describes it, "do politics" and those who are affected by it. Finally, Adam Standring and Matthew Donoghue add a third layer to the discussion of where and how the restructuring of politics needs to take place: namely, they suggest challenging "ruling ideas" by means of the left providing a moral critique of politics to, as they put it in their chapter, "resonate with the lived experiences of the European public". Far from being abstract, such a critique must, they write here, be "grounded in concrete struggles for equality, justice and change" in order to provide the necessary narratives that can link moral values in the here and now with a progressive vision of society. The challenge remains, though, how these ideas find their way into our political institutions.

Overall, the 14 chapters in this book tackle a wide range of problems surrounding democracy and how it might evolve, often drawing the reader's attention to less-discussed matters. Despite the substantial differences in their approach, focus and proposed strategy, the chapters speak to each other in multiple ways. The authors, with their diverse country and disciplinary backgrounds, bring together a wealth of knowledge, astute insights and forward-looking conclusions about the state of democracy, the potential for democratic change and the actors and strategies that can get us there. We hope it will inspire political action striving for a democratisation of democracy.

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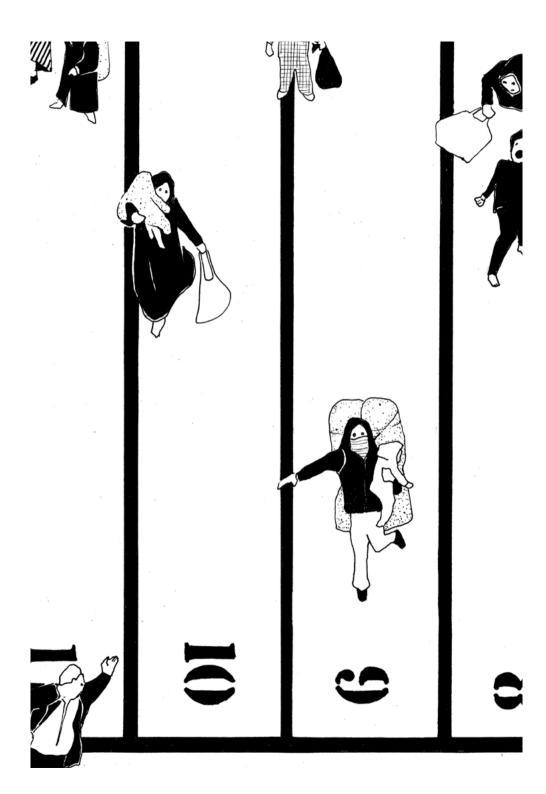
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THE
AUTHORITARIAN
THREAT

THE MANIFESTATION OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM IN EUROPE:
CHALLENGING THE FRAGILE COMPROMISES OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

NORMA TIEDEMANN
HEIKO BOLLDORF
DANIELA CATERINA
NIKOLAI HUKE
BENJAMIN OPRATKO
FELIX SYROVATKA

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Liberal democracy has been described as a 'risky project'. Political forces in the European Union such as Lega in Italy; the FPÖ in Austria; Rassemblement National, or National Rally (known as the Front National, or the National Front, until 2018) in France; the SDS in Slovenia; and the HDZ and the Homeland Movement in Croatia reveal the fragility of the compromises of liberal democracy – and they also illustrate its precarious nature. Drawing on these case studies, we trace the conjunctures of the involution of liberal democracy in the EU in recent decades, which have created fertile ground for authoritarian populism to thrive. We argue that the declining cohesive force of parties or civil society organisations such as trade unions, the increasing disciplinary pressures generated by a globalised world market and the limited prospect of overcoming the authoritarianism of modern capitalist societies within liberal democracy, opened the door for the successful mobilisation of anti-democratic sentiments. Authoritarian populist forces in Austria, Croatia, France, Italy and Slovenia have managed to reinforce the half-heartedly concealed hierarchical structures of society. Their efforts to re-normalise inequality and authoritarianism not only pose a threat to the political participation and physical integrity of minorities and subaltern groups; they also undermine basic principles of liberal democracy, as deliberation is replaced by a putative homogeneous 'will of the people'. The chapter concludes with a look at how their counterattack against previous achievements of emancipatory movements within the confines of liberal democracy has played out in the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the fairly dynamic nature of the current situation and the chaotic handling of the health/social crisis, we stress that social movements and progressive forces will be crucial in working towards a socially inclusive political alternative that defends – and potentially transcends – the incomplete democratisation of liberal democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy is a fragile and "risky project", in the words of Rödel et al. (1990: 20). First, it requires people to accept democratic deliberation and collective decision making as the primary mode of conflict resolution and to regard political opponents as legitimate contestants in the struggle for solutions (ibid.: 48f.). However, the institutions of liberal democracy themselves are unable to guarantee these very preconditions. Power relations, hierarchies and inequalities that shape everyday experience (e.g. command over labour, hierarchisation of family relations and along national/ethnic lines, and the division of space based on socio-economic/gendered positions) continuously undermine both the will and the ability to resolve conflicts democratically.

Second, it establishes a sphere of relative political freedom in which the demos can participate (primarily through representation), debate and struggle. However, this sphere of relative freedom and equality is constantly undermined by gendered, racialised and capitalist relations of domination. Liberal democracy "individuates actors and liberates them from personalised dependence, but without offering them the possibility of a life without (existential) fear characterised by solidarity and autonomy" (Elbe 2020: 83). This is because "[u]nder capitalist conditions, decisions that concern the ways in which humans work and live are essentially left to the owners of the means of production, whose profit-maximizing decisions bind common life for many decades if not centuries" (Demirović 2017: 319). Liberal democracy is necessarily limited to the political sphere. The spheres of economic production, social reproduction, care responsibilities and division of labour are not open to democratic deliberation. Rather than serving as a driving force to continuously "democratise democracy" (Marchart 2015) and overcome authoritarian residua within society, the institutions of liberal democracy tend towards fragile balances. As a result of long-lasting struggles, individual rights are guaranteed to workers, while precarity and authoritarian command at the workplace remain unchallenged and the need to sell one's labour power is as persistent as ever. Women are equal under the law but face a patriarchal assault in their day-to-day lives. Despite the existence of anti-discrimination and equal opportunities legislation, racism and homophobia continue to prosper. Refugees can apply for asylum while global inequality is stabilised by murderous border regimes surrounding the Global North (Book et al. 2020: 8). Hierarchies in society and their anti-democratic, authoritarian implications tend to be brushed over rather

than challenged. This impartial realisation of democracy poses the continuous threat of mobilisations against democracy.

Third, liberal democracy relies on the state and its institutions to safeguard the mechanisms of democratic representation and conflict resolution. State apparatuses, parties and bureaucracies, however, are far from reliable bulwarks against the dangers of authoritarianism. Especially when they are left to act as they please because of a lack of popular pressure or transmission channels, they tend to increasingly pursue their own rationales and become less responsive (i.e. there is a 'hardening' of the state). This tendency is reinforced by the disciplinary effects of capitalist accumulation on the fiscal capacity of the state. As capitalist accumulation is key not only to secure employment and economic growth but also to tax revenues, states scramble to provide favourable conditions for capital, often doing so to the detriment of popular demands (Caterina / Huke 2020).

Drawing on case studies of countries from across the European Union, we show that the fragile and risky project of liberal democracy is increasingly exhibiting deep cracks and fissures that threaten to undermine its very existence. A case in point is the rise of authoritarian populism. Political forces in the European Union such as the FPÖ in Austria; the HDZ or the Homeland Movement in Croatia; *Rassemblement National,* or National Rally (known as the *Front National*, or the National Front, until 2018) in France; *Lega* in Italy; and the *SDS* in Slovenia, reveal the fragility of the compromises of liberal democracy – and illustrate its precarious nature. Tracing the conjunctures of the involution (Agnoli 1995) of liberal democracy in the European Union in recent decades, we outline how the very social fabric of post-war mass political parties fell away and authoritarian populists challenged the normative core of democracy throughout.[1] We argue that the declining cohesive force of parties or civil society organisations such as trade unions (Eribon 2018), the enforcement of atomised, regressive collectivities, and increasing disciplinary pressures generated by a globalised capitalist world market (Caterina / Huke 2020) paved the way for authoritarian populist actors to thrive. Authoritarian populist forces were able to reinforce the half-heartedly concealed hierar-

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1   This periodisation necessarily remains a rough outline which disregards country-specific temporalities and conjunctures. However, it does represent an attempt to bring similar emerging developments together in one coherent framework to gain a glimpse into the bigger picture of authoritarian populism across Europe.

chical structures of society: employers' command and freedom of action are strengthened at the expense of workers' rights, patriarchal hierarchies are strengthened (or reinforced) to the detriment of aspects of gender equality, and homophobia and racism are openly articulated to thwart equal opportunities. The efforts to re-normalise inequality and authoritarianism not only pose a threat to the political participation and physical integrity of minorities and subaltern groups; they undermine basic principles of liberal democracy, as deliberation is replaced by a putative homogeneous "common sense" or "will of the people" (Huke 2018). The "symbolic glue" (Grzebalska et al. 2018) of exclusive, white national identity, of anti-genderism, of an ethnically defined, powerful collective to integrate the powerless 'mass individual' can build on long-existing structures expressing a contempt for difference and for minorities and deeply ingrained traits of an authoritarian "anti-democratic ideological syndrome" (Stögner 2020: 285). Authoritarianism is thus not alien to liberal democracy and indeed thrives within its institutions and its porous social fabric, ruptured as it is into many parts.

We understand authoritarian populism therefore as a regressive counter-attack against the partial emancipatory achievements fought for by social and labour movements, women and migrants within liberal democracy. It not only aims to roll back these accomplishments, but denounces the deliberation-oriented rationales of liberal democracies. Whether termed right-wing populism (Wodak 2015), völkisch-authoritarian populism (Häusler 2018: 9) or radical right-wing populism (e.g. Mudde 2015: 296), authoritarian populism is the preserve of a constellation of far-right, neo-fascist, neo-Nazi or authoritarian-conservative forces, strategies and world views, encompassing specific political content and ideological elements (see Wodak 2015). Authoritarian populism aims to (re)create a hierarchical society characterised by discrimination (e.g. through the normalisation of racism or the re-masculinisation of politics). It turns against the normative core of democratic compromise (e.g. by nurturing resentment, hate and fear) and sponsors an authoritarian state project or authoritarian "techniques of governing" (see Frankenberg 2020) which aim to replace the institutional basis of liberal democracy with plebiscitary authoritarianism. It promotes the personalisation of power and prizes informality and opportunism. Although often presented as the actual defender of genuine democracy in the face of elites that are claimed to be corrupt, it is actually a conservative rebellion against the normative ideals of a political

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collective governing itself through universal laws based on political rights and individual liberties.

At the heart of this paper, we outline the conjunctures of authoritarian populism in the EU in recent decades. Furthermore, we discuss whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected authoritarian populist forces. The chapter concludes with a summary of the situation and points to potential emancipatory counter-movements beyond the confines of liberal democracy. Empirically, our analysis builds on case studies from various research projects (Caterina 2021; Caterina / Opratko 2020; Forschungsgruppe Europäische Integration 2012; Opratko 2020; Syrovatka 2015; Syrovatka 2016; Syrovatka 2020).

Keywords:
liberal democracy
authoritarian populism
crisis
COVID-19
political parties

CONJUNCTURES OF INVOLUTION: AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM IN THE EU

In the pages that follow, we explore developments since the 1980s. Over this time, authoritarian populist forces in the EU have become key political rivals for the mainstream parties, or even dominant parties themselves. Through three periods, we trace the neoliberal hardening of state apparatuses and the strategic mobilisation of authoritarian sentiments as enabling conditions for the rise of authoritarian populist forces. Subsequently, we outline how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the potential for authoritarian populist political forces.

Key to understanding the rise of authoritarian populism, we argue, are four major trends within the political economy of European societies. They constitute the societal backbone of the developments which we subsequently

examine in our case studies and are thus not explored further in the rest of this paper. First, there are the profound demobilisation of (political) civil society (e.g. trade unions), the erosion of political integration and the subsequent 'hardening' of the state. The decline of social democracy – in the sense not (only) of a political family but of a set of ideas – and, in many instances, of the welfare state meant that within countries' institutions there was no longer a responsive ear for social demands (Huke 2019b). Second, there are increased precarity due to neoliberal deregulation and a repressive form of individualisation whereby individuals are made responsible for social problems (e.g. unemployment, poverty) (Billmann / Held 2013; Menz / Nies 2019). Third, there are the intensified disciplinary pressures and crises resulting from a globalised and deregulated world market that compromise the "steering and fiscal capacity of the state" (Caterina / Huke 2020). They amplify the gap between everyday experience and state politics. Fourth, rights-based achievements of progressive movements, feminist struggles, migrants' self-organisation, legal successes in the area of gender equality and anti-racism have since the 1960s challenged conservative norms and de-normalised hierarchical power relations (Norris / Ingleheart 2019). Taken together, we argue that the four trends identified here provided a window of opportunity for authoritarian populist forces to destabilise democracy by promoting "moral panic" around deviance and minorities (Hall et al. 1978; Huke 2019a), pursuing the politics of hate and fear (Wodak 2015), attempting to revive 'the traditional family' and hierarchical gender relations (see Höckner 2020; Ramme 2020; Yarar 2020) and spreading anti-democratic discourses that revolve around ethnicised constructions of a homogeneous *demos and a univocal will of the people* (Huke 2018).

GRAVITATING TOWARDS THE AUTHORITARIAN POLE: THE CRISIS OF FORDIST ACCUMULATION
OPENING REMARKS

The 1970s in many European countries marked a crisis of the 'Fordist' accumulation regimes that had been so dominant in the previous two decades. To restore profitability, political and economic elites during the 1980s increasingly embraced solutions from the playbook of what is usually termed 'neoliberalisation' (e.g. labour-market flexibilisation, suppression of wages, deregulation of financial markets). Global financial markets and transnational capital increased

their leverage over policymaking. State institutions did not disappear per se, but those that had until then shielded consent-oriented, corporatist agreements have been largely marginalised (Buckel 2017: 37), meaning that trade unions lost the quite influential role they had enjoyed in the preceding period (Deppe 1993). At European level, principles of neoliberal competitiveness and discipline were enshrined in the Single European Act (SEA) and the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (Gill 1997). In some instances, these neoliberal strategies met fierce resistance, as in the case of miners in the UK, whose strikes were attacked by the proto-neoliberal government of Margaret Thatcher, for which Stuart Hall coined the term "authoritarian populism" (Hall 1979). However, other sections of the public supported a neoliberal agenda hoping to overcome economic recession and mass unemployment (Bieling / Steinhilber 2000), i.e. the programmes of established political actors were anchored to some extent in popular consensus.

In this period, the fragile compromise of liberal democracy in some countries – France and Austria being two prime examples – increasingly tipped towards the use of force to discipline resistant elements of society. New or reformed political forces entered the arena, troubled the landscape of established political parties and strategically boosted authoritarian sentiments within society.

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The Austrian Freedom Party (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, or FPÖ) and the French Front National (National Front, or FN) are exemplars of the early emergence of authoritarian populist forces, as well as these forces' flexible adaptation to changing circumstances. At that time, repressive state apparatuses expanded their competences and budgets,[2] and new legal constraints curbed progressive actors' ability to ensure that their material interests were carved into the machinery of the state. The asymmetry at the core of liberal democracy grew and with it the normalisation of social inequality. There was an increasingly virulent trend towards forging consent through ethnically exclusive constructions of identity.

AUSTRIA

Against the backdrop of the Fordist crisis, the FPÖ – founded in 1956 – turned into the first modernised right-wing populist party in Europe. When a youthful Jörg Haider took over the leadership in 1986, its traditionalist pan-Germanist outlook gradually gave way to a genuine Austrian nationalism and new racist campaigns. From the late 1980s onwards, the FPÖ primarily targeted economic migrants who had been recruited as Gastarbeiter ('guest workers') during the economic upturn in the 1950s and 1960s, and their families. In the wake of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, refugees from the Western Balkans also became targets. This culminated in a petition for a referendum called 'Austria First!', often casually (and aptly) referred to as the 'Anti-Foreigner-Referendum', which went ahead in 1993. During this period, the FPÖ under Haider combined racist campaigns with a critique of the political system established after the Second World War, with Haider even calling for the establishment of a 'Third Republic'. It also managed to exploit long-term crises in both traditional parties, the Social Democrats (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, or SPÖ) and the conservative Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*, or ÖVP). These two parties had governed the country, often in Grand Coalitions bringing them together, throughout much of Austria's post-war history. They had institutionalised a system of corporatist class compromise, or *Sozialpartnerschaft*, as well as a deeply entrenched system of political power sharing, or *Proporz*, at all levels of the social fabric between the Social Democrats ('reds') and the conservatives ('blacks') – an

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2   See, for example, the statistics of the German Federal Criminal Police Office (Bundeskriminalamt, or BKA), which show steep budget and staff increases from the 1970s and 1980s to the present day (Bundeskriminalamt 2009).

arrangement that clearly resulted in nepotism. The FPÖ managed to portray itself as a credible critic of this setup, which was in crisis as early as the mid-1980s. After 1986, deficit-prone state-owned enterprises in the steel, chemical and manufacturing industries were privatised, which led to the offshoring of production and mass layoffs. Additionally, during the first half of the 1990s, as part of Austria's application process for membership of the EU (at that time still the European Community (EC)), granted in 1995, Austrian governments introduced austerity measures and neoliberal reforms of the welfare state. All of this happened under SPÖ-led governments, leading to the disruption of the Austro-corporatist social compromise and a deep sense of alienation from the SPÖ among the working class. Haider was the leading political actor to recognise the crisis of Austro-corporatism and a "growing alienation from traditional politics" as "emerging opportunity structures and saw the dormant potential of the Freedom Party" (Heinisch 2008: 45).

FRANCE

Similar developments were seen in France, where the failure of President François Mitterrand's socialist experiment and the neoliberal-modernist Uturns in the 1980s paved the way for the rise of the Front National, or the National Front (known as *Rassemblement National* (RN), or National Rally, since June 2018) (Amable 2017; Vail 2010). France's increasing integration into the international division of labour since the 1980s was accompanied by the questioning of social, economic and cultural achievements and resulted in growing social insecurity (Syrovatka 2015: 388ff.). A combination of the dismantling of redistributive mechanisms and the abolition of the Fifth Republic's highly personalised majority voting system led to the break-up of the traditional two-party system. It was replaced by a system of movement-based alliances, situated outside the classical right-left scheme (Lisi 2019), one of which involved the Front National. In the FN's formative years following its establishment in 1972, its ideological inclinations were always rather flexible (supporting authoritarian/neoliberal elements of the European project like defence and a single currency in the 1980s), but it developed a resolutely anti-establishment profile from the mid-1990s onwards, attacking 'Brussels' and European integration. The constant power changes since the 1980s from one political bloc to the other (socialist to conservative and back) without any fundamental change in policies, had by 2017, in the words of a paper from ahead of that year's presidential election (Quencez / Michelot 2017), "increas-

ingly become the symbol of a stalemate in the French democratic system",
and the FN presented itself as the only force that was capable of sweeping
this away (ibid.).

CLOSING REMARKS
Overall, the period is characterised by the decomposition of the social compro-
mise fought for by trade unions and the workers' movement as well as the
weakening of political parties' ability to bind people together in a given political
project (mass integration). Authoritarian populist actors in countries such as
the UK, Austria and France began to benefit from the erosion of the relevant
mechanisms, which had previously linked established parties and their elec-
torate and could articulate the looming discontent towards crisis management.

SLIDING CONSENSUS WITH NO ALTERNATIVES IN SIGHT: THE 1990s AND EARLY 2000s

OPENING REMARKS

The emergence of negative social effects of neoliberal policies during the
1980s and 1990s (e.g. persistent unemployment, precarity) meant that the
fragile consensus for neoliberal strategies turned out to be short-lived. It
made way for a "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe / Marks 2009) in which
populations voiced their disagreement with neoliberal reforms in referenda
(Huke / Wigger 2019). As the disciplinary effects of global capitalism and trea-
ties such as the EMU or the SEA (Gill 2001) became increasingly apparent,
Keynesian welfare states and national systems of industrial relations found
themselves under pressure. Despite strikes and protests, neoliberal policies
continued to dominate the political arena throughout the following decades
(Bailey et al. 2017). The relationship of force between capital and labour shifted
significantly towards the former, as precarious employment gained ground.
Social-democratic parties arrived at accommodations with conservatives and,
starting with New Labour in the UK, embraced neoliberalism. Due to the shifts
in power relations, solidarity-based alternatives proved more and more out of
reach, and political demobilisation, fears of social decline and forms of exclu-
sive solidarity grew (Huke / Wigger 2019).

This period saw what could be viewed as the further ideological and structural
consolidation of Thatcher's claim that "there is no alternative". The potential
openness characterising liberal democracy was reduced to the idea of market-

conforming governance, in which ever fewer realms of society were accessible through democratic decision-making. The subjective experience of power-lessness in relation to established political actors and institutions, and state apparatuses' lack of openness to material demands were expressed by authoritarian populists who challenged not only the supposedly detached political elites more successfully in elections, but also the underlying norms of democratic mediation. In the figure of 'the migrant' and 'the Muslim' as 'uncivilised others', anti-democratic, anti-pluralist sentiments converged and mobilised racist patterns to disarticulate class antagonism into identitarian, nationalist conflict lines. Authoritarian populists thus, while failing to present an alternative to the neoliberal hegemony, themselves pushed to untie the knots of a more universally inclusive social state and the bastions of organised labour.

The loss of the fragile consensus and the growth of discontent paved the way for the success of authoritarian populist parties in several European states, such as Austria and Italy as well as (albeit under the differing conditions of post-socialist transformations) in Croatia and Slovenia.

AUSTRIA

In Austria, the FPÖ was able to benefit from what was, at least from its point of view, a perfect storm in the 1990s. Its rise at that time is often portrayed as the emergence of a new workers' party on the back of the SPÖ's relative decline. However, this is inaccurate. In fact, while the FPÖ did pick up 507,000 votes from the Social Democrats between 1986 and 1999, it gained even more (527,000) from the conservative ÖVP, the traditional party of the Austrian bourgeoisie and rural communities (Picker et al. 2004: 264). Haider's FPÖ managed to put together a genuine cross-class alliance, articulating the interests of different social groups, which often shared just one sentiment: a deep dissatisfaction with the Austrian political status quo. As a result, the party's actual manifestoes were contradictory. The FPÖ framed itself as the new 'social' party of the common people, yet had a fiercely hostile attitude to trade unions, public spending and the welfare state; and it enjoyed the support of significant sections of Austrian capital, yet opposed European economic integration, which would benefit those capitalists. This construct was held together by an authoritarian populist strategy, including the development of a 'vertical' antagonism to the traditional elites, represented by the eternal coalition of the SPÖ and the ÖVP and the creation of a racist and classist opposition between the 'people' and supposedly lazy 'welfare scroungers' and 'foreigners'. The rise of the FPÖ under Haider ulti-

mately swept the party into government in 2000 with 26.9% of the vote, as the ÖVP formed a coalition administration with this party for the first time. However, inexperienced personnel as well as the lack of any coherent strategy led to a rapid decline in the FPÖ's popularity (Luther 2011: 468). Neoliberal reforms, including the partial financialisation of the pensions system, the privatisation of state assets and the introduction of university tuition fees, stood in stark contrast to the social-nativist, welfare-chauvinist image adopted by Haider. Ultimately, the FPÖ's first stint in government ended in a "spectacular demise" (Heinisch 2008: 50) that saw the party crash to 10% in the snap elections of 2002. After this "rise and fall" of the FPÖ (Picker et al. 2004), the parliamentary far right managed to reconstitute itself under a new leader, Heinz-Christian Strache. The FPÖ adopted a radicalised version of the Haider formula, relying more heavily on the traditional far-right cadre. The new FPÖ under Strache rebranded itself as a "Social Homeland Party" (*Soziale Heimatpartei*), and singled out Muslims and Islam as targets in their campaigns. This political shift also marked the end of the road for the liberal wing of the FPÖ (Schiedel 2014). The new-old "'winning formula' consisting of economic liberalism, socio-cultural authoritarianism and opposition to immigration and multiculturalism" (McGann / Kitschelt 2005: 149) yielded consistent success in regional and national elections, while the federal government was again an increasingly unpopular 'Grand Coalition' of the SPÖ and the ÖVP. It is worth noting that the FPÖ was a major innovator in the use of the internet and social media for political purposes. It built up a highly effective network of websites, and YouTube and dark social media channels (WhatsApp, Telegram) to communicate with its supporters (Fuchs 2016).

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ITALY

In Italy, *Lega* (League), originally founded as the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) by Umberto Bossi in 1991, is at the time of writing the oldest party in the Italian Parliament. It began life as a party firmly rooted in Italy's northern regions, especially Lombardy and Veneto. At first, it flip-flopped between demands for the outright 'secession' of these territories from the rest of Italy and demands for federalism (Bobba / McDonnell 2015: 160). The party's "specific brand of exclusionary ethno-populism" (Ruzza / Fella 2011: 165) was thus inextricably tied to its regionalist concerns (see Agnew 1995; Diani 1996). In the 1990s, *Lega*'s "ethnoregionalism" (McDonnell 2006) was apparent in the scapegoats for the party's attacks: first and foremost 'Rome', i.e. the centralised Italian state, but also Southern Italians, who were stigmatised as

terroni. These scapegoats, however, have shifted over the years. From the late 1990s onwards, *Lega* started to attack the EU instead of Rome, and migrants instead of Southern Italians. Importantly, the critique against the EU has been constructed analogously to that against the Italian state, denouncing its centralism and excessive regulation. According to Huysseune (2010: 73), this continuity of critique has allowed *Lega* "to embed Euroscepticism in a national context where it has traditionally been very weak". However, Bossi's Eurosceptic Uturn was at odds with the party's highly pragmatic stance on EU issues that were relevant to its core constituency (Woods 2009: 164f.) and were mainly based on shifting political opportunities at domestic level rather than anti-EU ideology (Chari et al. 2004). Italy's domestic balance of power is indeed key in this respect, as *Lega*'s general success in the 1990s and early 2000s was closely bound up with its role as Berlusconi's main ally in the centre-right coalition governments formed in 1994, 2001 and 2008, against a backdrop of fragile bipolarism and fluctuating political support for the rival centre-left and centre-right camps (Amable et al. 2011; Palombarini 2003).

CROATIA

At the periphery of the European Union, a slightly, but not fundamentally, different picture emerged in the 1990s. Throughout that decade, Croatia was governed by right-wing populists (Brkić 2001: 97ff.). The first free elections, in 1990, brought Franjo Tuđman's conservative Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica, or HDZ) to power. The new government's primary aim was to gain independence from Yugoslavia and to win the war that lasted from 1991 to 1995 and inflicted severe physical, social and humanitarian harm on the multi-ethnic region and newly-established state. Establishing a Croatian state involved creating a distinctive national identity and coming up with a range of enemies: not only the Serbs (cast as aggressors against Croatia) and communism (due to its association with Yugoslavia as a means of Serbian domination), but also female emancipation and homosexuality, which were seen as a threat to the Croatian people (Mlinarić 2013). Overall, an authoritarian, nationalist and socially conservative mindset acquired a hegemonic grip on Croatian society, with this mentality being manufactured by political and economic elites, who acted accordingly. Strikes were delegitimised by members of the government, who called them "politically motivated" (Cvek et al. 2019: 140ff.), and the Catholic Church gained considerable influence, leading to the propagation of traditional gender roles in schoolbooks (Mlinarić

2013). President Tuđman could govern in an authoritarian fashion, as there was no parliamentary control over the executive (Brkić 2001: 103). This entailed a clientelistic, undemocratic transition to market capitalism, favoured by conservative and liberal forces alike. Companies previously operating under the worker self-management system were privatised in an underhand way, resulting in the closure of many industrial enterprises (Lončar 2013: 171ff.). According to political scientist Jovan Mirić, there was a religious glorification of the state in Croatia under Tuđman, which made democratisation impossible (Mirić 1996: 95). After Tuđman's death in 1999, a coalition led by the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske, or SDP) took the reins (Brkić 2001: 121), which produced "immediate positive effects towards pluralisation in the public sphere and a democratisation of decision making" (Dolenec 2013: 147), but failed to address the consequences of corruption in the privatisation process and organised crime networks operating within the framework of the Croatian state (ibid.: 148). Meanwhile, the HDZ continued to delegitimise the SDP "as non-patriotic, treasonous communists" and to present itself as a pro-European force while continuing to appeal to the authoritarian desires of its voters (ibid.: 150f.). When it returned to power in 2003, it applied the same authoritarian, clientelistic approach to government as it had previously and showed no signs of combatting large-scale corruption and criminal activities until, broken by scandals and facing an economic slump, it lost the 2011 elections (Zakošek / Maršić 2010: 796).

SLOVENIA

Like Croatia, Slovenia declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Following the first multi-party elections in 1990, a centre-right anti-Communist coalition called DEMOS (Demokratična opozicija Slovenije, or Democratic Opposition of Slovenia) formed a government. The war of independence in summer 1991 lasted 10 days and soon afterwards, there were strikes caused by the loss of the Yugoslavian market hitting the population's living conditions (Furlan 2014: 192ff.). Disagreements about how to best transition to capitalism resulted in DEMOS falling apart. Slovenia was then led from 1992 to 2004 by centre-left coalitions, who took a redistributive policy line at a time when the old consensus between capital and labour had long been abandoned or started to dissolve. Shares were issued to workers and managers, far-reaching curbs were placed on access to foreign capital, and the state retained ownership of some key services (banking, energy, tele-

communications and railways) (ibid.: 194ff.). Despite its relatively systematic management of the transition, Slovenia as an export-oriented country still wanted to become an EU Member State to enjoy the benefits of the European single market, leading the country to voluntarily subject its economic model to the neoliberal competitive agenda of the continent's political economy. It joined the EU in 2004 and then the eurozone in 2007. Notwithstanding this shift towards European liberalisation (which was pretty popular with the public), the centre-left coalition was unable to convincingly combat corruption, prompting populist attacks from the right-wing opposition, who accused the government of representing only the interests of a corrupt elite (Toplak 2006: 828). Moreover, the centre-right bloc capitalised on the overtly nationalist issue of citizenship rights in a referendum. In particular the former Social Democratic Party (now the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka, or SDS)), who was part of this bloc, moved its electoral focus from targeting workers' class identity to increasingly playing the ethnic-nationalist card (ibid.). Following the 2004 elections, the SDS, under the leadership of Janez Janša, managed to form a government for the first time (Hösler 2006: 215f.). This change of administration points to the growing attraction at that time of right-wing, nationalist and authoritarian-populist politics, personified by Janša, who was quite a popular figure, having been politically persecuted during the 1980s and the Minister of Defence during the war of independence. His first government (2004–2008) watered down the social components of the Slovenian transitional model to meet the requirements of the European Central Bank. The new government planned to privatise infrastructure operators and introduce a flat tax rate, university tuition fees and a higher retirement age. However, only parts of this policy programme materialised because of demonstrations and student protests, the refusal of the SDS's coalition partner to agree to a higher retirement age, and railway workers' strike threats (Bolldorf 2008: 312f.). Thus, the new model of executive-led neoliberalisation was still contested and did not yield a new consensus, replacing its predecessor, i.e. the consensus on a gradual transition. As in the other case studies presented here, Slovenia experienced decreasing stability, as the only alternative to the status quo was seemingly provided by nationalist, authoritarian-populist forces.

A defining feature of this period of authoritarian populism was its anti-elitism, with attacks mainly targeting the EU and national governments for their purportedly overly soft line on migration, security and corruption. The respective actors managed to portray themselves as dependable protectors of a regional (e.g. in the case of Italy) or national entity under threat. The politics of fear and hate proved successful vectors channelling the growing discontent into electoral gains. Representation, described by Stuart Hall as a formative practice, not a simple reflection of some pre-existing will (Hall 1979), in this context creates the illusion of a homogeneous people whose will is voiced by a leader or party. In an innovative use of new media and communication channels, a "cult of immediacy" (Frankenberg 2020) is nurtured, taking intermediary institutions of public and democratic reasoning out of the equation and establishing a supposedly direct line between representatives and represented.
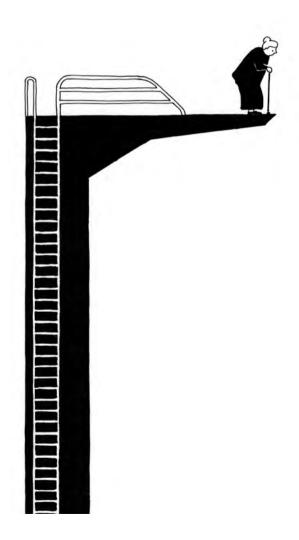
DISINTEGRATION AND NEW CONSTELLATIONS: 2007 AND BEYOND

OPENING REMARKS

The deep economic crisis that unfolded after 2007 exacerbated the contradictions of the previous period. In the years that followed, neoliberal principles became even more firmly entrenched in EU and Member State institutions. Even the legal foundations of liberal democracy have been compromised, as governments openly breached laws in their management of the crisis and policing of counter-protests (Oberndorfer 2015). Poverty, precarity and unemployment increased, while harsh austerity measures were implemented that weakened trade unions even further, reduced social security and limited political rights. The effect was a dynamic of disintegrating polarisation, with governments reacting to diminishing legitimacy and social unrest by hardening state apparatuses which again fuelled unrest (Huke / Wigger 2019). Across Europe, former mass parties no longer have a stranglehold on the widespread loyalty which liberal democracy depends on (Buckel 2017: 31). The eurozone crisis and its aftermath provided a window of opportunity for both progressive social movements and authoritarian populist forces (Bailey et al. 2017; Solty / Gill 2013). Thus, one can speak not only of disintegration, but the incremental consolidation of new constellations, varying on a case-by-case basis, with authoritarian populists poised to increasingly occupy the political centre. These populists impact the political environment long before they enter government – or even

if they do not do so – by structuring political communication and substance as well as desirable policies. Stuart Hall observed this incremental shift back in the 1970s/1980s, when authoritarian mindsets and practices were adopted by sweeping aside the class antagonisms that form the basis of liberal democracy, appealing to 'the people' and claiming to represent them. The fault lines differ from country to country but mainly involve migration or gender equality, both of which are framed as threats to national sovereignty.

FRANCE

In France, multiple crisis phenomena were exacerbated by the 2007 financial crisis (Syrovatka 2016). The deep structural crisis of the accumulation regime combined with the economic situation in the eurozone led to persistent stagnation from 2011 onwards[3]: by October 2020, France had not yet managed to get its GDP back to pre-crisis levels (IMF 2021). The tendencies bound up with the economic crisis and its associated distribution conflicts turned into a crisis of the political system. From 2007, the political system experienced considerable upheaval, as the former two-party constellation was replaced by alliances of 'movements' situated outside the classic right-left schema (Lisi 2019). The uneven development of the crisis in all its facets fostered the rise of authoritarian populism in the form of growing support for RN under Marine Le Pen's leadership. At the same time, authoritarian populism has been able to take up a place at the heart of society, shifting from being an openly fascist presence in society to being a socially accepted force in the political system (Syrovatka 2015: 394ff.). This 'normalisation' of the far right was facilitated by conservative and liberal parties strategically adopting their positions (Mondon 2015). As a result, RN has been able to gain ground in conservative electoral milieus, particularly winning over the right wing of the conservative Républicains as well as some of those who used to vote for left-wing parties (Perrineau 2017). Since social democracy's collapse in the 2017 presidential election and the rise of the liberal En Marche (On the Move) movement spearheaded by President Emmanuel Macron, RN has set up a duel between "patriots" and "globalists" (Mallet 2020) in which this party supposedly defends France and its Catholic secular culture against globalisation and its adherents (ibid.). RN uses conspiracy theories to make out that a wide range of opaque dangers pose a permanent threat to French society. At the core of RN's strategic orientation is a hostility to Islam, which it accuses of infiltrating French society, while blaming Muslims for an unwillingness to integrate (Ivaldi 2019).[4] Another pillar of its strategy addresses social issues. While authoritarian populism from the 1970s to the 1990s still followed a strictly neoliberal course, since 2011 there has been a focus on social policy issues, such as housing or a higher minimum wage. However, in keeping with the party's slogan Les Français

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3 With the exception of 2017, when growth rates were well above 2%.

4 While the very real danger of political Islam in France and other European countries is undisputed, RN's authoritarian response is not an appropriate reaction to Islamist ideology.

d'abord (French People First)[5], RN considers that social benefits should be the exclusive preserve of those holding French citizenship. The (re)orientation of RN's social policy is firmly linked to an anti-European discourse that sees the EU and the euro as a threat to the French economy and state (Ivaldi 2018).

The EU's *ultralibéralisme* is countered by RN's protectionist policy, which not only provides for the nationalisation of banks, but also withdrawal from the EU and the euro (Koenig 2019). Overall, RN presents itself as an antagonist to the left-liberal and pro-European nebula revolving around En Marche and the Greens, who achieved strong results in the 2020 local elections, which point to a growing polarisation of political society.

SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, the crisis starting in 2007 led to considerable political turmoil, bringing about several changes of government in a short space of time (Podvršič 2018), clearly pointing to a high level of disintegration. In this context, the political arena could not be hegemonised by any single political force for an extended period, fostering the conditions for the rise of an authoritarian-populist movement. The centre-left coalition under Prime Minister Borut Pahor (2008–2012) was confronted with constant pressures from the EU to introduce austerity measures, especially 'workfare' principles and a higher retirement age. Both projects were refused in referendums in 2011. Janša became Prime Minister for the second time in 2012. His government passed 100 laws in one year enforcing the austerity policy. After mass demonstrations in the winter of 2012/2013, the government had to step back because of a vote of no-confidence. The following governments continued the neoliberal policy. In 2018, Prime Minister Miro Cerar resigned, criticising the trade unions for their "unrealistic and harmful demands" in the wake of a wave of strikes pushing for higher wages in the public sector, e.g. in schools and kindergartens (Der Standard 2018). Janek Janša and his party SDS won the early elections held in 2018, but as he could not find a coalition partner, Marjan Šarec became Prime Minister, heading up a minority government (Der Spiegel 2018) supported from the back benches by the leftist party Levica (The Left). Levica managed to push through various demands in exchange for this arrange-

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5 This slogan was first used in 1984 as the title of a book by the founder of France's National Front, JeanMarie Le Pen, and has since been a regular fixture of policy programmes of that party and its National Rally successor. It alludes to the America First! slogan deployed by the US National Socialists in the 1930s.

ment, including ending all austerity measures and bringing about higher wages in the public sector and a higher minimum wage (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung 2019). However, this arrangement was abandoned because of a disagreement about the Slovenian healthcare system (Levica 2019), resulting in Janša forming a government instead and becoming Prime Minister for the third time in March 2020 (Die Presse 2020). The SDS's 2018 election campaign clearly showed that it is a right-wing populist party (Der Spiegel 2020). Janša advocates citizens' right to bear weapons, expresses doubts about human-made climate change and spreads conspiracy theories about members of the former Yugoslavian secret service purportedly still pulling the strings in Slovenia. In a resolution from 2017, the SDS declared its support for the traditional Slovenian family consisting of stable marriages between men and women (SDS 2017), pursuing the line from 2015, when the SDS and the Catholic Church successfully opposed same-sex marriages in the referendum on this issue (Wölfl 2015). The initial disintegration of Slovenia's political landscape is thus gradually giving way to a consolidation of authoritarian-populism.

CROATIA

In Croatia too, the economic crisis starting in 2007 struck the political system and engendered a level of disintegration conducive to the far and conservative right. From 2011, the Social Democrats were in government, while the conservative HDZ took a rightward turn. Whereas the Social Democrats implemented austerity measures and acted against the interests of its traditional electoral base, right-wing organisations offered a reactionary riposte to the crisis instead of an emancipatory one by strengthening traditional identities and contempt for minorities. Irrational responses were also articulated, in the form of conspiracy theories, by the populist party *Živi Zid* (Human Shield), who mainly campaigned against the EU as well as corrupt elites (N1 2019). In the face of a deep socio-economic crisis and with the government in disarray, such authoritarian sentiments enjoyed growing appeal, and the HDZ, presenting itself as the parliamentarian wing of the right-wing populist movements, returned to government in 2015, providing some far-right ministers for the new coalition (Ponoš 2018: 3f.). However, this constellation did not turn out to strike a stable balance between conservative and far-right forces, meaning that a new HDZ government from 2016 onwards reverted to a more moderate rhetoric. This caused the right wing of the party to reinforce its opposition, mainly focusing on the populist 'go-to' area of gender issues (Zakošek 2018: 2). When Croatia

decided to ratify the Istanbul Convention for the Prevention of Violence against Women, a lot of HDZ representatives refused to follow suit (Lovrić 2018: 3). A new NGO called *Istina o Istanbulskoj* (The Truth About the Istanbul Convention) was established (Istina o Istanbulskoj 2017), and Catholic fundamentalists claimed that the convention propagated an unacceptable "gender ideology" (Slobodna Dalmacija 2018). Broad coalitions of the conservative and authoritarian-nationalist right can be built around such issues, but these were still too moderate for some. In early 2020, popular singer Miroslav Škoro founded the new right-wing populist party *Domovinski Pokret* (Homeland Movement) (dnevnik.hr 2020a). Many HDZ right-wingers defected to the new, Eurosceptic party (ORF.at 2020). The Homeland Movement won representation in Parliament in the July 2020 elections, securing 10.89% of the vote (dnevnik.hr 2020b). Among its representatives are members of Opus Dei (an organisation within the Catholic Church) and of right-wing organisations of war veterans, and TV presenters who have used their programmes to spread homophobic messages (Novosti 2020).

The above overview illustrates the country's groundswell of authoritarian-populist forces since the crisis starting in 2007. and the complete failure of the established liberal left to counter such attacks and offer a credible alternative. However, the political climate is not tilting in just one direction. In the

July 2020 parliamentary elections, a political grouping to the left of the Social Democrats, the Green-Left Coalition (Zeleno-Lijeva Koalicija), also managed to secure seats in Parliament for the first time since the independence of Croatia by achieving more than 7% of the vote, half of which it garnered outside the major cities, underlining its nationwide support (Stojaković 2020). Moreover, it won the local elections in Zagreb, where it picked up the mayoralty. This seems to suggest that political debate might not be simply disintegrating or shifting wholesale further to the right, but polarising between authoritarian-populist and leftist progressive responses to the crisis.

AUSTRIA

In Austria, the FPÖ won 26% of the vote in the 2017 national elections – almost the same as in 1999 under Jörg Haider – and once again joined a coalition government led by the ÖVP (Bodlos / Plescia 2018). An internal coup in the latter party had seen (now former) Chancellor and previously Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz take the reins. Kurz undertook a substantial political shift in the second half of 2015, as he realised the potential capital that could be gained

from seizing on sections of the public's rejection of the new flows of refugees that were making headlines at that time. Ruth Wodak (2018) recently called the politics of "the new ÖVP" a "shameless normalisation" of the far right. It "demonstrably adopts key demands of the FPÖ in terms of migration and refugee policy and thus propagates extremely restrictive migration policies (Rheindorf / Wodak 2018) [...]. Both the FPÖ and the new ÖVP have shame-lessly spread [...] many rumours, [...] and false reports [...], all of which come together to form a single threat scenario consisting of a fantasised "invasion" by so-called "illegal migrants" (Ötsch / Horaczek 2017)" (Wodak 2018: 332). For the ÖVP and for Kurz, this authoritarian-populist turn proved highly successful. They won the 2017 elections with 31.5% of the vote and continued to ride high in the opinion polls for the next three years. In stark contrast to the first ÖVP/FPÖ government, this time the support for both of them held up, even though they introduced a number of measures – e.g. the extension of the maximum working day and week – that seem to run counter to the interests of significant sections of both parties' electoral base. Crucially, FPÖ politicians took charge of the Ministries of the Interior, Defence and Social Affairs. This allowed the party to introduce a seemingly endless stream of legislative proposals targeting foreigners, migrants, refugees and Muslims, as well as people receiving welfare benefits and the long-term unemployed. However, the coalition spectacularly fell part when, on 17 May 2019, German newspapers released undercover footage, recorded in Ibiza in 2017, showing FPÖ party leader and Vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache and deputy leader Johann Gudenus implicating themselves in corruption and illegal party financing. The 'Ibiza affair' eventually led to the end of the conservative-right wing coalition government (Eberl et al. 2020: 1352). Initially, the party managed to contain the electoral damage in the 2019 European Parliament elections. However, the weeks leading up to the 2019 snap general election saw the emergence of accusations that Strache had embezzled party funds, and he was eventually expelled from the FPÖ. The turmoil prompted a nosedive in its fortunes at that election, when the party picked up 16.2% of the vote, with its number of ballots more than 540,000 down on 2017.

ITALY

In Italy, as in Austria, authoritarian populist forces re-invented themselves and gained new ground after being severely challenged by the crisis since 2008. *Lega* was namely the most important coalition party in the fourth government led by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (2008–2011), yet the crisis blocked the

viability of public spending as the main element of compromise trying to reconcile the largely opposed demands within the centre-right social base (Amable et al. 2011). As a result, following Berlusconi's resignation, *Lega* ended up in the government headed by Mario Monti (2011–2012) as an almost irrelevant opposition party preoccupied with internal party scandals. While key authoritarian traits already marked the crisis-management strategies advanced by Berlusconi and Monti (Caterina 2019), two major symptoms of an Italian "crisis of crisis management" (Heinrich / Jessop 2013) started to snowball following the fall of the Monti administration: first, the mounting direct and indirect costs of the crisis (not made up for by any promised development in social justice); and second, a dramatic decline in output legitimacy, associated with rising Euroscepticism and disillusionment at the crisis-management strategies.

Against this backdrop, *Lega*, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, who was elected its Federal Secretary in late 2013, managed to capitalise on the symptoms above and to surf the "long wave" of the crisis (Caterina 2020) while revolutionising *Lega* from originally being a regionalist party calling for the secession of Northern Italy from the rest of the country to a nationwide party along the lines of Marine Le Pen's National Rally (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Salvini successfully exploited anger in society by reinforcing the shift towards attacking the European Union and migrants into a state of "constant propaganda war" (Newell 2019: 3). Euroscepticism has turned into an integral part of not only the party's anti-immigration socio-cultural outlook, but also – as in the French case – its anti-austerity, welfare-chauvinist socio-economic position (Caterina 2021). This success of Salvini's authoritarian populism is closely related to the rise of the "polyvalent populism" (Pirro 2018) embodied by the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, or M5S), with *Lega* and M5S representing two sides of the same coin, both railing against the status quo (Passarelli / Tuorto 2018). Protracted negotiations after the 2018 general election ushered in a "marriage of convenience" (Pucciarelli 2019: 22) between the two parties, which triggered an outright populist upheaval, given the complete insignificance of any left-wing or centre-right alternatives. Indeed, the very strategy adopted by *Lega* and M5S disarticulated potential alternatives by heralding policy reversals in highly sensitive socio-economic areas such as pension reform (*Lega*) and the income support scheme (M5S), albeit with dubious results in terms of the actual reduction of disparities (Afonso / Bulfone 2019; Giugliano 2019). At the same time, *Lega*'s time in government in 2018/2019 – with Salvini holding the highly symbolic post of Minister of the Interior –

saw the party's role in efforts to bring about an authoritarian transformation of the Italian state reach its height. Despite heated debate, the so-called 'Salvini decree' of October 2018 which had such a huge impact on Italy's migration policy was only replaced in October 2020 (ANSA 2020).

CLOSING REMARKS

The deep and persistent slump in capital accumulation in the aftermath of 2007 has been translated into further symptoms of a political crisis and vanishing legitimacy for traditional ruling parties. Authoritarian populist actors have exploited the emerging cracks with internal and external realignments, while still adhering to their tried-and-tested melange of opposition to migration; anti-equality messaging; and, in some instances, radicalised neoliberal politics. In certain cases, such as Croatia and Austria, established parties become increasingly afraid of their growing rivals and so (re)integrate elements of open racism and hostility to migrants into their political repertoire, pursue practices reminiscent of an authoritarian state, thereby contributing to the normalisation of the far right and its ideological hinterland. In other cases, such as France, Slovenia and Italy, the authoritarian populist forces themselves join the political mainstream. A long process of crippling social unrest sowed the seeds for right-wing populist sentiment to prevail in the face of a dramatic decline in standards of living for vast swathes of the population across Europe. Ultimately, trade unions and social-democratic parties have been defeated and/or have pushed themselves to the sidelines by adapting or radicalising neoliberal shibboleths such as enforcing budgetary discipline and curtailing social rights. They have been unable to offer convincing alternatives and have therefore played a part in the disintegration of long-standing party constellations, which has been most visible in the emergence of new combatants on the right and the left and among the populist spectrum or in the rebranding of existing parties. Authoritarian populists have been enjoying electoral success across Europe, while former mass-based parties have been losing their core voters. Overall, recent years have been characterised by these parties' disintegration, with incremental consolidation (at various rates) for other parties, with the balance mostly tipping towards the authoritarian pole. However, this has not gone without opposition or resistance. In some countries, movements have taken to the streets and in some, these have turned into electoral alternatives. Thus, polarising disintegration can also be seen in cases where leftist forces have gathered momentum (e.g. local elections in France or Croatia). This

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dynamic situation underwent yet another seismic upheaval with the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

AMBIGUOUS DEVELOPMENTS: AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
OPENING REMARKS

Even two years into the historic, global 'earthquake' brought about by a dangerous virus, exposing the holes in public health systems in Europe which had been laid low by the neoliberal agendas outlined above, one might have been inclined to state that there was no one single "populist response" to the pandemic (Mudde 2020). Giorgos Katsembekis and Yannis Stavrakakis emphasise this point in their Populism & the Pandemic Report. They argue that there was "no common reaction to the pandemic nor any coherent pattern regarding the success and/or approval ratings of […] governments [including populists]" (Katsembekis / Stavrakakis 2020: 3). This reflects the incoherence of the response in the month after the SARS-CoV-2 virus arrived in Europe and started to spread and the severity of the crisis became clear. Across Europe, the challenges that this unprecedented state of emergency posed for the already stripped-down liberal democracies laid bare further authoritarian potential at both a subjective and a political level, while presenting all political actors with a kind of crisis which proved difficult to exploit for the benefit of their parties. Although the overall picture in terms of authoritarian populist developments is ambiguous, the threat of irrational and antidemocratic senti-ment in society and its mobilisation by authoritarian populist forces remains real and clear, as can be seen in all our case studies.

AUSTRIA

Austria's political authorities did not take decisive action to tackle the pandemic until it posed a major threat to public health across the country. A 'super-spreader' event in Ischgl, a ski resort in the state of Tyrol, in early March 2020 was a turning point (Correa-Martínez et al. 2020). On 10 March, the government decreed a number of measures, including a partial travel ban, the cancellation of large-scale events and a halt being put to in-person univer-sity classes. From 15 March until 6 April, the government shut down large parts of public and economic life. Between 6 April and 1 May 2020, it then gradually lifted some of the restrictions, before reintroducing them in October

of that year, when the second wave of the pandemic hit. The governing coalition of the ÖVP and the Green Party came up with economic rescue packages and brought in subsidised wages involving short-time work in an effort to deter companies from laying off workers (Schnetzer et al. 2020). Despite these measures, the unemployment rate in Austria rose from 8.1% in January 2020 to 12.7 percent in April of that year, i.e. the highest level since the Second World War. However, by May 2021 unemployment had dropped to 7.7%, with experts divided on whether this represented an actual stabilisation of the labour market, or a hidden crisis, with employers holding off redundancies and a wave of bankruptcies which would happen when government support came to an end. The FPÖ chose not to focus on the economic and social aspects of the crisis, but rather became the political face of the protests against the pandemic measures. In April 2020, the party launched a campaign entitled Stop the Corona Madness!, criticising measures such as the mandatory wearing of face masks, and pandered to those segments of society trivialising the danger posed by the virus. Subsequently, senior leading members of the FPÖ, including former Minister for the Interior and now party leader Herbert Kickl, took part in and gave speeches at protests and demonstrations. During the latter half of 2020, a genuine protest movement against anti-COVID measures emerged, mobilising significant numbers of people for demonstrations and rallies in many Austrian towns and cities, including regular mass demonstrations in Vienna. From mid-2021 onwards, the movement increasingly focused on its opposition to the government's vaccination strategy, and there was a renewed surge in the movement's numbers in late autumn 2021, when the Austrian government, in the face of pitifully low vaccination rates, announced plans to introduce a general vaccination mandate. While the social and political makeup of those protesting was heterogeneous, some sections of the far right, including the FPÖ as well as neo-fascist and Nazi groups, were from the very start crucial in organising these protests. The FPÖ has become the only major party openly supporting what has become the largest social movement in Austria's recent history. This represents a significant change for the party, which has historically largely refrained from association with movements and street protests. However, whether this strategy offers a way out of the deep electoral crisis facing the FPÖ after the Ibiza debacle remains an open question. Recent polls suggest that the party's strategic embrace of "pandemic populism" (Vieten 2020) has helped it to regain some electoral support, but this remains at lower levels than before the Ibiza crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Italy at a difficult time for Salvini's *Lega*. The relationship between *Lega* and M5S, the two anti-establishment parties making up the governing coalition, had descended into one of open competition in the wake of the 2019 European elections, which had completely reversed the balance of power thanks to *Lega*'s best-ever election results (Cotta 2020). The ensuing internal conflict between the coalition partners resulted in the collapse of the first government led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and the formation of a second Conte coalition (henceforth the 'Conte II government' for short) as a result of M5S and the centre-left Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, or PD) unexpectedly joining forces (Moschella / Rhodes 2020).

In early 2020, *Lega* thus still had to rebrand itself as an opposition party. When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, the situation seemed ideal for Salvini to capitalise on, as there was clearly a foreign "other" to attack, namely the Chinese and "their" virus. However, in the third week of February 2020, changing circumstances challenged the party's typical "we/other" dichotomy – specifically, the virus started to spread in regions such as Lombardy and Veneto, both of them governed by *Lega*, raising the question "who are 'the others' now?". Salvini failed to respond with a coherent position on how to handle the pandemic. His contradictory statements partially explain the ebbing away of support from *Lega* voters in that period (Drogo 2020; Mari 2020; Lopapa 2020a; Pagnoncelli 2020).

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After the collapse of the Conte II government in February 2021, *Lega*'s decision to join parties including M5S, PD, FI and Italy Alive (*Italia Viva*, or IV) in a *pro-European* governing coalition led by former European Central Bank (ECB) President Mario Draghi demonstrated the centrality of two major fault lines that are highly pertinent to *Lega*'s authoritarian populism and have been severely affected by pandemic-related dynamics:

> First, the pandemic has increasingly called into question Salvini's Euroscepticism. According to various observers, e.g. Tito (2020), the Recovery Fund has nullified the rhetorical weapons of nationalist populism. Indeed, even during the Conte II government, Salvini's *Lega* had failed to articulate any arguments against massive financial support from the European Union. The party's support for the Draghi government has further undermined the coherence of Salvini's long-standing critique of the EU, begging the basic question how *Lega* can go back to its pre-pandemic Eurosceptic battle cries (Di Quirico 2021).

> Second, the pandemic has challenged the balance of power within the (previously seemingly tight-knit) right-wing bloc. Despite being split between being in government and in opposition until *Lega*'s abandonment of its coalition with M5S in August 2019, a strategic alliance in local and regional elections and parliamentary cooperation meant that the three main right-wing parties (*Lega*, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, or FdI) and Silvio Berlusconi's Forward Italy (*Forza Italia*, or FI)) had a solid common base (De Giorgi / Dias 2020: 169). The internal power distribution within the right-wing bloc had experienced a watershed moment with Salvini's triumph in the European elections of May 2019, as *Lega* became the coalition's leading party, FdI increased its share of the vote and FI saw its popularity continue to decline (ibid.: 172). However, the pandemic has further impacted the relative strength of each of the parties on the right of the political spectrum compared with their rivals for that slice of the electorate. Since August 2021, not only has *Lega* lost its lead in the opinion polls but it has dipped below Meloni's FdI, which has enjoyed a remarkable increase in its popularity since the start of the pandemic (Ginori / Mastrobuoni 2020; YouTrend 2022).

Interestingly, this pandemic-related reshuffling of the cards among the authoritarian populists is taking two long-standing features of Italy's political landscape – *technocracy* and *populism* – into a new phase. Some scholars have referred to the Draghi government as representing a new historic compromise (Tassinari 2021; Gardels 2021). The relationship between technocracy and populism provides an excellent starting point for attempts to make sense of how the two are blending into previously unknown forms of "technopopulism" (Bickerton / Invernizzi Accetti 2021). The future of authoritarian populism in the country thus seems to be closely intertwined with the future implications of this process and its ability to trump alternatives for the sake of "a unitary, unmediated, and unaccountable vision of society's general interest" (Caramani 2017: 54).

At the time of writing, in early 2022, Salvini stands out as being perhaps the main loser in the haphazard political constellation that saw to the re-election of Sergio Mattarella as President of the Republic. Mattarella's reappointment and the associated ongoing stewardship of the Draghi government send out a signal of political stability to European partners and international observers alike. Against this backdrop, it is still open to question whether *Lega* will opt for a political strategy that is increasingly distanced from its pre-pandemic authori-

tarian populist stance (Cerasa 2022). However, Italian civil society certainly still seems to provide fertile ground for authoritarian populist tendencies, with right-wing extremist groups continuing to exploit social unrest sparked by the government's handling of the pandemic (most prominently, through the vaccination drive and the further tightening of rules surrounding the EU Digital COVID Certificate), i.e. the 'No Green Pass' movement (Bull 2021; Saudelli 2021).

SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, there has been a shift towards authoritarian populism since the start of the coronavirus crisis. The government under Janez Janša was formed at the beginning of this period (Die Presse 2020). Since then, Janša has operated in an overtly populist way by spreading conspiracy theories about the radical left controlling elements of the media who are critical of his administration. He even threatened to cut the funding of independent media outlets (Mappes-Niediek 2020) and drastically curtailed citizens' right to protest and demonstrate. The government ignored its obligation to formally extend this emasculation of political rights by simply implementing, time and again, executive ordinances without any clear legal foundation (Bardutzky / Zagorc 2021). The Janša government also seized on the opportunity to move in on the left-wing cultural centre ROG in Ljubljana, based in a building occupied by protesters, by raiding and evacuating it in 2021 (Untergrundblättle 2021). This marks a break away from the liberal tradition of negotiation and compromise, making the situation increasingly difficult for the political left.

Janša continued targeting independent media outlets throughout 2021, using his Twitter account to denounce critical journalists as liars and closet communists. Furthermore, the right-wing broadcaster Nova24TV, which has very close ties with Janša's party, attacked Lili Bayer, a Brussels-based reporter for *Politico* magazine, for publishing an article criticising Janša's treatment of the Slovenian media (Ozsváth 2021). In October, Janša accused several MEPs of being puppets of George Soros (Wesel 2021). Indeed, a combination of his treatment of the media and his failure to procure enough COVID vaccines for Slovenia even prompted four opposition parties to put forward a motion of no confidence in Janša, although they did end up losing the vote in Parliament (Maček 2021).

By late 2021, the COVID-19 situation in Slovenia had become critical, with less than half of the population vaccinated and the number of infections sky

high. The government introduced fairly strict measures – for example, it was not allowed to go to work without taking daily COVID tests. Shortly before an EU summit in October, there were clashes between demonstrators and the police at protests in Ljubljana against this policy, involving several hundred participants (Tagesschau.de 2021).

CROATIA

In Croatia, the situation is different. Initially, the coronavirus crisis helped the HDZ government under Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, as it was judged to have responded pretty competently to the first wave of the pandemic (Kostanić 2020). Unlike Janša, Plenković has not used the crisis to undertake an authoritarian reconstruction of the state. There have also been signs of a rapprochement with the country's Serbian minority – Boris Milošević, a prominent Serbian politician, was invited to the commemoration of the Oluja operation, involving the reconquest of occupied regions by the Croatian Army in 1995 (Jung-Grimm 2020). However, by the time the first anniversary of the pandemic hitting Croatia came round, the HDZ was in deep crisis. Croatia's GDP was shrinking dramatically, while the country was one of the three EU Member States that had administered the fewest COVID-19 vaccinations (Klauški 2021). By the end of 2021, only 46.5% of the population were fully vaccinated. Several prominent members left the HDZ just before the local elections in May 2021, and rumours spread that some of them were going to become members of the Homeland Movement (Kostanić 2021). Moreover, right-wing conspiracy theorists started trying to fill the void that was being created by the ailing HDZ by organising protests against the government's measures to control the pandemic (Zrinjski 2020). As the pandemic situation deteriorated and in the face of continuing strict measures, more protests in the Croatian capital Zagreb against the governmental policies took place, again involving right-wing populists and neo-fascists. In November 2021, thousands of protesters, who were bussed into Zagreb from across the country, demanded Andrej Plenković's resignation as Prime Minister (Salzburger Nachrichten 2021). It remains unclear whether the government will be able to withstand these pressures.

FRANCE

In France, the pandemic has exacerbated the trend towards authoritarian populism. On top of this, President Macron's arbitrary handling of the pandemic

has further eroded confidence in his government (Mallet 2021a). Meanwhile, the radical right gained ground by pointing out the social consequences of the crisis (Soullier 2020) and criticising the government for its hesitancy. In particular, the RN focused on its core vote and called for small and medium-sized enterprises to be saved with state aid. The party also published the much-discussed 'Coronavirus Black Book', accusing the government of lies and withholding information (Mediapart 2020). Against this backdrop, the defeat in the regional elections in April 2020, the ongoing activism of the Yellow Vests (Gilets Jaunes) movement and protests against the planned reform of unemployment insurance in 2021, as well as the poor opinion-poll ratings for Macron himself, speak of a growing crisis of the political system. While French social democracy has faded into oblivion since the 2017 presidential election, the French left became fragmented during the coronavirus pandemic. In contrast, Marine Le Pen and RN were able to present themselves as a party of social modernisation during this crisis (Berteloot 2021). As well as backing away from its position of wanting to leave the EU, RN promised to water down European austerity policies and to launch a social policy programme to cushion the consequences of the pandemic. Macron's crackdown on radical Islamism corroborated Le Pen's demands and thus legitimised her neo-fascist stances on immigration and Islam (Luce 2021). This favourable point of departure for the radical right led many observers to speak of a repeat of the presidential duel between Macron and Le Pen from 2017. Therefore, until the end of 2021, RN also pursued a strategy of further weakening its extreme right-wing positions and embracing socio-political demands in order to pick up support, especially from the left, for another potential run-off between Le Pen and Macron in the second round of the presidential election in April 2022. Thus, Le Pen pledged to strive for a "government of national unity" involving the radical left if she were elected (Mallet 2021b). Her strategy caught on, with Macron and much of the media taking on the discourse of political polarisation between "patriots" and "globalists", thereby introducing a new set of political goalposts.

However, the 'dilution' of RN's positions came at a price, as it created room for a far-right competitor to establish himself. In late 2021, Éric Zemmour, a prominent TV presenter and author, announced his candidacy for the presidential election. As a figure who has regularly caused a stir with his racist, sexist and anti-Semitic statements and uses openly fascist rhetoric, it initially seemed that he could thwart Le Pen's efforts to get through to the second round of that election. With his early poll ratings of 12% to 15%, it appeared that he could

attract the support of many right-wing voters who would probably otherwise vote for Le Pen. However, any failure by Le Pen to reach the second round would probably only be a Pyrrhic victory for French democracy. At the same time, Zemmour's strong polling numbers make clear the enormous potential of the radical right as an electoral force, were these two presidential candidates together to attract more than 30% of the vote. This shows just how entrenched authoritarian populism has already become in French public opinion and indeed the fragility of the country's political system (Raynaud 2021).

CLOSING REMARKS

In a crisis situation like the global pandemic, authoritarian populist forces capitalise on widespread resentment of voices of reasoning behind and the processes involved in democratic decisions that have far-reaching authoritarian undertones. Perceived truths, fake news and conspiracy narratives replace argumentation, with opposing views being denounced as lies. Some of the responses to the health crisis try to appeal to coronavirus-sceptic forces, and draw on a wider "culture of rejection" (Opratko 2020; Harder / Opratko 2021a; Harder / Opratko 2021b). During the crisis, ethnically charged "we/other" dichotomies that were already common before the pandemic were mobilised against political rivals. However, the coronavirus crisis was also difficult to exploit for political ends. As opposition forces, authoritarian populists were not always in a position to benefit from the confusion created by the virus. What they did do was radicalise their nationalist, authoritarian discourse or, where they had aspirations to be a governing party themselves, persistently criticise the "political elites" for mismanagement and supposedly acting against "the people" (Bobba / Hubé 2021: 8f.). Meanwhile, authoritarian populists in government initially gave a chaotic impression of an irrational back-and-forth, reacting too late or virtually not at all and downplaying the risks of the virus, thereby showing that they do not necessarily thrive when an actual crisis occurs. However, as time went on, they mostly gravitated towards similar policy solutions across Europe involving, though, differing levels of curbs on political rights and expansion of executive powers while still manufacturing internal and external enemies (see e.g. Bárd et al. 2020). The years ahead are set to be defined by ferocious social conflicts over the shape of a post-pandemic Europe. Large numbers of people have lost or will lose their job, there has been a huge increase in public debt and the politically generated strain on the healthcare sector will leave profound marks on these mainstays

of society and the people whose labour is exploited in them. A lack of social contestation and credible political alternatives means that it is by no means implausible that authoritarian-populist sentiment could make further inroads among the public. However, there is no inevitability about this.

DEMOCRACY – A RISKY PROJECT

As this reconstruction of the conjunctures of authoritarian populism in the EU shows, liberal democracy in Europe is not necessarily future-proof. Authoritarian attitudes, social inequality and non-responsive state apparatuses systematically create crises that offer opportunities for authoritarian challenges to democratic achievements. In recent decades, the erosion of mass-based parties, increased precarity and disciplinary pressures stemming from the capitalist world market led to an intensification of struggles over the re-normalisation of hierarchies along gendered and racialised lines. Against this backdrop, authoritarian populist actors have often managed to portray themselves as the 'true voice' of 'the people' and undermine democratic deliberation and conflict resolution by promoting fake news, fear and hatred of 'the other'. As a result, hard-won social rights and emancipatory compromises are hanging in the balance. In Austria, Italy, France, Slovenia and Croatia, authoritarian populist parties and actors have been part of the political scene for decades now and have shown themselves to be both tenacious and flexible in adapting to the situation. Thus, the current manifestation of authoritarian populism is not a recent development, but the expression of latent tendencies within liberal-capitalist democracy and the dissemination across society of authoritarian populist political messages and psychology.

However, democracy can also be a risky project for its enemies and the ruling classes. The overwhelming materiality of the COVID-19 pandemic and the newly emerging social struggles associated with it (Nowak 2020) could pose a threat to identitarian ideologies. Drawing on surveys in the aftermath of the first lockdown period (i.e. spring 2020), some observers have depicted right-wing populist forces as outright "victims of the pandemic" (Lauria 2020). *Victims* in the sense that they have paid a high price for the fact that "the concrete fear of the virus has swept away the artificial fears fabricated by populist sovereignism, leaving it drained and voiceless" (Mauro 2020). Migrants no longer seem to be the main problem for a once buoyant middle class that is suddenly dropping below the poverty line because of the economic consequences of the pandemic. It thus remains to be seen how

long an anti-migrant stance will help the respective actors moving forward, in the face of a massive decline in social welfare payments as a result of the austerity cutbacks following the euro crisis, and the very uneven-handed way in which the pandemic has been handled and its costs distributed. Authoritarian populism is currently a rather successful by-product of liberal democracy, but is not guaranteed to last. Differing contexts and actors make it hard to predict further developments given that the current situation is highly contentious and the defining openness of liberal democracy hotly contested. Clearly, defending liberal democracy is not enough to counter authoritarian populism. Rather, there is a need for struggles aimed at expanding the narrow limits within which democratic conflict negotiation currently works. Cultures of radical democratic objection and resistance can spread, but this will depend on the ability and willingness of leftist actors (whereby it is open to question whether social democrats will be among these) and social movements to offer a socially inclusive political alternative promoting equality and appealing to reason, solidarity and empathy. In the framework of liberal democracy, social struggles have limited bandwidth to operate in, but are nevertheless forces pushing for the expansion of democratic government in all social spheres, thereby contradicting capitalist principles of social reproduction (Buckel / Martin 2019: 247f.). On such struggles depends the battle to stop the further rise of authoritarian populism in Europe, but more crucially the opportunity to overcome the always precarious asymmetrical compromises of liberal democracy by sowing the seeds for a real democratisation of society as a whole. However, as long as the utopian horizon of the fight against authoritarian populism remains liberal democracy (and thus (neoliberal) capitalism), European countries will continue to stumble over the intrinsic contradictions of this way of organising society.

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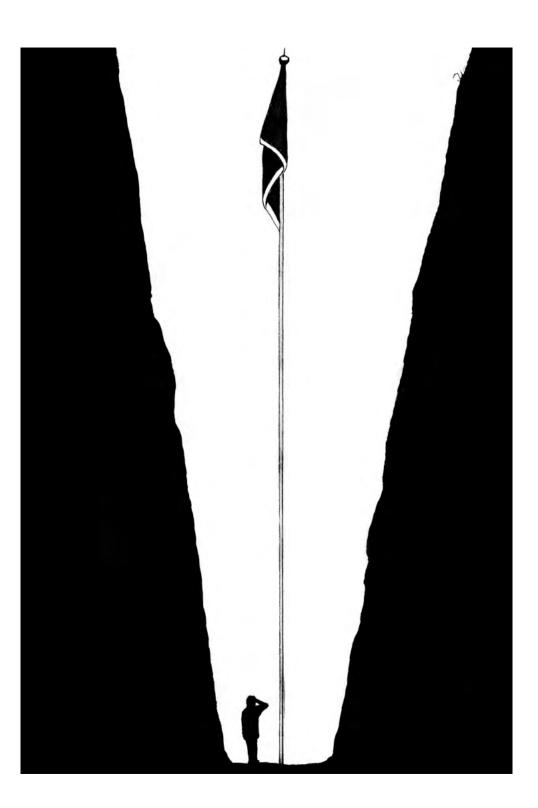
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AUTHORITARIAN NEOLIBERALISM, COVID-19 AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

ALFREDO SAAD-FILHO
MARCO BOFFO

2

This chapter examines the contradictions, limitations and changes in global neoliberalism from the point of view of our interpretation of the three crises in the dominant system of accumulation (Boffo et al. 2019; Saad-Filho 2019; Saad-Filho / Boffo 2021): the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), which was followed by prolonged economic turbulence, the political crisis in the wake of the GFC, leading to the disintegration of neoliberal democracy, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This interpretation is grounded on Marxian political economy and applied to the case study of Brazil. Our previous work focuses on the contradictions and limitations of global neoliberalism, including its volatility, economic crises and the emergence of authoritarian forms of governance. We claim that these are part of a politics of crisis management through the manipulation of resentments, fostering exclusion, oppression and exploitation. The ensuing social divisions have been contained by nationalism, racism and violence, often fronted by 'grandstanding' leaders. This chapter argues that the pandemic reinforces these exclusionary tendencies, involving major repercussions for economic stability and democracy. In this way, COVID-19 reveals the limitations of neoliberalism as never before, with very adverse implications for the economy and the legitimacy of capitalism itself.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic created severe contradictions for capital accumulation in the advanced Western economies. On the one hand, the lockdowns disarticulated the basic processes of extraction and circulation of surplus value and forced states to intervene in unprecedented ways to secure social order and the relations of exploitation (Saad-Filho 2020a). On the other hand, prior to a vaccine or effective treatment, any resumption of economic activity would inevitably spread the coronavirus, threatening even longer standstills later on. Several governments found themselves paralysed by this dilemma, and became unable to implement either successful economic policies or effective health policies. The United States, the United Kingdom, India and Brazil are among the clearest examples of failure, contrasting with remarkable successes in East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania (Saad-Filho 2020b).

While the pandemic triggered an unprecedented economic collapse, its political implications remain uncertain. The background is not auspicious. The crises hitting the economy and democracy fostered the rise of right-wing "populist" politics in several countries (Boffo et al. 2019), which became especially evident with the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016, and the election of Jair Bolsonaro as Brazilian President two years later. There were also similar developments in Austria, Hungary, Italy, the Philippines, Turkey and elsewhere. The rise of authoritarian neoliberalism is symptomatic of the attempt to shore up the system of accumulation through a greater reliance on coercion, instead of social consent or the co-option of exploited or marginalised groups (Bruff 2014; Bruff 2016; Bruff / Tansel 2020; Hendrikse 2018; Tansel 2017). Symptomatically, during the pandemic several authoritarian governments associated themselves with (more or less explicit) policies of "herd immunity", an approach replete with social Darwinistic overtones.

Against this backdrop, this chapter examines the likely implications of COVID-19 for global neoliberalism, drawing on our interpretation of the overlapping crises of the dominant system of accumulation: the economic crisis (which has been raging since the GFC and has been deepened still further by the pandemic and its aftermath), the disintegration of political democracy, and the direct impacts of the health crisis itself. This interpretation is grounded on

Marxian political economy (Saad-Filho 2019), and it builds on our assessment of the contradictions and limitations of global neoliberalism and the scope for authoritarian forms of governance. These are key aspects of a politics of crisis management through the manipulation of mass resentments in order to intensify exclusion, oppression and exploitation both within and between countries (Boffo et al. 2019; Saad-Filho / Boffo 2021). The social divisions arising from neoliberalism are, increasingly, being modulated by selective forms of nationalism, racism and violence, which are often deployed by means of authoritarian or populist politics. We conclude that the coronavirus crisis has the potential to reinforce those exclusionary tendencies, with highly detrimental implications for democracy. At the same time, the pandemic has revealed the limitations of neoliberalism as never before, with significant implications for the legitimacy of capitalism itself. This chapter examines those global trends, and illustrates them taking Brazil as a case study.

After this introduction, the chapter has five substantive sections. The first of these sketches a condensed history of neoliberalism, highlighting its corrosive impact on democracy, along with the origins and contours of the current drift towards authoritarianism. The second outlines the relationships between neoliberalism and the pandemic, highlighting how the system of accumulation enabled the spread of the coronavirus and informed the policy responses to it. The third and fourth focus on the case study of Brazil. They review the rise of Jair Bolsonaro as a product of the revolt of an 'alliance of elites' against the previous governments led by the Workers' Party, and show how authoritarian neoliberal governance exacerbated Brazil's vulnerabilities and made it one of the countries worst affected by the pandemic. The fifth and concluding section focuses on the prospects for contemporary democracy in general, and in Brazil specifically, in light of the crises in neoliberalism and its abject failure to meet the needs of society and protect life itself.

A CONDENSED HISTORY OF NEOLIBERALISM

The literature on neoliberalism indicates five principal ways in which this concept has been understood (Fine / Saad-Filho 2017; Saad-Filho 2017): (a) neoliberalism as a political project imposed by the right against the workers and the poor, initially led by the governments of Augusto Pinochet in Chile, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and Ronald Reagan in the United States, and subsequently spreading around the world; (b) neoliberalism as a set of public policies and practices seeking to "roll back the state" and generally following the so-called Washington Consensus; (c) neoliberalism as a cluster of ideas and ideologies associated with Austrian and monetarist scholars, especially Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman and their "neoliberal thought collective" based at the Mont Pèlerin Society, and followed by an array of think tanks, NGOs, university departments, international organisations, lobbies, and so on; (d) from a Foucauldian perspective, neoliberalism as a "technology of the self" promoting a specific subjectivity, entrepreneurial mindset and mode of (self)governance; and the favoured approach in this chapter, (e) neoliberalism as a stage of capitalism characterised by the financialisation of production, exchange and social reproduction. Although these approaches to neoliberalism are mutually complementary, and indeed largely overlap, the last of these is more general since it recognises that neoliberalism is not only about shifts in ideas, economic policies or power relations. More generally, neoliberalism is the contemporary mode of existence of capitalism and a specific modality of social and economic life. In this phase, the systematic use of state power to promote "the markets" (especially the

financial markets) and shield them from any form of democracy encompasses all the features listed above and more, with financialisation as its driving force. This approach frames neoliberalism as part of an ongoing effort to insulate capitalism from economic democracy, and to impose institutions that hollow out the functioning and character of political democracy itself.

The history of neoliberalism can be divided into three phases, which are inevitably more logical than chronological, since they can be delayed or accelerated or even combined depending on the country or region or economic, political and historical circumstances. Roughly, these phases are separated by the East Asian crisis in the mid-1990s and by the GFC (Boffo et al. 2019). The first phase is associated with the transition from the previous system of accumulation (Keynesian in the advanced Western economies (AEs), developmentalist across the Global South, Soviet-style socialist in the former "Eastern Bloc", or otherwise) to neoliberalism. Such a transition usually involves some form of "shock therapy", being characterised by the aggressive promotion of private capital by the state to stifle labour, disrupt and neutralise the left, promote the transnational integration of domestic capital and finance, and establish a new institutional framework with scant regard for the social, economic or other consequences (Fine / Saad-Filho 2017). This phase invariably requires strong state intervention, not least through the re-regulation of the economy along neoliberal lines and the reorganisation of the state itself under "market principles" (neatly encapsulated in the doctrine of New Public Management).

The wave of transitions to neoliberalism was initiated by the military coups in Uruguay, Chile and Argentina in the 1970s. Soon after, it was buttressed by Thatcherism, Reaganism and their replicas in other advanced economies, structural adjustment in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa since the 1980s, the "reforms" in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, and the stabilisation policies imposed in the wake of the East Asian crisis, which closed this historical period (Boffo et al. 2019). However, in almost every case, while the transitions to neoliberalism restructured economic and social reproduction, they also created a large stratum of economic and social "losers": millions of skilled jobs were eliminated, especially in the AEs, entire professions vanished or were exported, and employment opportunities in the public sector worsened because of privatisations and the "retrenching" of state institutions. Job stability declined in the formal sector, opportunities to escape from the

informal sector faded, and pay, conditions and welfare protections deteriorated for most workers and professionals.

The second phase of neoliberalism ran from the mid-1990s until the GFC; it emerged both as a development and an adaptive response to the dysfunctions and adverse social consequences of the transition. Politically, this period was associated with the 'third way' under the leadership of 'centrist' politicians like Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, and it focused on the expansion of financialisation, the stabilisation of the social relations imposed in the previous phase, state management of the new modalities of international integration, and the introduction of typically neoliberal social policies to manage the deprivations created in the previous transition to neoliberalism.
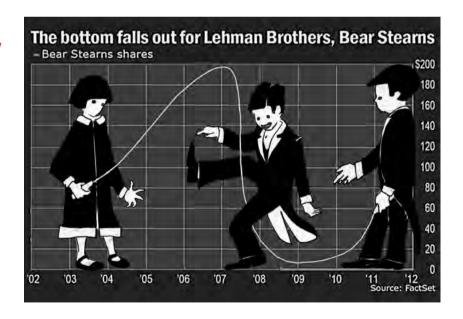
This phase also promoted a typically neoliberal subjectivity centred on "individual freedom and initiative" (Held 1996: 253) as the dominant form of ideology and rationality, redefining the relationships between individuals, the economy, society and the state. Everyone was pushed to adopt an entrepreneurial mode of living, and social intercourse was increasingly subordinated to narrow economic criteria (Fine / Saad-Filho 2017). In this way, neoliberalism became the "common sense" of the age. The promotion of the ideology of self-responsibility was especially destructive for working-class culture and agency, since it deprived citizens of their collective capacities, valued consumption above all else, placed the merit of success and the burden of failure on isolated individuals, and disabled collective agency by suggesting that the resolution of every social problem requires the further individualisation, marketisation and financialisation of social interaction.

In the political domain, a neoliberal form of democracy spread across an increasing number of countries, until it became the typical (although obviously not the only) political form of the system of accumulation (Ayers / Saad-Filho 2015). Given the diffusion of neoliberal ideology, these political shifts could plausibly be presented as the universalisation of democracy itself – the "end of history" for Fukuyama (1992). The diffusion of neoliberal democracy was buttressed by the "War on Terror" (WoT) launched by the United States and some of their allies in the wake of the 9/11 attacks (Lafer 2004). The WoT forcibly aligned much of the Middle East and Central Asia with neoliberal globalisation, while also allowing the self-appointed "coalition of the willing" to justify the corrosion of civil liberties at home and imperialistic military interventions abroad in the name of freedom and democracy. In turn, in the AEs,

the neoliberal "reforms" tended to hollow out already established forms of democracy, triggering a growing disengagement from conventional politics. This disengagement was expressed through declining electoral participation and membership of mainstream political parties and increasing volatility in party loyalty and electoral allegiance (Mair 2013).

From a global, historical perspective, the expansion of political democracy was part of a cycle of struggles, not least around suffrage and the broadening of representation, spanning the period from the European revolutions in 1848 to the Keynesian-social democratic "compromise" after the Second World War (Azzarà 2018; Eley 2002). In contrast, the subsequent transitions promoted a neoliberal form of democracy that, although still based on electoral politics, systematically disempowered collectivities, hampered mobilisations for the expression of mass interests and largely disabled the left.

From an institutional point of view, the neoliberal democracies imposed a growing number of technocratic institutions and rules-based processes, especially in the economic domain, that precluded democratic outcomes and insulated neoliberal policies and priorities from electoral accountability.

These included independent central banks, maximum fiscal deficits, inflation targets, extensive privatisations, arm's-length regulatory agencies (that were invariably captured by the conglomerates nominally under their control) and the use of referenda to bypass representative democracy (while appearing to empower individuals at the expense of "entrenched" or "elite" interests) (Biebricher 2015; Chamayou 2021). In the meantime, a barrage of propaganda promoted overconsumption, often funded by borrowing, as the essence of the good life. The re-engineering of the state increasingly sidelined economic issues from political debate. However, instead of securing the neoliberal order forever, the new institutional framework ended up eroding the legitimacy of neoliberal democracy and alienating the "losers" politically. While the post-war welfare state was being disarticulated, the narrowing of the political discourse closed down avenues to express concerns and debate alternatives. The pleas of the "losers" were ignored, and they were often ridiculed by the media and the institutions of the neoliberal state.

Increasingly, the dissatisfactions, resentments, fears and hopes of the "losers" were turned by the mainstream media into moral conflicts between "good" and "bad" people, framed by "common-sense" discourses focusing on individual "honesty" and "dishonesty", and images of "undue privileges" granted by a bloated and inefficient state to the undeserving poor, women, minorities, foreigners and foreign countries. It was as if every frustration with neoliberalism could be explained by the misbehaviour of scheming "others", aided and abetted by the state (Hall / O'Shea 2013; Jensen 2014). In most countries the political spectrum slid relentlessly to the right, both because of the institutional restructuring of the state, and because of the waning of the left and the repression and delegitimation of all opposition. Mass dissatisfaction dissolved into anomie; later, it would be enraptured by "grandstanding" authoritarian leaders advocating right-wing populist solutions to the problems of neoliberalism. Even worse, after formal democracy had been hollowed out by years of neoliberal rule, those dissatisfactions were hijacked by the far right (Kiely 2018).

The GFC took hold after years of prosperity, and it was followed by a third phase of neoliberalism, distinguished by a crisis of legitimacy of the system of accumulation (Bonanno 2017). This crisis followed the collective realisation of the extraordinary – and extraordinarily costly – flaws of financialisation, and the perception that neoliberalism had driven an accelerated concentration of

income and wealth and imposed undesirable patterns of employment and social reproduction. It had also become clear that the neoliberal restructuring of the state, society, finance and industry had failed to deliver rapid accumulation, income growth or macroeconomic stability, belying the promises of future gains in exchange for the sacrifices made in the transition.

Despite its severity, the GFC was eventually contained by the reconstitution of the hegemony of finance and the stabilisation of the economy by means of additional debt, followed by harsh "fiscal austerity" in most AEs. This was accompanied by new forms of accommodation between the state, finance and industry, with, for example, states flirting with industrial policy and the provision of infrastructure in order to shower money, loans, paper assets and profitable contracts on private capital, prompting a resurgence of the notion of state capitalism for neoliberal times – see Alami / Dixon (2020). Given the evident inability of neoliberalism to "mobilize the instruments to address its crises and to maintain mass loyalty through the satisfaction of its promises" (Bonanno 2017: 241f.), "austerity" policies had to be buttressed by increasingly repressive forms of rule, which tended to be validated by the discourses and practices of (selective forms of) nationalism and (more or less disguised) racism. In the European Union, the cases of Croatia, Hungary and Poland offer striking examples of this tendency.[1]

In other words, the GFC triggered a crisis of democracy that exacerbated the tendency of neoliberalism to rely on the coercive apparatus of the state. In the 1980s and 1990s, so-called law-and-order policies emerged across the AEs as the penal "component of a broader monetarist and neoliberal state strategy geared towards inhibiting working peoples' opportunities to avoid the worst forms of wage labour and, concomitantly, diminishing their expectations with respect to wages and job security" (Gordon 2005: 53). Since then, penalisation has been enforced "as a technique for the invisibilization of [...] social 'problems'", and to refrain from addressing the root causes of the social insecurity caused by neoliberalism (Wacquant 2009: xxii) (italics in the original quote). These policies spread from the United States first to the AEs and later around the globe (Wacquant 2014).

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1   See Fabry (2019) and Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2019; see also Berberoglu (2021) for a global view.

Even if the coercive apparatus of the state has always been integral to capitalism in general, and to neoliberalism specifically, its deployment has come to the fore since the GFC because of the inability or unwillingness of the state to manage social conflicts. In its absence, neoliberal states have tended to rely increasingly on the policing of disaffection. This has been especially evident in France, as the state unleashed unprecedented levels of violence against the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vest) protesters,[2] and in the United States, in the repression of the Black Lives Matter protests. These transformations underpin a new political form – authoritarian neoliberalism – in which the democratic shell of neoliberalism partially collapses, because of the effort to sustain the system of accumulation despite its inability to deliver shared prosperity (Saad-Filho / Ayers 2020). In this light, the rise of authoritarian right-wing "populist" leaders in several countries is a reaction to the economic and political crises in the system of accumulation, as well as a way to shore up neoliberalism, given the extraordinary challenges it is facing.

A NEOLIBERAL PANDEMIC

The economic and political crises in neoliberalism were overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the severity of the pandemic was largely determined by biology and genetics, the spread of the coronavirus can also be examined from the angle of its neoliberal features. First, far from being unexpected, the risk of pandemics had been considered by civilian and military strategists for decades, especially in light of HIV in the 1980s, SARS in 2003, H1N1 in 2009, MERS in 2012, and Ebola and other "new" diseases (Coles 2020). In particular, it was well known that flu-type viruses were likely to emerge in the animal markets in Southern China (Wang et al. 2006; Vidal 2020; Zahoor 2020). It follows that the crises of public health and the economy were not caused by failures of planning; instead, to a large extent they reflected political choices, the dismantling of state capacities, failures of implementation and a shocking underestimation of the threat.

Second, the virus came into contact with human populations because of their encroachment into previously isolated environments and the growing commodification of animal products (Wallace 2016; Wallace 2020; Davis 2020; Snowden 2020).

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2   See Kapsas (2020).

Third, the virus tended to spread through routes determined by transnational production chains, commercial links and the movements of the better off, e.g. skiing holidays in Austria and Northern Italy (Nunes 2020; Oltermann 2020).

Fourth, COVID-19 tended to hit distinct social groups in very different ways, depending on their vulnerabilities and ability to protect themselves. In brief, the super-rich often isolated themselves on their yachts, the moderately wealthy fled to their second homes, and the middle class struggled to work from home while juggling childcare. Finally, the poor, who were already in worse health, on average, than the privileged, either lost their earnings entirely or had to risk their lives daily to perform much-praised but low-paid "essential work" as bus drivers, care workers, nurses, porters, shopkeepers, builders, sanitation officers, deliverers, and so on; meanwhile, their families remained locked up in cramped accommodation. It is not surprising, then, that poor and so-called Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities have been disproportionately hit on a massive scale in terms of morbidity and mortality (Lerner 2020; Kendi 2020; Scheiber et al. 2020; Valentino-DeVries et al. 2020).

The economic and political crises in neoliberalism also shaped the path of the pandemic in the West at two further levels. In the background, the ideologies of individualism and 'choice', which had helped to validate neoliberalism and disorganise the opposition, bled into a destructive scepticism of established knowledge. For years, mainstream 'experts' and 'politicians' (the only actors who were given the chance to express themselves at any length in the media) undermined their own integrity by ritually praising neoliberalism and its institutions, proclaiming them to be the best of all possible worlds and belittling the concerns and experiences of the 'losers'. Their views fed a growing scepticism about politics, science and the media that, true to neoliberal form, fed the individualisation of truth itself and the proliferation of self-centred, if not outlandish, beliefs along the following lines: 'it is my right to believe that the Earth is flat and no one has greater authority than me on any subject'; 'nobody can impose masks, vaccines or lockdowns on me'; 'the coronavirus is a hoax because I say so', and so on. Logically, this could lead to a bonfire of certainties that would consume geostationary satellites, long-distance transport, the internet, statistical medicine, water treatment plants and much else. In the realm of politics, disregard for science, evidence and established truths would often degenerate

into a quasi-religious attachment to populist 'leaders' peddling comforting but wildly misleading claims, and whose every trespass would be forgiven because they seemed 'genuine'. Despite the intense discomfort of liberal and mainstream commentators, the appealing personality of these leaders would often excuse their managerial incompetence, and their opinion-poll ratings would hold steady despite mounting casualties in the pandemic and the utter dysfunctionality of their administrations. Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Jair Bolsonaro offer prime examples of a criminal failure of leadership to both contain the coronavirus and to protect the right to life.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the AEs, and especially the United States, the United Kingdom and Brazil, mishandled the pandemic (Saad-Filho 2020b). China had to confront the coronavirus without warning since December 2019, and did so successfully; it was followed by Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Laos, New Zealand, the Indian state of Kerala, Cuba, Senegal, and so on. Their experiences showed that political regime has little to do with administrative competence, and that distinct approaches could be successful, depending on local combinations of state capacity, the central-isation of decision-making, the local manufacturing base, a rapid response, universality and capillarity of health systems, resources, technology and social control: the disaster was not inevitable. In contrast, vastly wealthier AEs dith-ered and lost the opportunity to keep fatalities low. Their policy failures were symptomatic of the disarticulation of the state apparatus in these countries under neoliberalism.

	TOTAL CASES	CASES PER MILLION	TOTAL DEATHS	DEATHS PER MILLION	EXCESS DEATHS	GDP GROWTH 2020 *
BR	7,162,978	33,698.71	185,650	873.40	54,700	-5.8
UK	1,983,017	29,208.20	66,643	981.65	65,700	-9.8
US	17,480,798	52,746.70	313,942	947.39	149,200	-4.3
CN	94,930	65.88	4,763	3.31	N/A	1.9
CU	9,893	873.43	137	12.10	N/A	N/A
DE	1,487,788	17,746.11	25,833	307.39	9,800	-6.0
NZ	2,110	437.56	25	5.18	N/A	-6.1
KS	48,570	947.35	659	12.85	N/A	-1.9
TW	763	31.87	7	0.29	N/A	0.0
VM	1,411	14.49	35	0.36	N/A	1.6

3   The data presented in the table are drawn from various sources: Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center (2020), the Our World in Data website http://ourworldindata.org, Financial Times (2020) and International Monetary Fund (2020).
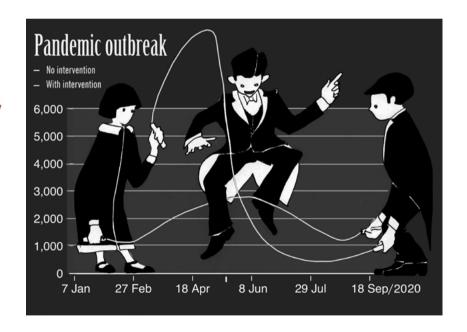
4   All the data in the table are those found on the relevant web pages on that date except the GDP growth estimates for 2020, which are from the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook from October that year (International Monetary Fund 2020).

The differential impact of the pandemic can be assessed from three complementary angles, regardless of marginal differences in the counting of cases and deaths in each country. At the earliest stages, the leadership of the three countries in question (the United States, the United Kingdom and Brazil) not only disregarded successful experiences but also (along with Sweden, another catastrophic example) got entangled in an ideological debate about 'herd immunity' that revolved around a purported trade-off between the number of lives lost and the economic costs of a lockdown (which, in turn, depended on timing as well as severity). This debate might have proceeded indefinitely – handing victory to the proponents of herd immunity, since the virus was spreading rapidly – until mass outrage and the evidence of success in East Asia became so overwhelming that most countries had to impose restrictions on movement and other precautions (Sidera 2020). Even then, the governments in these three countries moved only with great reluctance, maximum confusion and minimal efficacy, ensuring that death rates would mount and proving that they had never abandoned their preference for a herd-immunity strategy. As it happens, the hypothesis of a trade-off between health and the economy was entirely wrong, since the countries that contained the virus early on tended to experience less severe economic contractions than those that let it circulate widely (Smithson 2020). The hesitation to save lives because this was "too expensive" was due to a lethal cocktail of ideology, incompetence, inability to overcome the limitations of neoliberalism and unwillingness to recognise that, in the absence of a vaccine, the public-health response to the coronavirus must include a lockdown, and the earlier this was imposed, the lower the death toll would be (Wearmouth 2020).

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Around the world, neoliberal governments were shown to have hollowed out, fragmented and extensively privatised their health systems, even when they appeared to be publicly owned.[5] Neoliberalism was also shown to have created a precarious and impoverished working class highly vulnerable to disruptions in their earning capacity (due to the pandemic and the lockdowns) and to health scares, because of their lack of savings, poor housing, inadequate nutrition, and work patterns that were incompatible with healthy lives (Solty 2020). It was revealed that four decades of neoliberal reforms had depleted state capacities in the name of the "superior efficiency" of the market, disarticulated public policy, promoted deindustrialisation through the

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5   For the case of the UK, see Leys (2020), Siddique (2020) and Wren-Lewis (2020).

"globalisation" of production and rendered several wealthy countries unable to produce personal protective equipment for their healthcare staff and ventilators to keep their hospitalised population alive. Instead, those economies had built unsustainable financial structures in pursuit of short-term profitability, which could be kept afloat only with support from the world's largest central banks (Tooze 2018).

From the point of view of democracy, mainstream discourse initially latched onto the presumed advantage of authoritarian regimes in addressing the pandemic, due to their rapid and centralised decision-making and ability to control the citizens (Kavanagh / Singh 2020; Stasavage 2020). Additionally, the political right tended to decry lockdowns because they allegedly violated the right to free movement.[6] In turn, marginal segments of the left, drawing on a biopolitical reading of the pandemic (Agamben 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d), also denounced lockdowns as being repressive and

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6   See, for example, Olson (2020).

iniquitous (Sotiris 2020) – but see Dale (2020) for a critique. None of these approaches is defensible. From a class perspective, capitalists, workers and the middle classes have divergent interests in a pandemic. While everyone seeks economic security provided by the government, including compensation for their losses, they also have contrasting interests when it comes to lockdowns: the capitalists can protect themselves better, and have an objective interest in keeping the economy working to keep the flow of surplus value. Workers know that lockdowns offer their best chance of safety, but need the state to provide economic security. Finally, the middle classes may lean in either direction depending on their location vis-à-vis the production, extraction and circulation of value, and on their political alignment. The impact of the pandemic on democracy will depend on the relative strength of each interest group, with capital enjoying an in-built advantage, given its unquestionable hegemony over the neoliberal state.

In response to the shock, several governments immediately returned to the economic policies implemented after the GFC, especially the United States and the eurozone, but those policies rapidly proved to be insufficient: the economic collapse in 2020 was probably the greatest in the history of capitalism, and the required subsidies and bailouts must be correspondingly larger (Michell 2020; Sandbu 2020). If the economic implications of the pandemic are set to be both catastrophic and long-running, the political implications are likely to be just as grave. In what follows, we review the disaster in Brazil, whose predicament can illustrate key features of the approach outlined in the previous sections. This does not imply that Brazil offers a template to interpret the experiences of other countries. That country does, however, offer a stark case study of the unparalleled "conscious intensification of state neglect" (Ortega / Orsini 2020: 1265) under authoritarian neoliberalism. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro effectively implemented a form of necropolitics that was wholly incompatible with democracy and citizenship.[7] He sabotaged all attempts to contain the pandemic, undermined

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7 The notion of necropolitics put forward by Mbembe (2003) stems from the assumption that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (ibid.: 11). This modality of politics therefore accounts "for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (ibid.: 40) (italics in the original). For a more detailed examination, see Mbembe (2019).

efforts to shield and vaccinate the population, justified his neglect with coarse reasoning and threats of violence, and never expressed regret for the tens of thousands of lives lost under his watch.

THE BRAZILIAN CATASTROPHE

Jair Bolsonaro, a former military officer and far-right political maverick,[8] was behind one of the world's most spectacular failures in tackling the pandemic. In large measure, Brazil's destructive response to COVID-19 can be attributed to Bolsonaro's attempt to build a neo-fascist movement based on the 'losers', who in Brazil are concentrated among the upper middle class and informal workers.

Brazil's tragedy starts from the implausible election of Jair Bolsonaro. His triumph was due to the convergence of two forces, one global in scope, and the other primarily domestic (Saad-Filho / Morais 2018). At an international level, the GFC led to the rise of "grandstanding" authoritarian leaders in several countries (see above). In Brazil, the governments led by the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT), under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010) and President Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), pursued policies which benefited both the rich and the poor, but which castigated (both in relative and absolute terms) the middle class. This social group became the most prominent "loser" under mature neoliberalism in Brazil (Loureiro / Saad-Filho 2019).

The Brazilian middle class was squeezed in four ways. First, it was squeezed by the promotion of the interests of the rich through financialisation, government support for large capital companies and agribusiness, and diplomatic and commercial expansion overseas to consolidate Brazilian influence, contracts for big service providers, and exports (Saad-Filho / Morais 2018). Second, it was hit by the rise of the poor through the creation of millions of low-paid jobs, the formalisation of labour, the rapid growth of the minimum wage, the expansion of federal welfare programmes, and new avenues for social mobility, for example through racial quotas at universities and the civil service (ibid.).

8   Bolsonaro was discharged from the Brazilian Army in the late 1980s following his public campaign for higher salaries for the military, which culminated in a series of failed terrorist attacks that were meant to draw attention to his demands. Instead of being jailed, he was allowed to resign, and he subsequently went into politics, adopting extreme right-wing and misogynistic positions. This strategy turned out to be more successful than anyone could have imagined.

Third, it was squeezed by the continuing erosion of traditional middle-class careers, especially in middle management, banking and the upper layers of the civil service. For example, while almost 1 million jobs paying more than five times the minimum wage were created in the 1990s, there was a net loss of 4.3 million such jobs in the 2000s (Pochmann 2012). Fourth, Brazil's middle class was hit by the deteriorating quality and rising cost of urban services because of insufficient investment, rising minimum wages and the extension of employment rights to domestic workers, and the expansion of means-tested transfer programmes, which the middle class helps to fund through taxation but is not entitled to claim. These adverse outcomes were compensated only temporarily by the expansion of personal credit and the appreciation of the currency (Lavinas 2017). In summary, while both rich and poor prospered under the PT, the middle class suffered a considerable decline in its economic position and social status.

Domestic and international capital – and the mainstream media – turned sharply against the PT following the demise of the global commodity boom.[9] These were accompanied by frustration among the upper middle class, which would become the main groundswell of support for the far right (Hunter / Power 2019). This "alliance of elites" moved to impeach President Dilma Rousseff in 2014 soon after her re-election, under the pretext of corruption scandals involving the PT, and violations of the (typically neoliberal) Fiscal Responsibility Law. Rousseff's impeachment was only the first step; it was followed by the decision to jail former President Lula (by far the most popular politician in Brazil) on trumped-up charges, as part of a drive to destroy the PT – not because the party was hostile to capital or privilege, but because it was an independent social-democratic political force mindful of the poor and committed to the expansion of citizenship. Instead, the alliance of elites embraced authoritarian neoliberalism, aiming to renew the structures of exclusion in the country, eliminate government autonomy from the privileged classes, and get rid of the forums the majority had to potentially control any levers of public policy (Saad-Filho / Morais 2018).

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9   For a detailed account, see Saad-Filho and Morais (2018).

The election of Jair Bolsonaro was the result of these processes, and of three conjunctural developments. First, as was suggested above, Brazilian politics had been defined by a convergence of dissatisfactions since 2013, which led to the demoralisation of the left, the disorganisation of the poor, and the consolidation of the alliance of elites. The alliance's authoritarian neoliberalism was concealed by slogans about "corruption", the imperative to "finish off Lula and the PT", and the need for a "strong government" backed up by the military (Cavalcante 2020). Being largely unknown, except for his sporadic utterances and bouts of misbehaviour, Bolsonaro was the candidate who best embodied the alliance's ideals (Reis 2020). The inanity of his programme was hidden by an overwhelmingly sympathetic mainstream media and by his refusal to attend debates or answer questions from unfriendly journalists. His electoral tactics were further assisted by a poorly explained "stabbing" that allowed Bolsonaro to capture the headlines, play the victim and stick to a low-intensity campaign centred on social media and "fake news" (Webber 2020). In the meantime, his economics spokesperson (and future Minister of Finance), the banker and ex-Chicago Boy Paulo Guedes, charmed capital with his plans to privatise "everything", gut the Amazon, demolish the state and disable the country's social policies (Saad-Filho / Boffo 2021).

Second, historically, the privileged in Brazil tend to rise up if their wealth is threatened or if their economic privileges fail to secure political domination. However, in order to be successful, the uprisings of the elite always need support from the middle class. Experience (e.g. in 1945, 1954, 1964, 1989 and 2015) shows that the best way to achieve this is to embroil in corruption scandals reformist administrations led by the centre-left (Boito 2015; 2020).

Third, the Brazilian left, including a range of political parties, movements, trade unions and community organisations, remains largely paralysed by internal disputes, especially around the role of the PT, its policy choices while in government and their consequences for society in general and the left in particular. These divisions have made it impossible for the left to lead a united front against Bolsonaro's authoritarian neoliberalism, or to develop a viable programme of government.

Although there has been a gradual build-up of political traction, for example through the continuing vitality of the landless peasants' movement (MST), the emergence of the homeless workers' movement (MTST), and large strikes of oil workers and delivery riders, the consolidation of a broad united left remains a challenging prospect (Santos 2020).

In these charged circumstances, the right has achieved political, economic and social hegemony in Brazil, even though it lacks a vision and programme (all it has been able to muster is a set of slogans), strong mass movements (those that have emerged have been small and fleeting), strong parties (the right has been unable to put together a political vehicle, despite great efforts and expense) or stable leadership (which Bolsonaro cannot provide because of his personal limitations, narrow horizons and inability to forge alliances). These are the most striking differences between the authoritarian neoliberal experience in Brazil and those in Hungary, India, Poland, the Philippines, Russia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States. In Brazil, right-wing hegemony is based on the crude politics of 'smash and grab'. Simply put, Rousseff's impeachment led to the hijacking of the country's executive by a syndicate of reactionary and corrupt politicians, led by her inept Vice-President, Michel Temer. They surfed a wave of resentment that they were unable to control, and used state power to impose a radical neoliberal programme at the expense of citizenship. Brazilian politics became even more poisonous in 2019, when Temer's group was replaced by Bolsonaro's. In this devastated political and institutional landscape, COVID-19 was bound to wreak havoc.

NEOLIBERAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE PANDEMIC IN BRAZIL

The fragilities of Brazilian society, politics and the state were starkly revealed by the stresses of the pandemic. Its devastating consequences were not entirely surprising; in recent decades, Brazil has suffered from repeated epidemics of dengue, chikungunya, Zika, H1N1 and other illnesses that invariably dispro-portionately hit the most marginalised, especially the poor and the Black and Indigenous communities (Posenato Garcia / Silva 2016). Even worse, while the pandemic made its way around the world, the Brazilian government system-atically downplayed the risks because precaution would look bad, suggest "feminine weakness" or harm Bolsonaro's electoral prospects. The President blamed the left and referred to the disease as "a little flu" affecting only the weak, "hysteria", and something that Brazilians "just [wouldn't] catch"; he

argued that "we all die in the end", while also promoting hydroxychloroquine as a miracle remedy. Finally, Bolsonaro forced out two Ministers of Health during the pandemic, finally settling on a military general with no health background. Here was someone who would carry out the President's whimsical commands and not threaten him electorally with inopportune demonstrations of competence (Harris / Schipani 2020; Londoño / Simões 2020; Phillips 2020; Richmond 2020; Silva / Pasti 2020).[10]

Bolsonaro's bluster and lies – very similar in character to those of other 'grandstanding' authoritarian leaders – had sufficed in the past, especially when they were given cover by a sympathetic media, an engaged judiciary and a pliant Congress (the Brazilian Parliament). Unfortunately for him, the coronavirus was unbending. Public health responses were deliberately delayed, ostensibly because the President objected to measures that might hurt 'the economy' while, in reality, Brazil committed itself to the world's biggest necropolitical experiment in herd immunity.[11]

For Bolsonaro's administration, as for other authoritarian governments, the pandemic offered an opportunity to roll out policy changes without having to face the usual level of scrutiny. In spring 2020, the then Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles, was caught on video saying at a cabinet meeting that the government should take advantage of the fact that the press was completely distracted by COVID-19, to change rules and simplify norms.[12] This led to the attempt, in September 2020, to revoke the "permanent protection

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10 The concept of 'medical populism' can encompass most features of Bolsonaro's approach to the pandemic (Lasco 2020; Speed / Mannion 2020).

11 The death toll in the country escalated inexorably, reaching 1,000 on 21 March, 10,000 on 3 April, and 100,000 on 3 May (Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center 2020). As disastrous as these numbers may be, the crisis was accompanied by a significant undercounting of victims. For every 10 deaths due to COVID-19, another 8 have been attributed to (the very similar) acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) (Rossi / Buono 2020; Sivakumaran et al. 2020). This condition was recorded as the cause of 23,400 deaths in Brazil in the first six months of 2020, as opposed to an average of 1,800 deaths in the same period in the previous five years, based on data on the INFOGripe website http://info.gripe.fiocruz.br, which monitors and presents alert levels for reported cases of ARDS. Severe delays to testing also meant that thousands of deaths due to COVID-19 were not recorded as such, while family members have been rumoured to object to the word "coronavirus" on the death certificate of their loved ones, perhaps exacerbating the undercounting (Redação 2020).

12 See e.g. UOL (2020) for the video of the relevant meeting, and Frey (2020) for a transcript of the then minister's words.

zones" created in 2002 for the preservation of Brazil's tropical mangroves and other fragile coastal ecosystems, which was later blocked by the courts (BBC News 2020). Similar attacks were launched against protections for Indigenous peoples and quilombola communities (communities of descendants of escaped slaves) (Ribeiro Scaldaferri 2020; Rocha 2020).

In the meantime, Bolsonaro never feigned sympathy for the victims or expressed pity, shame or remorse: he appeared callous and squandered the support he had among the middle class; he could not explain the complexities of the pandemic, and lost backing among the well-educated; and he could not lead a purposeful institutional response, and lost face across the country. Given Bolsonaro's refusal to lead a nationwide policy (much like Donald Trump in the United States), a disorderly patchwork of lockdowns was introduced by state governors and city mayors, invariably acting under conflicting pressures from the public and from powerful local interests. As a result, shopping centres shut down in some cities but remained open in neighbouring ones, increasing intercity traffic; some municipalities required masks on public transport while others did not, creating confusion; and the rules changed quickly, exasperating the population (Bonduki 2020).

In common with other developing countries, in the absence of coordinated public policies, the poor and informal workers (around 50% of the Brazilian workforce) faced an impossible dilemma: the contraction of activity and the lockdowns, fragmented as they were, left many with no income and stuck in crowded homes lacking water, sewerage systems and, increasingly, food (Mercier / Galarraga Gortázar 2020). No health policy can be sustainable under these circumstances. Bolsonaro's inaction created a rare opportunity for the left: united for the first time, they proposed in Congress an emergency income support programme for the poor. Bolsonaro and his Economy Minister, Paulo Guedes, resisted this under the neoliberal pretext of "fiscal restraint", but the left cobbled together a majority. Under pressure, Bolsonaro offered R$200 (approximately US$40) per month. Congress overruled him and approved R$600 per month to be paid to 65 million people (out of a population of 210 million): the most generous transfer programme in Brazilian history (Richmond 2020). For the bottom half of earners, this transfer programme raised incomes by more than the pandemic had reduced them, cutting poverty and neutralising the inequality-generating impact of the pandemic (Nassif-Pires et al. 2020). Yet, the emergency programme was

appropriated by Bolsonaro, who fronted the distribution of funds and saw his approval ratings shoot up among the poor just as they were tumbling among the middle class. Bolsonaro's approval ratings soon returned to 40%, so not as high as those of Lula (peaking at 90%) or Rousseff (70%), but strong enough to avoid the threat of impeachment, re-establish his political base and tower above his rivals.

As elsewhere, entrenched inequalities enhanced the impact of the pandemic (see above). However, Brazil is one of the most unequal countries on Earth, with a quarter of its population living in poverty even though the country boasts the ninth highest GDP in the world, a sophisticated manufacturing industry and one of the most powerful agribusiness sectors anywhere (Douglas 2018). Nevertheless, multiple and overlapping inequalities severely affected the health outcomes (Neri / Soares 2002). The pandemic reached Brazil through rich tourists returning from their Italian holidays, but the first person to die was one of their domestic workers (Sakamoto 2020). The pandemic trickled down from the rich to kill mainly the poor, first on the periphery of the wealthy cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro and, later, reaching the poor North and North-East regions, where its impact was devastating, given the precariousness of the poor's housing, health and nutritional situation and other circumstances.

It could have been different: Brazil has a universal health system (Sistema Único de Saúde, or SUS) free at the point of delivery, inspired by the UK's National Health Service (NHS). SUS was created by the democratic Constitution of 1988 (Carvalho 2013), and it expanded significantly under the PT administrations. However, the system has been starved of funds in recent years, reducing its capacity and resilience. Thousands of deaths can be linked to the lack of intensive-care beds, staff, ventilators, gloves and medicines (Ricardo 2020). In contrast, Ethiopia, Laos, Senegal and Vietnam as well as the Indian state of Kerala have far lower per-capita incomes than Brazil, yet they managed to contain COVID-19 because their public policies and health systems operated far more efficiently.

Instead of confronting the pandemic with the tools available, the Brazilian federal government deliberately delayed and diluted its policy interventions, and undermined the states and municipalities. Bolsonaro presented COVID-19 as "just another illness", for which his administration could not bear responsibility (as in the United States under Trump, the opinion polls have shown a strong correlation between support for Bolsonaro and lack of concern with the coronavirus). Instead, responsibility was shifted onto God or the victims themselves for their frailty or irresponsible behaviour. In turn, mounting income losses and exhaustion with the (erratic) policy measures being implemented in the country raised social tolerance to risk. Deaths piled up, and the macabre spectacle of mass graves being dug in São Paulo and Manaus was met by a declining sense of outrage. Bolsonaro may yet win his most challenging battle, at the expense of the old, the sick, the poor and the unlucky, and continue to haunt Brazil with his trademark disregard for life and commitment to inequality, discrimination and authoritarian rule. At the same time, though, the left has also been on the rise. Brazil always surprises, and the struggle for life, freedom and equality will continue.

CONCLUSION

Global neoliberalism has been veering towards increasingly authoritarian forms of governance since the GFC. In these politically charged circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the incompetence, mendacity and disregard for life of the most prominent authoritarian leaders of our time. Elected in the wake of profound economic and social shifts, and operating in political crises they had deliberately fomented, those leaders were ill equipped to deliver the most basic functions of statecraft: to protect lives and livelihoods and, when this becomes impossible, to express compassion and lead the nation in mourning. Brazil offers a dramatic example of failure in this regard. The country was enveloped by a crude modality of authoritarianism in 2016, which was radicalised further with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. During the pandemic, Brazil followed a uniquely ruthless neoliberal necropolitics driven by the President. Yet his base remained to a large extent impervious to the mounting disaster, despite the evidence of successes elsewhere. This prima facie surprising pattern was repeated by other authoritarian neoliberal leaders in other countries. These commonalities are too striking to be attributed to coincidence or the character flaws of individual leaders: they are symptomatic of a deeper malaise within neoliberalism itself, driven by its economic limitations and, increasingly, political gridlock.

In these difficult circumstances, it is incumbent on the left to strongly reject the brutality of authoritarian neoliberalism, and to offer an alternative politics of humanity and hope. This must be based first and foremost on learning the appropriate lessons from the pandemic. The health crisis and the economic collapse in the West, compared with the vastly more effective responses elsewhere, show that radically neoliberal and authoritarian administrations are not only unable to protect lives; they are committed to a form of necropolitics that harms society and disproportionately hits the poor. It has also become obvious that in a health crisis, governments must secure jobs, incomes and universal basic services. This is not merely for reasons of economic justice, but also as part of health policy: guaranteed jobs and incomes make it possible to enforce lockdowns which – in the absence of a cure – reduce the load on the health system, speed up the end of the pandemic and accelerate the economic recovery (Mankiw 2020).

Second, it is essential to consolidate the rediscovery of collectivity that emerged through the strain of the crisis, in contrast with the individualism promoted by neoliberal governments. The left must stress that the economy is a social system characterised by strong interdependencies, that we are bound together as humans, and that the universal provision of basic services is far more efficient than privatised, for-profit and fragmented provision.

Third is the allocation of costs. The economic consequences of the pandemic will be far more severe than those of the GFC, and there is no way that public service provision can, or should, bear even more 'austerity' to pay for them. The only way out is through progressive taxation, the confiscation of the fortunes made during the pandemic, strategic nationalisations, defaults where necessary, and – vitally for the long term – a 'green' growth strategy addressing climate change.

Fourth is the left's activity on the ground, to expand the boundaries of what is politically possible, challenging authoritarian neoliberalism as a death cult and supporting state-led safety nets and the reconstruction of state capacity after the depredations of neoliberalism.

To sum up, the COVID-19 pandemic was not unexpected, and it exposed neoliberal capitalism for its inhumanity and criminality. COVID-19 has shown that there can be no health policy without solidarity, democracy, equality, state capacity and industrial policy – all of which are anathema to neoliberalism in its current phase. The pandemic has starkly revealed both the limitations of authoritarian neoliberalism – in Brazil and elsewhere – and the need to over-come them.

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AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES IN HUNGARY AND SERBIA:

A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

MÁRK LOSONCZ

3

This chapter looks at the authoritarian regimes led by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia. We examine not only the obvious similarities but also the significant differences between them. In terms of the interpretative framework adopted here, we will analyse political and economic changes as mutually related processes. In other words, the transformations in the general behaviour of political elites are addressed in conjunction with the underlying social structures. Particular attention is paid to these regimes' predecessors, i.e. the background to the Orbán and Vučić governments' rise to power. Specifically, in the 2000s, both the Hungarian and the Serbian governing parties pursued policies that were both pretty undemocratic and socially disastrous. Thus, the authoritarian so-called solutions offered by both Orbán and Vučić during the 2010s were very much a supposedly necessary response to the crisis of the 2000s. We place a great deal of emphasis on the special methods used by the Orbán and Vučić governments to cling to power. Following an analysis of economic issues, a section is devoted to their divergent relationships with the European Union, set against the backdrop of a broader international context. In spite of the fact that both Hungary and Serbia are receiving considerable development assistance and financial support for innovation (a substantial share of Hungary's GDP comes from the EU), both countries have tense relations with their Western partners, and they are also facing severe criticism for their authoritarian policies. The chapter concludes that the EU's contradictory, paternalistic carrot-and-stick approach is partly responsible for the deterioration of the situation. Finally, some cautious predictions are made about what the future might hold for Hungary and Serbia's authoritarian regimes, taking into account the potential drivers of emancipatory change.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, and especially over the past decade, we have witnessed a rise in authoritarian politics and right-wing movements – not only around the world (from the regime of Donald Trump in the United States to those of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India), but also in European countries like Hungary (a Member State of the European Union) and Serbia (a country with close links to the EU). Attacks on fundamental norms and a decline in participative institutions have resulted in a dramatic polarisation of the political landscape and a further crackdown on democratic rights. The crisis of liberal representative governments and the intensifying processes of neoliberalisation have resulted in misguided answers to the deteriorating situation. The insufficiency of democracy has been aggravated further by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although these are global tendencies, we cannot shy away from the challenging task of analysing their specific conjunctures, looking at both the similar processes and the different bifurcations of these authoritarian regimes. The rise of the authoritarian regimes in Hungary and Serbia was going on almost in parallel during the 2010s. Even at first glance, there are many similarities between the Hungarian regime, dominated by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and its counterpart in Serbia, represented above all by Prime Minister and later President Aleksandar Vučić. For instance, in both systems the cult created around the leader (and the personalisation of the entire political sphere)[1] plays a key role, making a major contribution in both countries to the extreme polarisation of the political scene. Alternative and critical voices are marginalised in both Hungary and Serbia – a situation which is most evident in the lack of media freedom and pluralism.

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However, despite the obvious analogies between these two regimes, there are also significant differences. To start with, their ideological prehistory in the 1990s is conspicuously dissimilar. The political path of Orbán and his party, *Fidesz*, began with a strong 'post-communist attitude', entwined with an explicit liberal ideology. Orbán and his party only gradually adopted a right-wing, conservative philosophy, owing to changes in the Hungarian political spectrum. On the other hand, Vučić kicked off his career in a far-right party,

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1   See Tamás (2018).

with this ideology being particularly rampant in these early days when he was involved in Slobodan Milošević's authoritarian regime.

This chapter traces the genesis of the respective regimes and the pathways that affected their later attitude, in the 2010s, when both Orbán and Vučić became symbols of an increasingly authoritarian politics. Their ideological divergence has a substantial impact on the dynamics of their present-day behaviour and rhetoric. This is particularly clear in the countries' respective relationships with the EU. Hungary joined the European Union in 2004, while Serbia is still a candidate for accession. As a result, Hungary and Serbia have rather different relations with the European Union. While Serbia has been severely criticised, it maintains an adaptable and cooperative stance, whereas, officially at least, Hungary often positions itself in counterpoint to the European Union, claiming that 'Brussels is the new Moscow', in other words that the country is supposedly being colonised by its Western European partners. Orbán's demonstrative anti-conformity is very different from Vučić's adaptation to Western expectations.

Of course, no country operates in a vacuum. Rather than approaches that explain the authoritarian tendencies in Hungary and Serbia solely by making reference to domestic political issues, we need an analysis that situates the authoritarian dynamics in a broader and more complex perspective. Moreover, although they are neighbours who cooperate closely with each other, Hungary and Serbia behave extremely differently in their regional environment and so face divergent challenges in terms of international relations. Although Hungary has significant tensions with some of its neighbours, these regional tensions are not as significant or as much of a politically mobilising factor in Hungary as they are in Serbia.

One of our goals is to reconstruct the geneses of both authoritarian regimes, first of all by means of a critique of their predecessors during the 2000s. Our aim is to offer an explanation with regard to certain key questions. Why did these authoritarian regimes emerge at all? Could this have been avoided? Unlike those who exclusively and (to draw on terminology used by Pierre Bourdieu) fetishistically focus on the superficial political reality, we believe that the political analysis has to be embedded in a broader framework that takes into consideration economic issues as well, both in the 2000s and with regard to subsequent developments. In other words, the authoritarian outcome of the 2000s cannot be understood without a detailed description of strongly neoliberal and socially devastating policies.

However, we are not going to reduce our analysis to a merely descriptive approach to the genesis of Orbán and Vučić's authoritarian regimes or to their current state. Instead, we would also like to point to potential solutions to the overall crisis and alternative emancipatory endeavours and possibilities. Therefore, we will also focus on three questions. Firstly, does the relative popularity of these regimes among voters hide an implicit emancipatory potential? Secondly, how could the Western European partners have acted differently to discourage these negative tendencies? And finally, what political attitudes might give rise to a major change in both countries? What institutional alternatives and international restructuring might help the citizens of Hungary and Serbia to create a much more democratic society, with an effective public sphere and a strong awareness of economic issues? These questions (and, with any luck, the answers to them) go beyond a merely descriptive approach as they focus on the possibility of a post-authoritarian society.

Keywords:
comparative authoritarianism
soft authoritarian regimes
Hungary
Serbia
EU conditionality

POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORKS

The rise of contemporary autocratic systems has been discussed from the perspective of a very wide range of interpretative frameworks. First of all, it is very hard to interpret the rise of the Hungarian and Serbian authoritarian regimes within a framework that simply emphasises the desirable linear development of liberal modernisation and treats certain (semi-)peripheral countries as abnormal exceptions. On the one hand, it was pointed out years ago that there are major flaws in the liberal modernisation paradigm (Carothers 2002;

Krastev 2016), but others have indicated that Western liberal democracies also find themselves in a serious internal political crisis (Crouch 2004; Rodrik 2018; Streeck 2014). On the other hand, in principle any (semi-)peripheral country in the capitalist world system can produce at least some kind of non-authoritarian representative government; in other words, fatalistic interpretations simply based on a country having marginal status and being subjected (economically and/or politically) to the core(s) of the world system should be avoided (Rustow 1970). Other interpretative frameworks bend determinism in a culturalist direction. In particular, culturalist analyses suggest that Hungarians have a "serf mentality" (*jobbágymentalitás*), specifically that, because of their basic cultural-existential attitude, they are inclined to embrace authoritarian regimes (Spiró 2017; Vajda / Buják 2018). Sometimes this interpretation is reduced to a criticism of an anti-democratic political culture (supposedly uncritically inherited from the Horthyst and Kádárian[2] past) in which, in the words of Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller, from an interview with Jan Smoleński (Smoleński 2018), "people have no idea how liberty can be used".[3] Similarly, throughout Serbia's history, certain Serbian intellectuals have emphasised the harmfulness of Russian and "anti-democratic"/"populist" influence.[4]

Criticism from Bogdanović (2016) and Lošonc (2017) of such interpretations has demonstrated that, apart from being very rigidly and simplistically deterministic, this kind of interpretation cannot explain the significant differences between the various successive regimes in Hungary or Serbia. For instance, obviously the government formed by the Hungarian Socialist Party (*Magyar Szocialista Párt*, or MSZP) and the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége*, or SZDSZ) from 1994 to 1998 cannot be described as an authoritarian regime with an aversion to liberty in the same way as the *Fidesz*–KDNP[5] government led by Viktor Orbán after 2010. Moreover, *Fidesz* – Hungarian Civic

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2   The allusions here are to Miklós Horthy de Nagybánya (1868–1957), Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary from 1920 to 1944, and Hungarian communist leader János Kádár (1912–1989), who was General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party from 1956 to 1988.

3   See also Kis (2013), Skidelsky (2019) and Benczes (2016).

4   See, for instance, Perović (2015).

5   KNDP (*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*, i.e. Christian Democratic People's Party) is *Fidesz*'s small Christian democratic coalition partner.

Union (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*)[6] itself went through various stages of development, with its time in government between 1998 and 2002 differing significantly from its regime during the 2010s. Something similar holds true for Serbia as the authoritarian rule of Slobodan Milošević during the 1990s cannot be easily equated with the regimes of the various branches of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska Opozicija Srbije*, or DOS) in the 2000s. One-sided culturally deterministic approaches are not only insensitive to the nuances of political development in Hungary and Serbia but also incapable of explaining what was novel about the authoritarian regimes of the 2010s.

According to another interpretative framework, the changes within the political sphere can be attributed to the change in the behaviour of politicians (as they started to forge pernicious elite pacts, systematically destroy institutions, etc.) and their populist ideology.[7] Sometimes it is even argued that the economic dynamics of these countries have no impact at all on the authoritarian shifts witnessed in the political arena (Inglehart / Norris 2016). This type of interpretative framework tends to be somewhat tautological as it often describes authoritarian political developments on the basis of the authoritarian shifts themselves, as if these new regimes emerged as a result of purely voluntaristic decisions, thus representing a kind of *deus ex machina*.

There are also explanatory frameworks with an entirely different theoretical background. For instance, analysts drawing on world-systems theory view the crisis of representative government within the broader canvas of the inner tensions and difficulties of the centre–(semi-)periphery relations of global capitalism. The risk of determinism haunts this framework too as it tends to underestimate the leeway of regional and local actors, as if they had absolutely no other choices (Farkas 1994; Artner / Szigeti 2014; Fabry 2011; Szalai 2012; Szalai 2018). A more subtle approach emphasises the fact that, for instance, the regimes of Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić are precisely what could be called an "inventive" response to the challenges posed by the inner contradictions of contemporary capitalism.[8]

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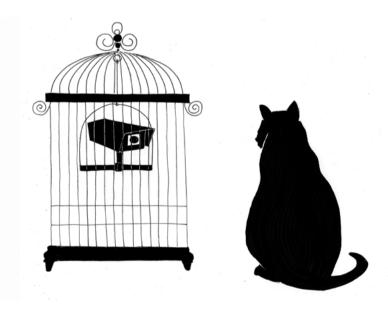
6   To give *Fidesz* its full name.

7   For a discussion of the critical approach to the discourse surrounding populism, see, for instance, Mudde (2017) and Stanley (2017).

8   See, for instance, Fabry (2014), Fabry (2018), Antal (2019), Éber (2015), Gagyi (2016), Wiener (2014a) and Wiener (2014b).

Certain authors claim that the Hungarian authoritarian regime represents a remarkable experiment, supposedly being an instance of a (semi-)peripheral developmental state trying, with a heterodox approach, to correct the mistakes of neoliberal capitalism, placing an emphasis on profitable branches of the international division of labour and encouraging the reinforcement of state bureaucracy (Bod 2018; György 2017; Wilkin 2016). However, it has also been suggested that the Hungarian case is rather unlike classical right-wing developmental states as it neglects social subsystems such as the education and health systems (Pogátsa 2016). For instance, Gábor Scheiring flatly rejects the concept of the developmental state on the basis that in his view, during the 2010s Hungary was an interventionist state that substantially contributing to an industrial malaise; thus, Scheiring proposes an alternative term, namely the "accumulative state" that intervenes to both handle conflicts and stimulate the increased accumulation of local-regional capital (Scheiring 2019; 2020).

Furthermore, it can be argued that the crisis of representative government is a result of both the processes and the pressure of global capital, yielding – at regional level, among others – "a parasitical rentier class of unproductive capital [which] now dominate[s] the global economy and effectively drain[s] industry and labour/consumers of resources" (Wilkin 2016: xv). This analysis is often extended to the examination of the forms of regional and local crony capitalism

or neopatrimonialism/neo-prebendalism, indicating that political interference even distorts regular market mechanisms, resulting in the "perverse redistribution" of goods and services (Makki / Mondovics 2016) or state capture. Political loyalty and informal relations became crucial in accumulating wealth (Innes 2014; Innes 2015; Schoenman 2014; Szanyi 2017). There is even the suggestion that these authoritarian regimes are being refeudalised (Szalai 2016; Szalai 2019; Tamás 2014). This kind of approach provides the scope for an analysis of the specific characteristics of the authoritarian regimes that took root in the 2010s. Sometimes these regimes are explained by well-worn analyses of illiberal democracies, or, to use various related terminology, electoral/competitive/soft authoritarianism or democratic despotism (Zakaria 1997; Levitsky / Way 2002). Needless to say, Hungary and Serbia are also examined from this perspective (Bozóki / Hegedűs 2017; Böcskei / Hajdu 2019; Filippov 2018; Gyulai / Stein-Zalai 2016; Szilágyi 2012; Szűcs 2018; Bieber 2020).

Unlike some of the dominant approaches, we are non-deterministic in our interpretation of the rise of the Hungarian and Serbian authoritarian regimes, i.e. regarding them as regimes that developed their own economic and political strategies. We reject both culturally reductionist analyses and interpretative frameworks that concentrate solely on the behaviour of the political elite. Instead, we believe that these authoritarian regimes should be conceived of as complex responses both to both the challenge of a domestic crisis and external pressure. Contrary to the culturally deterministic approach, which tends to explain political particularities from the vantage point of an exaggerated long-term perspective, we aim to focus on the subtle historical changes that have taken place over the past three decades. While a nuanced historicisation can provide a sinecure for the simplifications offered by various manifestations of determinism, we also need an approach that reconciles two basic rationales.

On the one hand, our aim in this chapter is to draw on explanations that take into account the crucial economic factors. One of our main conclusions will be that, although the rise of these authoritarian regimes was a reaction to the neoliberal policies of the 2000s, both Orbán and Vučić's regimes are also introducing very neoliberal measures. This economic analysis also needs to look at the complexity of various factors, i.e. both pressure from international developments and institutions, and local-regional responses that suggested a neopatrimonial accumulative state, resulting in state capture and a further decline in democratic rights.

On the other hand, we also need a phenomenological approach, i.e. not just an analysis of superficial phenomena but a detailed description of the way these regimes emerge, including an examination of political ideology (e.g. the rhetoric of enmity, the demagogic misuse of democratic discourse), the ambivalent behaviour of repressive apparatuses (as these regimes rarely use overt repression and instead tend to outsource violence to their direct partners), and so on. We believe that only the combination of a deep structural analysis and political phenomenology can explain both the rise of these authoritarian regimes and the way the relevant parties manage to secure repeated terms in office.

DIFFERENCES IN THE GENESES OF THESE REGIMES AND THE CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

HUNGARY

Viktor Orbán became the leader of *Fidesz*, originally an acronym for *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége* (Alliance of Young Democrats), in the late 1980s. Having been established as a radical reformist student and anti-establishment movement in the late state-socialist period, it was one of various liberal parties in Hungary as the country became a multi-party democracy. In the early 1990s, *Fidesz*'s explicit liberalism manifested itself in various ways. For instance, in 1990, Orbán – quoted in Urfi (2019) – claimed that "those who want to reduce the current rate of abortions from 90,000 per year to two or three thousand [...] aren't humans but monsters". On the other hand, these days *Fidesz*, now a national-conservative party, calls abortion part of the "culture of death" (Botos 2019) and claims that "[t]o support abortion is to support murder" (HVG 2019). Furthermore, Hungary signed an international anti-abortion declaration with a number of other authoritarian governments, including Poland and Saudi Arabia (Borger 2020). At the moment, *Fidesz*'s anti-abortion stance is above all an ideological weapon (and a tool for forging international alliances), but the party has in practice continued to refrain from tightening up legislation. While the Fundamental Law of Hungary (i.e. the country's Constitution), adopted by the *Fidesz*–KDNP coalition, states that the life of the foetus should be protected from the moment of conception (Ministry of Justice 2021), the legal rights of pregnant women have not been restricted as this would be a highly unpopular move (given that their autonomous rights are supported by around four fifths of Hungarians) (Serdült 2020).

We should add here that Hungary refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention on violence against women, arguing that it promotes "destructive gender ideologies" and "illegal migration" (Didili 2020). Another possible example of this ideological transformation is *Fidesz*'s shift from openly anti-clerical positions to a close alliance with the so-called historical Churches (Hazafi 2001). A further ideological symptom is its relationship with George Soros. In 1989, Orbán was the recipient of a scholarship from the Soros Foundation to study at Oxford University. Many other leading politicians from *Fidesz* also received financial support from that foundation (Hargitai 2016). However, in 2013, *Fidesz* launched a huge anti-Soros campaign which claimed that many Hungarian NGOs were led and controlled by George Soros (Gondola. hu 2013). The campaign reached its height with government-financed anti-Soros posters bearing slogans like "Don't let Soros have the last laugh" and "99% reject illegal immigration". Thorpe (2017) points out that these posters led to accusations that the Hungarian government was whipping up anti-Semitism. Investigative journalists have chronicled how and why Orbán, under the influence of political consultant Arthur J. Finkelstein, turned Soros into a scapegoat (D. Kovács 2019). As compellingly demonstrated by Corneliu Pintilescu and Attila Kustán Magyari, the anti-Soros campaign grew into a fully-fledged conspiracy theory promoted by the whole Hungarian government (Pintilescu / Kustán Magyari 2020).

Fidesz was described in its early days as "radical-liberal" or a "moderate liberal centrist" political bloc (Körösényi et al. 2003). In 1992, *Fidesz* even joined Liberal International (Fidesz 2006). The party's political-ideological position and strategy changed after the popularity of the national-conservative, Christian democratic Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum*, or MDF), the dominant party in the Hungarian National Assembly, the country's parliament, from 1990 to 1994, fell away, creating a gap in the political spectrum. This political vacuum was filled by *Fidesz* as it became increasingly conservative (Körösényi et al. 2003). While in power from 1998 to 2002, *Fidesz* leant even further to the right, as can be seen in the integration of smaller right-wing parties into the government, big symbolic gestures such as moving the Holy Crown of Hungary from the Hungarian National Museum to the National Assembly, the considerable emphasis placed on the alliance with the historical Churches, and so on.

Aleksandar Vučić's political career could not be more different from Orbán's. In 1993, he joined the far-right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska Radikalna Stranka*, or SRS), whose goal during the Yugoslav Wars was to create a Greater Serbia in the 1990s. The party's leader, Vojislav Šešelj, was found guilty by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia of involvement in instigating the deportation of Croats from Hrtkovci in Serbia. Many members of the SRS fought in the wars, either serving in paramilitary forces or as volunteers in the regular army. In an ominous statement in the Serbian National Assembly in 1995, Vučić said that "for every Serb killed, we will kill 100 Muslims" (Štetin 2015). In 1998, Vučić was appointed Minister of Information in the authoritarian regime led by Slobodan Milošević, pushing through the repression of alternative Serbian media and ensuring that the official media were broadcasting nationalist propaganda.

Vučić's role in the late 1990s has to be viewed in a broader perspective. It could be argued that the SRS was already contributing to the hegemony of the Milošević regime back in the early 1990s (Pavlović / Antonić 2007; Stojiljković 2012). However, the SRS's instrumental role became crystal clear when the party joined the so-called national unity or war government in 1998 with the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička Partija Srbije*, or SPS), in that almost from the very start, the SRS's main adversary was the so-called democratic opposition, not the ruling Socialist Party, and in the National Assembly the SRS repeatedly voted for changes to tighten the grip of the Milošević regime (Antonić 2015). Various arguments can be used to back up the characterisation of the Milošević regime as an authoritarian government (Pavlović / Antonić 2007; Losoncz 2020), revealing conspicuous parallels with the Vučić regime in recent years:

1/ Milošević generally tried to outsource violence to quasi-external actors (for instance, to the special forces of his country's intelligence services or to paramilitary forces), masking the regular army's responsibility for this. Similarly, Vučić heavily relies on intelligence services and, as we will see, also tends to use non-state forces to implement otherwise illegal and illegitimate measures in the form of violence.

2/ During the Milošević regime, there was a considerable disparity between Milošević's de *facto* and *de jure* power, i.e. his extra-institutional decision-making often overstepped the legal frameworks of the shallow state

(Tromp 2019). Likewise, Vučić is often criticised for going beyond the competences he has as President (for instance, he falsely claimed that his role was to "control the government"), i.e. his de facto power also exceeds the statutory limits on presidential power (Istinomer 2017).

3/ While during the 1990s the media were not directly outlawed at one stroke, their work was made harder by specific sanctions, financial pressure, and so on. Likewise, it is no coincidence that in the course of the Vučić regime, Serbia has slipped down the global media freedom rankings as nationwide media channels have been monopolised by the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, or SNS) and independent journalists are often threatened.

4/ For Milošević, democracy was no obstacle but a vital tool in accumulating power. Even his rise to the top of Serbian politics in 1987 at the 8th Session of the League of Communists of Serbia was broadcasted by state media, and mass protests organised with his blessing at the end of the 1980s (the so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution) were called a 'happening of the people'. Moreover, Milošević introduced a multi-party system and called elections even when times were tough (e.g. when inflation was 178,882%). In a similar way, Vučić has been overemphasising the democratic legitimacy of his own regime (first of all, by calling as many parliamentary elections as possible, and also via a plebiscitarian communication strategy involving, for example, face-to-face consultations with 'ordinary citizens'). Just as the Milošević regime was not only dictatorial but also softly authoritarian in a more subtle – even perverse, one might say – manner, the Vučić regime tends to avoid overt repression by seeking more nuanced strategies for control and the reproduction of power.

According to Slobodan Antonić, during the Milošević regime "there were no arrests, expulsions or prohibitions, there were no camps, acts of torture or trials for high treason – things that real dictators would do in similar circumstances" (Antonić 2015: 477). Even though we firmly believe, following Tromp (2019), that the Milošević regime did use violent methods and tools, Milošević's shallow state did for the most part shy away from overt violence towards fellow Serbs, preferring a moderate or soft form of repression – and Aleksandar Vučić played a significant part in this. But even more importantly, there was a high level of continuity in terms of Vučić's political role. As we

have suggested, his role in the authoritarian Milošević regime largely anticipated his behaviour in the 2010s.

THE PATH TO THE AUTHORITARIAN 2010s

The geneses of Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić's regimes are pretty divergent. They developed differently in their early days, explaining the distinctive forms of authoritarianism we see in Hungary and Serbia today. While Orbán's political career began with him severely criticising Hungary's Soviet-style socialist government in its final years and continued with him setting up the ultra-liberal *Fidesz* party, the rise of Vučić started with his membership of the far-right Serbian Radical Party and culminated in his involvement in Milošević's softly authoritarian (and, at least nominally, socialist) regime. Orbán has abandoned his original liberal perspective and has increasingly become a right-wing politician, while Vučić has made efforts to leave his nationalist past behind by moving towards an ideological stance close to the political centre. Hence, certain analysts tend to characterise the Serbian Progressive Party as a catchall or big-tent party without a clear ideological agenda.[9]

To outside observers, Orbán often presented himself in the 2010s as a leader who was at odds with the political ideals of liberal democracy. On a visit to a Hungarian-majority town in Romania, Băile Tuşnad, known as *Tusnádfürdő* in Hungarian, in 2014, Orbán proclaimed:

[W]e have to abandon liberal methods and principles of organizing a society, as well as the liberal way to look at the world. [...] Hungarian voters expect from their leaders [...] a form of state-organization [...] that will of course still respect values of Christianity, freedom and human rights. [...] It is vital [...] that if we would like to reorganize our nation state instead of the liberal state, that we should make it clear, that these [liberal citizens or politicians, depending on how this is interpreted (ed)] are not civilians coming against us, opposing us, but political activists attempting to promote foreign interests.[10]

In contrast, Vučić is trying to convince his Western backers that his regime meets the criteria to be classified as a so-called Western liberal democracy. Indeed, this dissimilarity between Orbán and Vučić can be partially explained

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9   See, for instance, BBC News (2018).

10   This English translation of an excerpt from the speech comes from Tóth (2014).

by the countries' different statuses in terms of European Union membership – while Hungary is a Member State, Serbia is still a candidate for accession.

Finally, the differences in the regimes' geneses have profound consequences for the historical development of their authoritarian features. While Orbán and his party were often heavily criticised by the liberal and leftist opposition during the first Orbán government, from 1998 to 2002, the regime at that time was very rarely described as 'authoritarian' in general. On the other hand, Vučić's party, the SRS, often provided support to Milošević's authoritarian regime during the 1990s, whether from within or outside government. One might say that while Orbán's authoritarian regime in Hungary is mostly an invention of the 2010s, the authoritarian aspects of Vučić's regime have deeper roots, dating back all the way to the 1990s.
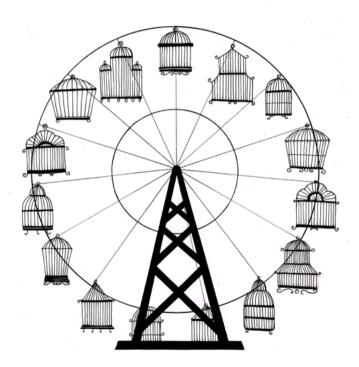
HUNGARY

Neither of the regimes examined here, i.e. neither the Orbán administration nor the Vučić government, emerged in a non-authoritarian vacuum. In fact, we can only really understand their success if we take into consideration the non-democratic aspects and economically devastating politics of their predecessors. Orbán returned to power after eight years of governments led by the Hungarian Socialist Party, the MSZP (mostly in coalition with the Alliance of Free Democrats). The non-democratic character of the regime manifested itself most clearly in the so-called Őszöd speech, a 2006 speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, in which he criticised his own party's leadership for deliberately misleading voters to win the 2006 elections ("Evidently, we lied throughout the last year and a half, two years") and claimed that the government had failed to enact any progressive measures during its tenure ("You cannot [cite] any significant government measure we can be proud of").[11] The speech was leaked and caused a national political crisis in 2006 (The Guardian 2006a). The government responded to these protests with force and police violence (parlament.hu 2010).

On the other hand, many analysts – e.g. Ágh (2013), Ágh (2016), Rauschenberger (2013), Böcskei (2016), Pogátsa (2013) and Pogátsa (2016) – suggest that one of the reasons behind the rise of Orbán's authoritarian regime was the unconvincing performance of the Hungarian governments between 2002 and 2010. They often argue that substantial economic inequality, i.e. the

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11   The quotes are from The Guardian (2006b).

widening gap between the elites and the masses, has undermined democ-racy – see, for instance, Boix (2003) – or has had a direct impact in terms of strengthening anti-liberal identity politics – see e.g. Gingrich and Banks (2006). Certain authors stress that the crisis experienced by the relevant welfare states required authoritarian solutions in order to re-establish the domination of capital.[12]

Among other developments, at times an MSZP-led government introduced a flat-rate personal income tax favouring those with a higher income; in 2004, it reduced corporation tax to 16% (at a time when the global average was 32%); the budget deficit peaked at 9.2% in 2006 (when the level of indebtedness of individual citizens was particularly high); there were significant corruption and other scandals (Beck et al. 2011), and so

on. Furthermore, from 2006 onwards, the leading economists advising the Hungarian government were calling for neoliberal reforms, i.e. further privatisation and austerity measures, while opposing any increase in the minimum wage, and for a reduction in the role of the state (for instance, by introducing competing private health insurance funds) (Tóth 2011). Austerity measures were put in place after the MSZP's victory in the 2006 elections, prompting a dramatic decline in the party's opinion-poll ratings from 37% to 26% even before the Őszöd speech was leaked (ibid.). The crisis was all-encompassing, ranging from the cessation of economic growth to the rise in the budget deficit, and from the foreign-currency debt crisis to substantial International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan packages (coming to 20% of Hungarian GDP) (Pogátsa 2019). Against this backdrop, Ferenc Gyurcsány tendered his resignation as Prime Minister in 2009, citing – as he put it at the time – "the recent turmoil that has made [Hungary] among the most troubled economies in Europe" (Kulish 2009).

An EU-wide survey of social mobility found that from 2007 to 2010 Hungary was the least economically just society in the European Union at that time, having the worst social mobility prospects of any country in the bloc (Eurofound 2017). While in 1993 the capitalist market economy enjoyed more support in Hungary than in Western Europe (Bruszt 1998: 174), by 2009 nowhere had backing from society for the capitalist market economy dropped off more sharply than in Hungary, with only around 46% of the population finding the market better than other social systems (EBRD 2007: 50f.). Leftist voters were especially disappointed (Policy Solutions 2013) and support for leftist parties in 2010 was lowest among skilled workers, manual labour and sole proprietors (Enyedi et al. 2014: 553). All this represents a significant shift from the situation in the 1990s.

The literature dealing with leftist criticism about the 2000s is plentiful.[13] On the other hand, since at least 2009, *Fidesz* has derived most of its support from workers and the petty bourgeoisie, especially outside Budapest,[14] while the MSZP only maintained its base among the managerial class (Enyedi et al. 2014: 539). According to Gábor Scheiring, "most of society took a negative view of the market transition, however, they did not reject

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13 See e.g. Kiss (2009) and Éber et al. (2014).

14 For a possible analysis, see Policy Solutions (2020) and Bíró Nagy and Laki (2020).

democracy. [...] That is to say, workers did *not* force an authoritarian shift"
(Scheiring 2019: 175) (italics in the original).

SERBIA

During the 2000s, Serbia, too, was far from a model of a democratic and
economically prosperous, socially just country. In the decade following the
overthrow of the authoritarian Milošević regime on 5 October 2000, the
country was governed by various branches of the DOS. This chaotic period was
marked by a series of very consequential political events (such as the assas-
sination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003, Montenegro's declaration of
independence in 2006 and Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in
2008). The various governments in this period brought together parties which,
for the most part, combined a more or less engaged nationalism with prag-
matic neoliberal policies. Notwithstanding some efforts to initiate fundamental
structural reforms in Serbian society, many analysts, e.g. Pešić (2012: 24),
suggest – in an allusion to the day after the demise of the Milošević regime –
that it was as if there was no 6 October, i.e. vital reform measures were not
put in place. Specifically, the Constitution was not suspended in the immediate
aftermath of the so-called Bulldozer Revolution which toppled Milošević, and
there was no systematic or critical examination of the moral/political values
and practices of existing institutions (for instance, the leaders of intelligence
services were not dismissed, meaning that they had time to destroy compro-
mising documents, and there was no lustration). In fact, there was a high level
of continuity between the Milošević regime and the 'post-October' system
in terms of both institutional mechanisms and personnel (in the legal system,
the Army, the intelligence services, etc.). Last but not least, the new Serbian
Constitution, known as the *Mitrovdan Constitution*, codified in 2006, is charac-
terised by explicitly nationalist articles, especially with regard to the status of
Kosovo and the secondary status of ethnic minorities.

This whole period has been described as witnessing the "opportunistic
pacification of the past, or a strategy of ensuring continuity with nation-
alism" (Dimitrijević 2003: 8). The DOS, which played a decisive role in the
overthrow of Milošević, disintegrated after his extradition to be tried by the
International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. More precisely, the
DOS disintegrated into various moderately nationalist parties, including the
Democratic Party (*Demokratska Stranka*, or DS) and the Democratic Party of
Serbia (*Demokratska Stranka Srbije*, or DSS), which concurred with even more

nationalist parties, namely the Serbian Radical Party and the Socialist Party. In 2003, Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was killed by the Zemun Clan, a powerful branch of the Serbian mafia having strong ties with the intelligence services and politicians (Insajder 2019a). Civil society in Serbia was very much under the influence of oligarchic party structures. Aleksandar Molnar (2008: 72) refers to these regressive tendencies as "a total pluralistic party dictatorship", as there was no one-party state, but the many governing parties appropriated public goods and services for themselves. There was systemic administrative corruption under the control of a strong partocracy (Barać 2007), as well as "an undisturbed interchangeability of power and money" (Pešić 2012: 175).

Furthermore, privatisation and economic monopolies were implemented under direct political influence (Barać / Zlatić 2005). In the words of Pešić (2012: 189f.), "[p]ublic goods were transformed into party property", with "feudalistic landmarks", and the activity of oligarchies (e.g. the relationship between parties and business) was not regulated by law. The local levels of the state (including policies and the employment of personnel) in particular were under strongly centralised party influence. Politicians were monitored by intelligence services in order to gather information on how they were going to vote in Parliament (ibid.: 190). Public broadcasting was also controlled by the ruling parties, and there was no pluralistic or democratic public sphere (ibid.: 198, 313).

In most cases, checks and balances were not applied, there was no separation of powers, and regulatory bodies were prevented from carrying out their activities. Today, Vučić's interference in the work of government is often characterised as an illegitimate and illegal encroachment by the President into the realms of executive power, but it is generally forgotten that he is not the first holder of this role to act in this way: Boris Tadić did the same when he was President.[15] In sum, Serbia in the 2000s can be described as a place giving free rein to a privileged political-economic class and state capture, and as a country suffering from chronic anomie and neo-patrimonialism.[16]

While descriptions of the Milošević regime in the 1990s have used terms such as "blocked transformation" (Lazić 2011) and "delayed neoliberalism" (Musić 2011a; 2011b), since 2000 neoliberal economic policies have been in the

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15   For more details, see Pavlović and Stanojević (2010).

16   For a detailed analysis, see Vladisavljević (2019).

ascendancy in Serbia. One of the new government's first acts following the overthrow of Milošević's authoritarian regime in 2000/2001 was to introduce a new labour law that abolished any formal requirement for there to be collective bargaining between employers and workers and that made the labour market more flexible (Musić 2013: 25f.). The new law on privatisation made it easier for majority owners to purchase companies; as a result, around 60% of economic resources were sold off as part of a process which has been called "one of the dirtiest privatisations in Southeast Europe" (Luković 2012). Former workers or small shareholders, who were for the most part excluded from these processes, protested in vain against these unlawful privatisations (Pešić 2012: 246).

From 2001 to 2009, between around 400,000 and 500,000 workers lost their jobs (Nikolić Đaković 2011). For instance, in Niš, one of Serbia's largest cities, only 15,000 of 200,000 industrial workers remained in their employment (Stevanović 2011). In Serbia, around 65% of firms were shut down soon after they were privatised , and 75% of workers were made redundant (Pešić 2012: 349). In addition, (largely high-ranking) party members became employers, thus combining control over means of production with their hold on means of political domination. From 1998 to 2010, membership of trade union organisations dropped from 50% to 33% of all workers; at the end of the 2000s, only around 12% of workers in the private sector were trade unionists. At the same time, around 600,000 workers were employed on the black market or unregulated parts of the economy (Musić 2013: 26, 39).

Systemic deindustrialisation (ibid.: 29–33) and large-scale subsidies coupled with high interest rates for foreign investments went hand in hand, Serbia's economy has become highly import-oriented. In 2002, the country's four biggest domestic banks were shut down, and financial control was mostly handed over (specifically, in the form of around 80% of the financial sector) to foreign banks (ibid.: 29, 34).

Overall, this period in Serbia can be best analysed drawing on the neoliberal shock doctrine and through the prism of disaster capitalism (Klein 2007). After the 2008/2009 economic crisis, the situation got even worse. Not only did foreign investments fall by around 50%, but In 2009, real-terms GDP was -4.1%. The unemployment rate was around 20%, and there were 370,000 fewer workers in employment in 2010 than in 2008. Moreover, I invoices of 57,000 firms were blocked as a result of unpaid debts (Musić 2013:

35f.). The catastrophic economic situation in Serbia prompted protests across the country. Workers from hundreds of firms went on strike in the course of 2009 (ibid.: 42–46). Ljubisav Orbović, the president of Serbia's largest trade union confederation, the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (CATUS), called this series of protests by workers "the insurrection of the army of hungry, poor citizens, deprived of rights" (b92 2010).

THE RISE TO POWER AND THE SUCCESS OF THE SOFT AUTHORITARIAN VISION
HUNGARY

The 2010 elections culminated in a landslide victory for Viktor Orbán and *Fidesz*. The campaign was mostly focused on the issue of law and order: "A strong state – a strong government – a strong Hungary". On the one hand, the *Fidesz* campaign promised that the corrupt politicians of the 2000s would be sanctioned and that the new government would break with what it called short-term private interest and moral nihilism. The other important political message was that there would also be a severe crackdown on 'subsistence crime' (which might be interpreted as referring to Roma petty crime). *Fidesz* did not plan to provide generous social benefits; instead, it announced that those depending on social security would be moved over to the public work(s) scheme or system.[17] As for other social issues featured in the campaign, there was a significant emphasis on family values, creating 1 million new jobs and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (Magyar Narancs 2010). We must not forget that after 2002, *Fidesz* "opposed privatisation and "the market-friendly transformation of the health system" (Körösényi et al. 2003). In terms of ideology, *Fidesz*'s rise to power can be attributed to a complex conjunction of rhetoric targeted at an "elite" of "left-liberal" politicians and businesspeople and a doctrine focused on law and order and moving against marginalised communities. On the other hand, *Fidesz* offered a solution to the economic problems of the 2000s, more precisely to middle-class citizens' fear of being declassed – and this provides the explanatory context for its quasi-leftist tendency to cling to some of the remains of the welfare state.

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17 For more information about this framework (variously called the "public work(s) scheme", "public work(s) system" or "public employment system") in Hungary, see Koltai et al. (2012) and Belügyminisztérium – Közfoglalkoztatási portál (s.d.) from the Hungarian Ministry of Interior's Public Employment portal. It was introduced by the government as a way to get long-term unemployed and jobseekers back into work.

The catalyst for Aleksandar Vučić's electoral victory in 2012 was SNS members' split from the far-right Serbian Radical Party, accompanied by the adoption of moderate and pro-European political views. The Serbian Progressive Party's campaign promised a break from the 2000s: in particular, putting an end to partocracy, and "fighting corruption and organised criminality" (Nikčević 2012). The "fraudulent privatisation" narrative also became a cornerstone of the SNS's ideology, and this was complemented by smear campaigns directed at the previous administration, and especially the Democratic Party. Totemically, at the end of 2012, Miroslav Mišković, a Serbian business magnate and owner of Delta Holding – and indeed regarded as the wealthiest Serb at that time – was arrested (however, he was released from custody soon afterwards, and most of the charges against him were dropped). Other political messaging also played a key role. Vučić announced that Serbia would probably be an EU Member State by 2022 (Cvejić 2016). Fiscal consolidation and infrastructural development were also vital aspects of the campaign. While an increase in the state pension was at the heart of the 2012 campaign, in 2016 a pay rise for workers in the education sector and the health system was the leading social issue.

HUNGARY AND SERBIA IN THE 2010s – A COMPARISON OF TWO AUTHORITARIAN DYNAMICS

In this section we will focus on the similarities between the Hungarian and Serbian regimes in the 2010s. We will rely on a political phenomenology that refuses to describe these regimes as purely dictatorial, contrary to a conceptually unfounded, but still widely held, rationale – see, for instance, Bakó (2020), Gábor (2021), Márki-Zay (2021), Direktno.rs (2020) and Politika (2017) – and offer instead a more balanced approach that emphasises the ambiguities of electoral/competitive/soft authoritarianism.

The global trend towards the spread of soft authoritarianism followed a long process of democratisation. The so-called third wave of democratisation began in the 1970s in Portugal, Spain and Greece and was reinforced by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dismantling of one-party structures, the differentiation of the civil society and the state, the rise of competitive multi-party systems, and so on radically changed the political scene in many countries. The 1990s were marked by a high level of optimism regarding the triumph

of so-called liberal democracy. For instance, according to Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2005* report (Freedom House 2005), the number of "Free" countries increased to 89 (with an additional 30 states being classified as electoral democracies with serious deficiencies in terms of the rule of law).

However, even back in 1997, Fareed Zakaria's well-known article *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy* (Zakaria 1997) pointed to a new authoritarian tendency in countries like Peru, Sierra Leone, Pakistan and Slovakia. According to him, in many countries multi-party elections provide no guarantee of actual political liberty. In other words, maintaining the formalities of the liberal representative system can be combined with a political strategy that eliminates or limits civic and political rights, further distorts the neutrality of the state, and excludes or restricts institutions that could have served as a counterbalance to political arbitrariness, while there is unequal access to public resources, and so on. Within these new authoritarian systems, democracy is not abolished altogether – instead, it is 'hacked', i.e. authoritarian forces transform the political sphere by creating an unbalanced situation in terms of competition where elections are anything but fair (electoral rules are manipulated, public media are monopolised, the opposition is bribed, or even the ruling party creates its own opposition, etc.). The maintenance of formal mechanisms goes hand in hand with the misuse of loopholes and informal influence.

These authoritarian regimes are not purely dictatorial (unlike the overtly violent and repressive regimes of, for instance, Saudi Arabia, North Korea or Belarus). Instead, they have a transitional system between democracy and pure dictatorship, and so are often called 'hybrid' regimes. Today, there are more than 50 regimes that are regularly labelled as 'hybrid', including Armenia, Georgia, Botswana, Gabon, Senegal and Cambodia. The authoritarian tendency was further aggravated by certain global phenomena. One of them is the gradual evaporation of the hegemony of the United States, and the increasingly significant role of China, Russia, Iran and other countries. The intensification of geopolitical competition puts additional pressure on many states. Furthermore, the 2008/2009 economic and financial crisis posed new challenges for liberal representative governments, throwing its socially devastating effects into particularly stark relief. Some other forms of crisis (the ecological crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) have also contributed to the rise and consolidation of authoritarian regimes. In our opinion, both Hungary and Serbia's

authoritarian regimes can be understood only by taking into consideration these wider global tendencies.

One might ask what the relationship is between the decline of liberal representative governments and the rise of authoritarian regimes. In theory, it could be that these two regime types are diametrically opposed to each other, i.e. the authoritarian tendencies are the result of a widespread mistrust for authentic political ideas and institutional practices.

However, many other alternative interpretations have been offered by political analysts. At the very least, one might suggest that liberal systems are inherently weak and fragile, i.e. they are necessarily exposed to illiberal tendencies. There have also been claims that the hybrid regimes emerged against the backdrop of political systems that were only nominally democratic, or, more specifically, in which the formalities of multi-party elections did not go hand in hand with substantive, participatory democracy. For instance, many analysts of the Hungarian hybrid regime, such as Antal (2013), Antal (2017), Ágh (2013), Rauschenberger (2013), Krastev (2016) and Böcskei (2016), suggest that its predecessors in the 1990s were overly technocratic and depoliticised society.

At a more general level, one might even come to the conclusion that, as has been demonstrated by many critical analyses, liberal representative governments themselves are in no way incompatible with authoritarian regimes.[18] Thus, the rise of authoritarian regimes, not only in Hungary and Serbia but also more widely, raises important questions for the dominant political status quo in the West. However, the specific features of soft authoritarian regimes deserve particular attention.

First, hybrid authoritarian regimes rarely use overt repression. Specifically, they do not tend to simply ban opposition parties, NGOs or alternative media. The cost of these kinds of actions would outweigh the benefits, as behaving in this way might undermine the legitimacy of the system and, at the same time, could spark nationwide resistance. Filippov (2018) puts it as follows:

Restriction "to the extent necessary" is always more effective and sustainable than a complete ban. [...] Commanding a sufficient legislative majority, [those in power] can take over or hollow out the other key institutions of control: the

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18   See, for instance, Neocleous (2008) and Losurdo (2014).

Accordingly, in theory, both the Hungarian and the Serbian regimes can be strongly and openly criticised; however, such criticism usually turns out to be ineffective. These tendencies are most obvious when it comes to media pluralism. In Hungary, outside Budapest the printed media are entirely under the influence of *Fidesz* (Magyar Narancs 2017), and many independent media outlets, such as *Népszabadság* and Index.hu, have been merged into other organisations or bought up or shut down by the ruling party – see, for instance, BBC News (2016) – and thus the situation is more like an information monopoly.

The situation is similar in Serbia, where state broadcasters "do not comply with the expected obligations regarding programme content" (Đurić / Dobrilović 2019: 43). The state media are openly one-sided and full of fake news, and journalists working for other media outlets are often humiliated or threatened. According to Media Associations (2018), research has shown that "public broadcasters are places from which public dialogue and critical thinking have been ousted and [...] their news programmes are dramatically dominated by the executive authorities". Television channels with a national frequency have been placed under the complete control of those in power or openly pro-government owners and journalists (Media Ownership Monitor Serbia s.d.). Accordingly, in recent years, Serbia has slipped down the worldwide media freedom rankings compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) – in 2020, Serbia was 93rd, 34 places below where the country stood in 2016 (Maksimović 2020a).

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Moreover, both the Hungarian and the Serbian regimes have done much to curb academic freedom. Central European University (CEU) announced that it was leaving Budapest after a confrontation with the Orbán government and the latter's implementation of its Lex CEU (Deák 2017).[19] The Orbán government also stripped the Hungarian Academy of Sciences of its autonomous research centres, placing them under the aegis of a government-controlled body (Inotai 2019).[20] The Serbian government launched a similarly authori-

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19 The Hungarian government tabled an amendment to the Act on National Higher Education in the National Assembly that actually uses legal chicanery to force CEU to shut down its activities in Budapest and, for example, in a clearly unacceptable move, to open a new campus in New York State.

20 For a broader perspective, see Labanino and Dobbins (2020).

tarian attack on the University of Belgrade's Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (IFDT) in 2019/2020 (European Western Balkans 2020c). To sum up, these authoritarian regimes rarely use outright prohibition and instead prefer to adopt alternative soft strategies of reorganising, monopolising, and so on.

Second, so-called democratic institutions are no obstacle to these authoritarian regimes; on the contrary, they are considered to be exploitable resources – elections lend them strong legitimacy (Džihić / Günay 2016). In Serbia, indeed, four parliamentary elections (2012, 2014, 2016 and 2020) confirmed a majority of the public's support for the SNS, and, furthermore, before the formation of the government in 2020, Vučić announced that Serbia would hold parliamentary elections again in 2022, which, according to Dragojlo (2020), experts saw as his attempt to repair his damaged legitimacy and his party's prospects in the 2022 Belgrade city elections. Thus, a stabilitocracy is somewhat paradoxically combined with a political-ideological "strategy of tension" and forced mobilisation. Both the Serbian and the Hungarian regimes prefer plebiscitarian communication. Thus, it is no coincidence that certain authors label the Orbán regime a "plebiscitarian leader democracy".[21]

The Orbán government regularly holds so-called national consultations for opinion-polling purposes, with questions being sent out to every household (Inotai 2020c), while Vučić has repeatedly stressed that he is ready to communicate face to face with anybody, including ordinary citizens; in 2016, he promised to meet citizens once a week in his office – a promise which was however only briefly kept (Insajder 2019b).

Besides trying to create a spirit of national consensus and cohesion (according to Orbán, quoted in Kovács (2019), the "homeland cannot be in opposition"), these regimes strongly influence the activities of the opposition parties, as they oscillate between marginalising or destroying those who are dangerous to their political monopoly and encouraging those who pose no real threat to them. For instance, in Hungary, the State Audit Office (ÁSZ) fined the conservative party Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary) for illicit party financing. Vass (2019) reports that "ÁSZ's [...] activities [had] generated controversy, as according to critics, they increasingly serve[d] Fidesz's interests and undermine[d] democracy and [the] rule of law". At the same time, *Fidesz* made room in government-controlled media for *Mi Hazán*k (Our Homeland),

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21   See, for instance, Körösényi et al. (2020).

set up by ex-members of Jobbik as a more "authentic" right-wing rival for their former party (Political Capital 2019).

Having said all that, one might conclude that these regimes use democracy as an exploitable resource, while diminishing its truly pluralistic dimensions. However, we should add that a wide range of voter mobilisation strategies are deployed. According to philosopher and intellectual Gáspar Miklós Tamás, speaking in an interview with the weekly magazine *Magyar Narancs*'s Szilárd Teczár, "there are no parties in Hungary in the sense of movements. [...] *Fidesz*-KDNP is a novel mixture of quasi-state apparatuses and semi-autonomous business structures, not a party" (Teczár 2017).

In contrast to the erosion of mainstream parties and their membership in Hungary, the Serbian Progressive Party had 750,000 members in 2020 (nova. rs 2020), making it the largest party in Europe (mondo.rs 2019). This meant that one Serb in nine was a member of the ruling party (nova.rs 2020), reflecting the fact that party patronage is crucial in securing a job for oneself or for family members and also entails other privileges (in terms of taxation, rent, etc.).[22]

Third, repressive state apparatuses have an ambivalent role in these authoritarian regimes. Filippov (2018) sets the scene in these terms:

In a hybrid regime operating in a democratic setting, members of the opposition are not terrorised by the police or party militias but by "civilian" security services, ultras or youth organisations, who are formally independent of the government. Thus, responsibility for political violence can be deflected from the state, which can look on as a bystander and characterise as grassroots social conflict the repression which it has stirred up and which serves its own interests.

In brief, violence is outsourced in order to maintain the government's democratic legitimacy. For instance, in 2016, a large group of hooligan-like men prevented members of the Hungarian Socialist Party from submitting a referendum initiative to the National Election Office (Székely 2016). Later, it was revealed that the ultras were in fact operatives of Ferencvárosi Torna Club's security firm, directly connected to the president of this sports club who was also a member of the Hungarian National Assembly and vice-president of *Fidesz* (ATV 2016).

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22 For a broader perspective, see Pavlović (2019a).

Another example from Serbia might also be instructive here. As part of the so-called Belgrade Waterfront urban renewal project that is headed up by the Serbian government and is supposed to transform the Savamala district (the second largest mixed-use complex under construction in Europe at the time these lines were originally written in late 2020), "[a] whole street was demolished without prior notice by masked men using heavy machinery. By destroying the buildings, they opened the way for a contested, UAE-financed 'Belgrade Waterfront' luxury real estate project" (Euractiv 2016).

However, overt violence is meted out in certain extreme cases. For instance, in 2020 there were mass demonstrations against the government's handling of lockdown, in which "people [were] hurt and arrested, and even attacked by the police for no obvious reason", and opposition leaders were injured as well (European Western Balkans 2020b). Both Hungary and Serbia are spending huge sums on militarisation. For instance, the Orbán regime was the biggest buyer of German military hardware in 2019 (Deutsche Welle 2019a), and there were reports of further massive military transactions in 2020 (Kerner 2020). Vučić also announced a further expensive weapons purchase in 2020 (Zorić 2020). He has made it clear on multiple occasions that there is no military force in the region that is comparable with the Serbian Armed Forces (Politika 2017). In addition, Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin has repeatedly said that Serbia might re-introduce compulsory military service (N1 2018). All of this is worrying in a region which was only recently ravaged by inter-ethnic conflicts and wars. Moreover, in recent years, the Serbian government has been linked to many international scandals, for instance covert exports of arms to Saudi Arabia (Deutsche Welle 2019b) and the weapons it supplied for use in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict (Vuksanović 2020).

Further questions might be raised regarding the intelligence services. In Hungary, the national security law was amended repeatedly, leading critics to draw attention to the risk that Orbán's legislation was paving the way for a kind of information police state (Hungarian Spectrum 2013). Furthermore, it seems that state intelligence services are partially being outsourced to the newly established private security company belonging to Lőrinc Mészáros, often referred to as the most corrupt man in Hungary (Botos 2020). This is also hugely problematic because private intelligence agencies are less easy to control and less accountable, and the profit-seeking motive can irrationally distort their activities (Losoncz 2020). In 2017, László Földi, the Orbán regime's

favourite national security expert and a former adviser to the Mayor of Budapest from 2010 to 2019, István Tarlós, stated:

Right now, there is a war going on. These people [i.e. members of humanitarian civil organisations dealing with migrants] are collaborators, war criminals, traitors, and so on. [...] [T]hey can be liquidated immediately. This is martial law: we don't bring spies or saboteurs before the courts – we liquidate them straight away. (Erdelyip 2017)

On the other hand, in Serbia, the security-intelligence sector has been increasingly taken over by the SNS's authoritarian regime. Key positions in both the intelligence services and the institutional watchdogs (such as the Security Services Control Committee of the Serbian National Assembly, the Serbian 'Protector of Citizens' (i.e. the national ombudsperson), the State Audit Institution or the judiciary) are made up of party officials or their close associates. For instance, the head of the Security Information Agency (BIA) is Bratislav Gašić from the SNS, and the head of the Bureau for the Coordination of Security Services is also a party member – until October 2020 this position was held by Nebojša Stefanović and thereafter by Aleksandar Vulin. In short, both the intelligence services and the institutional watchdogs are under the monopolistic control of this party. Clientelism is omnipresent. Petrović (2020: 4) explains:

[T]he security services are now (increasingly) exceeding their powers and authority and are (increasingly) acting as a political police force. Protection of the constitutional order and counter-espionage have been transformed into protection of the party in power and the fight against internal enemies. Such security services either turn a blind eye to crime and corruption linked with party officials or become its protectors.

Security services seem to help to consolidate political and economic power in various ways. For instance, they leak information to pro-government tabloid newspapers as part of a campaign against journalists who are critical of the government (Radivojević 2018). To give another example, the Serbian Protector of Citizens received a document from the Military Security Agency describing how the agency gathered intelligence on the Serbian Radical Party in 2015 (Protector of Citizens 2015). Apart from the abuse of power, what is most troubling are the interconnected clusters of illegal or even mafia-style activities, SNS officials and security-intelligence services (Krik 2019; Dojčinović / Pavlović 2019; Marković 2020).

Fourth, we have already mentioned that both regimes run smear campaigns against members of the opposition. Both political systems are highly polarised – in the case of Hungary, see, for instance, Bátory (2016) – and both Fidesz and the Serbian Progressive Party regularly target and stigmatise the most ambiguous opposition leaders, e.g. Ferenc Gyurcsány in Hungary[23] and Dragan Đilas in Serbia (Nenadović 2020). In keeping with Orbán's words "the homeland cannot be in opposition", opposition parties are often represented as enemies and traitors from within.[24] Moreover, the Orbán regime uses the psychology of enmity more broadly, i.e. campaigns are organised against various individuals or groups or key ideological messages are directed at them.

We have already mentioned the case of George Soros. According to opinion polls, in Hungary, 49% of people believe that Jews secretly run the world (Sirotnikova 2020).

In 2015, Hungary's authoritarian regime erected border fences to stop the flow of migrants, and these anti-migrant policies were followed by a hard-hitting anti-immigration campaign (Nolan 2015). Ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hungary was the least asylum seeker-friendly country in the European Union, with around 64% of Hungarian citizens having negative attitudes towards migrants from non-EU Member States (as opposed to an EU average of 44%) (Juhász et al. 2017).

Orbán has also been accused of anti-Gypsyism, i.e. of "seeking to mobilize his voters by targeting independent courts, the Roma minority, and the NGOs who help them" (Than 2020). A further campaign has been launched against the "'jail business', a term coined by government propagandists to refer to criminals who sue the state for huge sums in compensation, citing poor prison conditions" (Inotai 2020b), and the Orbán regime has also criminalised homelessness (Deutsche Welle 2018b). Finally, the Hungarian authoritarian regime has used new legislation and constitutional changes to limit LGBTQ+ people's rights (Deutsche Welle 2020).

As mentioned previously, ideologically the Serbian authoritarian regime is on a completely different trajectory. Specifically, Vučić and other key party officials have mostly been gravitating from far-right positions to the political centre, as

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23 See, for instance, Magyar Narancs (2014).

24 See, for instance, Magyar Nemzet (2020).

the Serbian Progressive Party has adapted to the European Union's expectations. Given that Serbia is still a candidate for accession to the EU, campaigns against internal or external marginalised groups are far less extensive than in Hungary. Furthermore, the Serbian regime has particularly focused on certain measures that could be regarded as progressive. For instance, in 2020, out of 21 cabinet members, 10 were women (N1 Belgrade 2020). Western media often concentrate on the fact that Serbia has an openly lesbian Prime Minister, although certain critiques have pointed out that this has had no significant impact on the status of the LGBTQ+ community in Serbia (Jenkin 2020).

Serbia started to put up a barbed-wire border fence to stem migrant flows in 2020, and the Serbian police is sometimes very aggressive towards migrants (Stojaković 2020). The Serbian state also seems to treat anti-migrant far-right protesters in the same way as humanist leftist demonstrators (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020). Still, the situation is very different from the one in Hungary.

Serbia's position is much more delicate when it comes to regional matters, in particular the status of Serbian minorities in neighbouring countries: the relationship with Kosovo has not yet been normalised and Serbian influence can also have a very divisive and destabilising influence on Bosnia–Herzegovina (Battaglia 2019). Tensions have also been growing between Serbia and Montenegro, as a result of ecclesiastical disputes, the opening of borders during the COVID-19 pandemic and Montenegro's expulsion of the Serbian Ambassador to that country (Maksimović 2020b). In the case of Croatia, important steps have been made towards reconciliation, but Croatia continues to be severely criticised for not doing enough to protect its Serbian community. Therefore, significant tensions remain between the two countries (Vladisavljević 2019). To sum up, although Hungary also has rather tense relationships with some of its neighbours such as Romania or Ukraine (TRT World 2019), regional tensions are not as significant or as much of a politically mobilising factor in Hungary as they are in Serbia.

At the start of this section, we suggested that the Hungarian and Serbian governments are by no means isolated cases – in fact, these authoritarian regimes form part of wider global tendencies. All the key characteristics of hybrid regimes (the lack of overt repression, the limitation of institutional watchdogs, the use of democratic elections as exploitable resources, the outsourcing of violence, the sharp polarisation of the voting population, etc.) can be clearly found in the Orbán and Vučić regimes. The fact that these

political systems differ substantially from purely dictatorial regimes, indicates that many of the old opposition strategies (for instance, those used before the collapse of Soviet-type regimes) are outdated. It is certainly not enough to think only in terms of the replacement of the exponents of such hybrid regimes – the underlying structural foundations of the political systems should also be rethought and re-invented.

ECONOMIC ISSUES
HUNGARY

As suggested above, the Orbán regime was a response to a political and economic crisis. Before 2010, Hungary was a (semi-)peripheral country with neoliberal economic policies (low taxes, low wages, weak trade unions, etc.). The economic elites were above all competing for investments from transnational capital. According to Gábor Scheiring, two basic mechanisms were lacking in this framework: the developmental state (with a system of state industrial politics, investments in scientific research, systematic imports of technology, etc.) and the welfare state (ensuring equal opportunities in education, a socially just health system, etc.) (Scheiring 2019: 36–39). *Fidesz* offered a nationalist alternative of the state that would defend citizens from malignant domestic or foreign influences, i.e. "there was a promise of cultural stability instead of the uncertainties of globalisation" (Pogátsa 2020).

In a certain sense, *Fidesz* has been economically successful. First and foremost, it has reduced unemployment rates. According to official data, there were overall 800,000 more employed workers after 2010 than in the previous two terms of government, meaning that Hungary had the third highest employment growth rate in the European Union. By 2019, the unemployment rate was around 3.7% – even in the poorer eastern parts of Hungary (Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) 2019). At the same time, the number of workers employed by the state has fallen significantly. However, according to critics of the system, unemployment benefits are minimal and are only paid out for a very short period (three months, the shortest such period in the European Union). It is also telling that, nominally, unemployment benefits have been turned into 'jobseeker benefits'. For these benefits to be extended, claimants must register for public work,[25] for which wages are no more than €150 per month, while those who have only registered receive just €63 per month.

25 See footnote 17 above.

In Orbán's so-called work-based society, "provision [for] the unemployed has become virtually non-existent and thus large sections of Hungarian society have been [...] ejected and rejected" (Veres 2019). Előd (2020) indicates that the aim of the whole system is to encourage people to find a job for themselves, without relying on the helping hand of the state. Proportionally, only 0.3% of GDP is spent on unemployment benefits. By April 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of unemployed people in Hungary had gone beyond 400,000 (Trademagazin 2020), i.e. more than 10% of the population. Despite the severe effects of the pandemic, there have been only slight increases in the unemployment budget. Based on National Employment Service data, around half of unemployed people receive no financial support (and around 200,000 people have no income) (Béresné / Maklári 2021). The official data are often manipulated; for instance, those who lose their jobs are often categorised not as "unemployed" but as "inactive" (on the basis that they are supposedly not actively seeking a job). The actual number of unemployed people might be double the official figures (Kovács 2021).

Fidesz has also tried to reduce Hungary's external financial vulnerability. Specifically, in 2012, the Orbán government flatly rejected the conditions attached by the IMF to a new €15-billion loan (BBC News 2012) – a step which has been frequently praised even by leftist critics of the Orbán regime. Moreover, Fidesz has consistently increased the minimum wage (in February 2021, it stood at 167,400 Hungarian forints, or – at the exchange rate applying at the time – €461 (gross) per month), as well as supporting citizens through the foreign-currency loan crisis (as loans were converted at below-market prices, partly at the expense of the banking sector). Some of these measures could be interpreted as slightly progressive.[26]

However, one might argue that the economic policies of the Orbán regime are still extremely neoliberal: for instance, it introduced a flat rate of taxation (thus favouring those on higher incomes), inflicted significant damage on what remained of welfare policies, established a harmful workfare programme and protected offshore activities (Tóth / Virovácz 2013). Social issues have been aggravated by the introduction of the so-called slave law that enables employers to demand up to 400 hours of overtime per year (Deutsche Welle 2018a).

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26 Take, for instance, the issue of cuts in fees for public utilities described in The Orange Files (2013a).

Furthermore, financial incentives for foreign investment have doubled during *Fidesz's* time in power (and the annual average productivity for domestically owned companies was only one third of that for multinational companies in Hungary). The Orbán regime has not managed to transform the Hungarian economy into a system that has more domestically owned firms with high value-added exportable products. However, the party has systematically helped to increasingly line the pockets of the country's elites, this capital being bound up above all with "casinos, wholesale trade and major land holdings" (Új Egyenlőség 2017).

While the upper class (the top 10–20% of the population) have profited from the new economic policies, the lower classes have been neglected. This is especially obvious in the case of the health system (3% less of GDP than the EU average has been spent on the health system) or education (with 3.9% of GDP being spent on education while the EU average was 6.5%).[27] Sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge calls these phenomena a "perverse redistribution" system (Makki / Mondovics 2016), while others emphasise the fact that the Hungarian regime can be characterised as presenting an authoritarian version of neoliberal capitalism (Fabry 2014; Szalai 2018; Szalai 2019; Pogátsa 2019; Scheiring 2020).

The negative effects of this kind of neoliberal politics were especially evident during the coronavirus pandemic. The catastrophic state of the health system meant that at one point Hungary was the world's worst-hit country, having the highest number of deaths per capita from COVID-19 (Simon 2021).

SERBIA

Apart from North Macedonia (from 2008 to 2017), no country has experienced a more radical shift to authoritarianism in the Western Balkans than Serbia (from 2012/2014 to now). The authoritarian regime of the Serbian Progressive Party is pursuing neoliberal policies even more brazenly (Pavlović 2019b; Balunović 2019) than *Fidesz* in Hungary. There is no doubt that certain significant changes have also been in evidence in Serbian economic policy. For instance, Serbia has managed to bring down public debt, and its public finances have also become much more sustainable. Indeed, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has praised Serbia's fiscal adjustment measures and the fact that the country has outperformed

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27 As for the consequences, see Hungarian Free Press (2016).

expectations. However, levels of inequality in Serbia are greater than in any EU Member State and indeed among the highest in Europe overall, alongside North Macedonia and Turkey (Aradarenko et al. 2017), and the gap between the *nouveaux riches* and ordinary citizens is growing all the time.

There is hardly any social mobility. The reasons for this are manifold. While we have argued that economic policies during the 2000s caused great harm socially, the situation under the Serbian Progressive Party after 2012, and especially after 2014, has got even worse – from 2012 to 2013, Vučić was only Minister of Defence and First Deputy Prime Minister, but many analysts, e.g. De Launey (2014), have suggested that he had the most de facto influence in government as the leader of the largest party, the SNS. The role of neoliberalism is most obvious in the case of the Labour Law adopted in 2014. The leftist critique is that this legislation made the Serbian labour force extremely vulnerable by enabling arbitrary changes to employment contracts, deregulating overtime and payment reduction, and reducing the influence of trade unions to the absolute minimum (Jovanović 2014). There were nationwide protests against the Labour Law and a general strike with 1 million participants. However, the protests against these measures proved ineffective.

Furthermore, the Vučić regime cut public sector wages (by 22–25%) and pensions (by 10%). Serbia introduced neoliberal austerity measures at the behest of the IMF. As Pavlović (2019b: 679) explains, "Serbia devalued the dinar (so-called external devaluation) [in 2009–2010], which enabled [a] less painful adjustment to the supply shock, which is probably why it had to go for the most radical austerity reform in the region in 2014–2018". Looked at from a broader perspective, what we see here in the Serbian case is what Živković (2013) calls "the typical neoliberal medicine of opening up to foreign capital, privatisation of state industries and public services, liberalisation of labour markets, and tight control over monetary policy". Since 2013, the employment of new workers in the public sector has been banned (b92 2013). On the other hand, employment very much depends on political patronage and clientelism. Those who got their jobs through political channels are under the strict control of the Serbian Progressive Party. Official propaganda made out that unemployment reached a historic low in 2021 (namely 9.9%). However, these data are often accused of being one-sided and manipulated.[28]

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28 See, for instance, Obradović (2020).

Other neoliberal policies that characterise the Serbian Progressive Party's rule include increasing privatisation, the commodification of education, unlimited subsidies for foreign investors and the transformation of urban space into an entrepreneurial and competitive zone, as in the case of the Belgrade Waterfront project (Jovanović / Škobić 2014; Radenković 2016; Simović 2016; Kostić 2016; Matković 2017; Datoo 2018). Most of these so-called reforms were flagged by Vučić as "painful and necessary" corrections of the status quo.

Given all this, one might argue that the neoliberalism of the Vučić regime is merely the culmination of neoliberal policies in Serbia dating back many years. However, the disastrous economic effects of this are greater than in the past. Around 60,000 people have been leaving the country each year, with most of them migrating to Western European countries. Although Serbia's health system proved somewhat resistant to the challenge of the coronavirus crisis (the number of deaths seems relatively low compared with neighbouring countries, and Serbia's vaccine supply outstripped demand), the country was expected to face something of an economic dip in 2021 (1.8%). While this was less than the anticipated average hit to EU Member States' economies (around 7.5%), which might appear to offer Serbia a competitive advantage, there were very specific reasons for this.[29] On the one hand, Serbia's integration into global supply chains is minimal, thereby preventing the coronavirus crisis from overly affecting the country's economy. On the other hand, agriculture accounts for a substantial share of GDP (around 15%), and this economic sector, too, was only minimally impacted by the pandemic (Stevanović 2020).

THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

It would be wrong to suggest that the EU's (semi-)peripheral countries necessarily end up with authoritarian regimes. Although Orbán and his *Fidesz* party frequently make out 'Brussels' to be a purely colonial force, it is clear that the authoritarian shift in Hungary cannot be legitimised as a logical or necessary counterpoint to Western European policies, given that there are obviously also (semi-)peripheral countries where authoritarianism is not part of the political equation and so is not a cause for concern. In order to understand the rise of the new regimes in Hungary and Serbia, we have to bear in mind above all the

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29 At the time this paper was finalised, in summer 2022, according to Danas (2022), Serbia's economic growth rate was 3.8%, which is attributed to the war in Ukraine, among other factors.

internal political and economic dynamics of these countries. However, this does not detract from the fact that the complexity of *Fidesz* and the Serbian Progressive Party's strategy and of how they acted was at least partially a response to the expectations and pressure of the objective challenges posed by international actors, especially the EU. We believe that this influence was often counterproductive, contradictory or sometimes distinctly negative. Criticism of authoritarian governments, as provided by the EU, should never be used as institutional blackmail that could harm whole societies.

HUNGARY

Hungary submitted its EU membership application in 1994 and accession negotiations started in 1998 (in fact, diplomatic relations with the European Community – i.e. the forerunner of the European Union – were established even earlier, back in 1988). The country joined the EU in 2004 together with seven other Central and Eastern European countries and two Mediterranean states. Although Hungary's accession was part of a wider enlargement process, the country was often deemed a special candidate because there was no real questioning of the West-facing orientation in its public sphere during the 1990s (unlike in Poland and Czechia[30]). Furthermore, Hungary was often perceived as a model country in that it rolled out one of the most radical economic reform programmes in post-communist Eastern Europe and is considered to have had an exemplary transition to democracy.

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Hungary was also among those candidate countries who led the way in terms of completing chapters of the EU *acquis*, i.e. the body of existing European Union law (the most difficult chapters had to do with reforms in agriculture and financial and budgetary provisions). A referendum on joining the EU was held in Hungary in 2003, in which 83.8% of the electorate voting 'yes' (well above Poland's 75% and Czechia's 62%). Although the MSZP was the governing party at that time, previously *Fidesz* – especially during its time in government from 1998 to 2002 – had played a significant role in moving forward the accession process. Indeed, in 1994, *Fidesz* unequivocally stated that Hungary's integration into the European Union as soon as possible was the party's primary foreign-policy objective.

However, during the 1990s the rhetoric of *Fidesz* – Hungarian Civic Party (*Fidesz* – *Magyar Polgári Párt*), as it was known at the time, on Europe and

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30 Here we use the Czech Republic's official short name.

the EU changed. This shifted to a conservative position, grounded in cultural attitudes and increasingly opposed to the 'technocratic' approach represented by other parties.

Thus, for instance, Orbán warned that EU membership might put thousands of Hungarian farmers out of business. *Fidesz*'s soft Euroscepticism during the 2000s was replaced by strong tensions between the party ideology and what was portrayed as the establishment in Brussels. Certain analysts, such as Johnson and Barnes (2015), emphasise the role of austerity measures required by the EU in the rise of the Orbán regime. *Fidesz* wanted to see a reduction in Brussels bureaucracy, a simplification of EU regulations, and so on. This kind of rhetoric reached its height in 2012 when Orbán "accused the EU of colonialism and meddling in his country's domestic affairs" (Pop 2012) after restrictions were imposed on EU funds as a result of Hungary's budget deficit and constitutional amendments. This announcement of restrictions was followed by large-scale demonstrations with the slogan "We will not be a colony!" (FEOL 2012).

Then in 2019, *Fidesz* used anti-Brussels billboards funded by the Hungarian state to accuse Jean-Claude Juncker – the then European Commission President – and George Soros of an immigration-fuelled conspiracy against European civilisation. The message on these billboards read "You also have the right to know what Brussels is up to" (Szakács 2019). Opinion polls show that in 2020, *Fidesz* voters believed that the European Union was Hungary's most dangerous political partner (Joób 2020).

The tensions between the European Union and *Fidesz* go back a long way. In 2013, the European Parliament adopted the Tavares report criticising the new Hungarian Constitution and its amendments for violating certain basic principles and rights. Special attention was paid to judicial reforms, reform of the electoral system, the lack of independence of the publicly owned media and the criminalisation of homelessness (The Orange Files 2013b; European Parliament 2013; Norwegian Helsinki Committee 2013).

Subsequently, in 2018, the so-called Sargentini report (European Parliament 2017) was adopted by the European Parliament. The report drew attention to the erosion of democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights in Hungary. It even invoked Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, i.e. the strongest action the EU can take against a Member State when then latter

breaches certain basic principles. Apart from concerns already raised by the Tavares report, the Sargentini report highlighted the abuse of migrants, corruption – see Fazekas and Tóth (2016) – and the inadequacy of privacy and data protection (Köves 2018).

In 2019, the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament suspended *Fidesz* following accusations that the latter had breached the rule of law (News Wires 2019). Then in 2020, the EPP called for a vote on the expulsion of *Fidesz*'s Tamás Deutsch, the leader of its Hungarian contingent, when he compared EPP leader Manfred Weber with the Gestapo and the ÁVH, the Hungarian State Protection Authority from 1945 to 1956 (Euronews 2020). Further tensions arose that year when the Hungarian government blocked "the EU's €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package – [...] held hostage due to their opposition to a planned new mechanism linking EU money to respect for rule of law criteria" (Bayer 2020a). Ultimately, a compromise delayed the implementation of the protection of the rule of law and anti-corruption mechanisms (ibid.).

In order to understand the full complexity of Hungarian–EU relations, we have to take into consideration other factors, such as the financial assistance provided to Hungary by the European Union, Hungarian public opinion about the EU, and, finally, the negative effects of the reports mentioned above. Hungary has often received vital balance-of-payment assistance from the EU. Moreover, in spite of *Fidesz*'s anti-EU rhetoric, Hungary is one of the main beneficiaries of EU funding (only Czechia and Slovakia have received proportionally more funds than Hungary): in the words of Spike (2016), "Hungary was the third-highest recipient of European Union money in the 28-member bloc between 2008–2015 [...]. [...] the European Investment Bank gave almost EUR 1 billion more to Hungary than Hungary had paid into the bank in the given period". During the 2010s, between 2.5% and 3% of Hungary's GDP came from the EU budget (Kovacevic 2019). In 2015, the EU budget accounted for as much as 4.38% of Hungarian GDP (that year Hungary received €470 per capita).

It is estimated that between 2007 and 2020, the EU provided Hungary with €22.5 billion in funding for the country's economic development and innovation programme (including the renovation of infrastructure and of cultural heritage). Furthermore, in spite of official *Fidesz* propaganda, according to which the EU was simply inefficient and had been unwilling to help Hungary during the

COVID-19 pandemic, the country was given €320 million to support small and medium-sized enterprises.

Certain EU financial packages were made more flexible to cope with the crisis. Hungary received an additional €26.5 million from the EU Solidarity Fund in 2020, and it is expected that even more financial support will follow in the years ahead (Magyari 2021). Given the high level of anti-EU propaganda, it is somewhat surprising that Hungarian public support for EU membership peaked in recent years, reaching around 85% in 2020 (even 77% of *Fidesz* voters were supportive) (HVG 2020). In addition, around 60% of the Hungarian public back extending the competence of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), i.e. they would support an institution that would investigate the misuse of EU funds and corruption.

SERBIA

Negotiations between Serbia and the European Union about the accession process were stepped up after the removal of Milošević's authoritarian regime from power in 2000/2001, bringing an end to the country's political and economic isolation. Serbia officially applied for EU membership in 2009, and it became a candidate country in 2012 as part of the EU's plans for future enlargement (together with other countries from the region: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Turkey). On 19 December 2009, visa requirements were lifted for Serbs travelling to Schengen countries (which incidentally also sped up migration to Western Europe). At the time of writing, the accession negotiations are still ongoing, and the country is receiving significant development assistance (by 2020, Serbia had benefited from support worth €2.9 billion from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance). The EU is by far the biggest donor to Serbia, and the Serbian government's cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague during the 2000s was a key factor in the accession process.

However, the country has faced many major challenges in its relations with the EU (Ministry of European Integration 2020; European Parliament 2019). Right from the start of negotiations, one of the main obstacles to Serbia's accession to the EU was its strained relationship with Kosovo, given the Serbs' refusal to recognise its sovereignty (Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008), despite the fact that as recently as 2021 that the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo was highlighted as a priority

and a prerequisite for EU accession. While Serbia's "claims regarding Kosovo will continue to take precedence over any potential prospects for accession" (Pérez 2020), the EU is trying to get to the heart of the problem. Demostat (2018) reports that a 2017 opinion poll showed that 69% of Serbs claimed that they would not support joining the EU if recognising the independence of Kosovo were made a precondition for accession.

According to the *Serbia 2020 Report*, there are major deficiencies in terms of Serbia meeting the EU's accession criteria, saying that while "[s]topping short of calling it a captured state, the Report describes a serious lack of progress in judicial reform, the de-politi[ci]sation of public administration, and the freedom of expression, while the oversight of [...] Parliament over the executive is described as barely formalistic. Corruption remains a cause [for] concern" (Majstorović 2020).

Apart from political concerns, serious issues have been raised about Serbia's economic policies (ibid.).[31] Criticism focuses for example on the lack of fully fair and pluralistic elections and institutional mechanisms. For instance, after the 2020 elections, the Serbian National Assembly was left without a clear and viable opposition (the Serbian Progressive Party's dominance was uncontested – it had 188 of the 250 seats and no real opposition), and the government was formed by the ruling coalition commanding an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly (the main opposition parties boycotted the elections).

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Furthermore, "Serbia's foreign policy is least adjusted to the EU common foreign policy positions. [...] It [is 60% aligned with] the EU positions on the various foreign policy themes, which range from Venezuela to Belarus" (Bandović 2021), in contrast to Montenegro and North Macedonia's 90–93%. Serbia even expressed an interest in joint Russian–Belarusian military exercises. Taken together, despite supposedly being a frontrunner in the accession process, from the EU's perspective Serbia is seen in many respects as lacking any real drive for reform and falling short in terms of tangible results, especially with regard to basic democratic principles and the rule of law (BIEPAG 2017). By 2021, while enthusiasm for the EU in Serbia had waned, a narrow majority of Serbs (around 54%) continued to support EU membership (European Western Balkans 2021).

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31 See also Stevanović (2018), European Commission (2020) and EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia (2020).

However, both the EU and Serbia have become less committed to the accession process. On the one hand, Pérez (2020) reports that "[t]he EU's ongoing identity crisis has motivated countries like France and the Netherlands to seek a slower approach to accession for candidates from the Western Balkans". On the other hand, he indicates that there is a "political realisation that the status quo is well worth preserving", points to "[i]ncreasing assistance from Beijing and [...] strong political backing from Moscow – two allies that will not demand domestic compliance with human rights standards in return for support" and says that "Serbia can additionally flirt with Russia and China and use this as a bargaining chip with the EU" (ibid.).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Vučić encouraged a narrative of victimisation by Brussels by (falsely) suggesting that Serbia was receiving significantly more aid from China (and that European solidarity was some kind of 'fairy tale'). Symptomatic of this was that 40% of Serbian citizens believed that China was Serbia's biggest aid donor (ibid.). Furthermore, according to a 2020 public opinion poll, 75% of the population thought that China had been by far Serbia's biggest provider of assistance in fighting the pandemic (Ivković 2021).

The country's "[o]pportunistic swings between Russia, China and the EU", as Bandović (2021) describes them, will surely become even more pronounced in the years ahead. To sum up, then, Serbia's commitment to the EU is more uncertain than it has been at any time since 2000.

Unsurprisingly, there is very close cooperation between the Orbán and Vučić regimes. The Hungarian government strongly supports the Serbian EU accession process, and Serbia is taking important steps to help the Hungarian minority living in Serbia, for instance, by allowing the privately owned Prosperitati Foundation to channel Hungarian government-backed funds to Hungarians from Serbia (Keller-Alant 2020). There is also significant infrastructure cooperation, such as the Budapest-Belgrade railway project (Inotai 2020a). Moreover, the Hungarian governing and economic elite is expanding its economic influence in Southeast Europe, including Serbia. According to András Juhász, "the expansion of Orbán's influence will hurt all those who want to bring about a progressive politics in the region. This is because [...] it is only the right who benefits from the Orbán government's money" (Juhász 2019).

THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF EU POLITICS

As is well known, the European Union itself is also frequently criticised for not being democratic enough, i.e. as an institution that has to be reformed – see, for instance, Fernández (2013) and Door (2013). Instead of simply using a paternalistic carrot-and-stick approach with regard to authoritarian countries such as Hungary and Serbia, which is lacking in coherence, expediency and effectiveness, EU Member States could serve as models only insofar as they are themselves at the forefront of promoting more civic engagement and a wider democratisation process that also embraces the economic sphere.

The EU has certainly made many significant blunders in the past two decades: (a) its failure to criticise Hungary or Serbia's undemocratic and socially damaging regimes during the 2000s; (b) its ineffectiveness and/or hesitancy for the most part in commenting on the authoritarian *Fidesz* and Serbian Progressive Party regimes; (c) its frequent encouragement of neoliberal policies that were socially damaging to the Hungarian and Serbian populations (a strategy which has very substantially contributed to alienation from the EU). As mentioned above, in the case of Hungary, the implementation of the rule-of-law mechanism was postponed as recently as 2020, prompting Orbán to declare a "victory of common sense" (Spike 2020).

As for the Serbian government, in spite of its underperformance in terms of basic democratic principles and the lack of cross-party and public dialogue encouraged by the EU, the Vučić regime continues to attract strong support and praise from EU ambassadors and representatives (European Western Balkans 2020a; Djilas 2020). Certain key critical voices and investigative journalists suggest that the symbolically generous and forgiving attitude shown to Hungary has been due to the close relations between the German federal government and its Hungarian counterpart (Panyi 2020; Techet 2020). The situation seems to be similar for Serbia, given that, according to Development Agency of Serbia (RAS) (2020) data, Germany is the country's leading investor. Thus, the suspicion is that economic interests trump objections about democratic principles.

However, overall, the commitment of both Hungary and Serbia commitment to the European Union is fragile and of a "tactical" nature. Both countries have very strong ties with the authoritarian Russian and Chinese governments (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty 2019). The Serbian case in particular seems to be a particularly sensitive one, given that "the EU has lost its momentum

in the Balkans and has let other powers fill the void. Now the Union has to compete with others over this part of Europe and makes concessions with the autocrats. The EU's conditionality policy lost both its stick and the carrot[.] New players, China, Russia and other non-EU actors are benevolent towards undemocratic governance as long [as] it secures them economic expansion" (Bandović 2021). One might ask whether the EU will develop more tolerance for sallies into authoritarianism, in order to keep Serbia (and to some extent even Hungary) on board as a partner. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that the Serbian government will soon adopt an even more hostile and confrontational policy towards the EU, like the Orbán regime.

CONCLUSIONS

At the start of this chapter, we proposed an analytical framework that draws on both the political phenomenology of the relevant authoritarian regimes and the underlying social structures, focusing in particular on economic issues. We offered an approach that takes account of both the circumstances and the subjective responses to the objective challenges, and also the special political methods and economic strategies deployed by the elites.

We claimed that the Orbán and Vučić regimes have very different geneses. While Orbán and *Fidesz* moved away from a liberal ideology to a right-wing, conservative one, Vučić and his followers abandoned their far-right stance in favour of a position somewhere towards the political centre, in line with the expectations of their Western European partners.

We also suggested that the geneses of these authoritarian regimes can be very clearly explained by a critical analysis of the 2000s – in those years, both the Hungarian and the Serbian governing parties pursued policies that were both pretty undemocratic and socially disastrous. Thus, both Orbán and Vučić's authoritarian 'solutions' during the 2010s were very much a response to the crisis of the 2000s. We might argue that disillusioned voters turned to *Fidesz* and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to facilitate a different economic politics. Both *Fidesz* and the SNS insisted on creating a political vibe that diverged from that of the 2000s, and they both combined the promise of establishing law and order with socially sensitive political messaging.

However, in both countries, neoliberal economic policies are still in the ascendancy. Both Hungary and Serbia are in real crisis in terms of rising social inequalities and the degradation of education and the health system.

There are also significant similarities with regard to the overall political vibe. Instead of outright prohibitions, both authoritarian regimes mostly call on more subtle strategies (monopolising the state-sponsored media, using elections and so-called national consultations as exploitable resources, etc.). However, these regimes have also been known to resort to violence.

At the time when the author was completing the writing of the first draft of this paper, polls showed that *Fidesz* was slightly declining in popularity. They also suggested that the united opposition (made up of six parties) could in principle defeat *Fidesz* in the 2022 elections (Bayer 2020b). Meanwhile, in Serbia, there is nothing to suggest any significant weakening of the dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party.

Any attempt to properly address these issues demands a rigorous analysis of what is going on. From a strongly conceptual perspective, what is today called "democracy" has very little to do with its original meaning in the classical European political tradition (Wood 2008). In fact, it would be better to characterise today's "liberal democracies" more specifically, namely as "liberal representative governments" which face serious challenges with regard to political and economic liberties. As has been demonstrated by many critical analyses, liberal representative governments are not at all incompatible with authoritarian regimes. Accordingly, one might argue, at least from a leftist point of view, that true democratisation means more than just a change in the members of the government. In particular the mere pluralisation of the political system and the reintroduction of checks and balances will be insufficient.

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In order to fully accomplish real democratisation, the public sphere should be enriched with more participative and deliberative processes. Furthermore, democratisation does not have be reduced to what is usually – and reductively – equated with 'politics', but should be extended to other social spheres as well (such as workplaces and neighbourhoods). This approach might seem to be somewhat unrealistic and idealistic; however, in both Hungary and Serbia in recent years, the most promising and creative ideas and practices were initiated precisely by grassroots, bottom-up movements or political organisations with significant civic engagement (in the case of Serbia, movements such as *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own), *Krov nad glavom* (The Roof Over Our Heads) and *Solidarna kuhinja* (Solidarity Kitchen); and in Hungary, for example *A Város Mindenkié* (The City is for All), *Közélet Iskolája* (School

of Public Life), *Deviszont*[32] and *Utcáról Lakásba! Egyesület* (From Streets to Homes Association)).

We are very much of the opinion that the authoritarian regimes can be roundly defeated (that is, at systemic and not only surface level) only if political and social change involves large-scale, decisive participation from ordinary citizens. In this respect, the significance of international actors should not be exaggerated – in fact, too much intervention from them might even be counterproductive. Specifically, it is better for existing problems to be resolved from within through greater citizen participation which people have actively fought for. Organic and gradual change from within would afford a new government in each of the relevant countries greater legitimacy, given that then the opposition to the authoritarian regimes could not be accused of serving foreign interests, and Western states could not be characterised as dictatorial colonial powers.

In order to bring about such change, broad-based popular participation in political processes would be needed both within the state apparatus (e.g. transformational change at municipal level, pressure being exerted on the public authorities to make changes in the judicial sphere, etc.) and in civil society (from trade unions to humanitarian grassroots movements) that would involve more inclusive and participative processes. However, international actors such as the European Union could still play a vital role.

In our view, the EU should certainly not put pressure on hybrid regimes to enforce neoliberal policies, nor should it blackmail authoritarian governments by inflicting harm on whole populations. As for the overall political messaging of the EU at symbolic level, it has to be as clear and reasoned as possible. However, all actual sanctions should be directed at the governments responsible for the further decline of civic and political rights, and not at the people of their countries.

As we have suggested, in both Hungary and Serbia, voters were disillusioned at the handling of social issues in the 2000s. For instance, it is telling that nowadays *Fidesz* draws most of its support from employed workers and the

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32 This organisation providing a community space for disadvantaged young people in Budapest derives its name from a widespread Hungarian expression unconventionally bringing together the words for "but" (*de*) and "although" (*viszont*) (Cooperative City Magazine 2019).

petty bourgeoisie, i.e. from classes with lower incomes. It is also interesting that both *Fidesz* and the Serbian Progressive Party used a somewhat leftist discourse as they rose to power (by adopting an anti-elite rhetoric, declaring war on corruption and organised criminality, using a 'fraudulent privatisation' narrative, etc.), including promises to keep alive what remained of the welfare state. If our analysis is correct, there are strong and authentic leftist sentiments in both Hungary and Serbia which are distorted by the authoritarian regimes and which other political movements might draw on one day in a very positive, emancipatory way. It is clear that these tendencies could flourish more easily if they could resonate with various initiatives relating to a more 'social Europe'. To sum up, all actors will need to deal with key economic and social issues if society is to be transformed at its roots.

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DEMOCRACY ON THE DEFENSIVE

DEFENDING AND RADICALISING DEMOCRACY:
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND STARTING POINTS FOR A POLITICAL AGENDA

TEPPO ESKELINEN

4

This chapter reviews, from the perspective of radical democracy, current threats to democracy and possible ways ahead. It is argued that the attempts to defend democracy from its authoritarian challenges, while naturally commendable as such, too often fail to engage in a process of properly defining democratic ideals. The currently hegemonic form of governance and decision-making, consisting of both democratic and anti-democratic elements, should not be confused with democracy as an ideal.

The article then analyses the anti-democratic elements in the currently hegemonic form of governance. The economic sphere in particular mostly operates without any attempt to ensure democratic legitimisation. This has allowed the neoliberal order to establish itself even without substantial democratic support. Furthermore, legitimisation of politics on the basis of expertise has come to increased prominence at the expense of democratic legitimisation, enhancing the power of experts ('expert power'). The power of these anti-democratic practices also means that democratic space can be lost even while formally and procedurally institutions remain democratic, in addition to the more obvious possibility of being discarded by authoritarianism.

This analysis in then used as a basis to explore the potential democratic strategy for the left. It is argued that while the left naturally has no difficulty in choosing between democracy and authoritarianism or democracy and right-wing populism, it should also be able to see beyond the existing hegemonic hybrid instead of legitimising it. Particularly the discourse on the need to oppose 'post-truth' narratives risks legitimising expert power. Instead, the left should see that even defending the democratic elements in the hybrid, let alone pushing for a progressive agenda, requires active efforts to radicalise the idea of democracy. Therefore, in light of these considerations, the article attempts to map starting points for a left-wing democratic strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is back on the political agenda, after years of being treated as something of a political platitude that was too self-evident to even deserve being properly addressed. The end of the Cold War led to the framing of democracy as almost above political contestation: while clearly some openly non-democratic regimes remained, it was believed that they would wither away virtually with the passage of time alone: sooner or later they would be overthrown. Transformative movements largely framed their vision around the vocabulary of social justice and opposition to corporate power, which confined the democracy discourse to small pockets even within the language of activists/practitioners. Left-wing political players regarded addressing labour issues and economic inequalities as more relevant than talking about democracy.

Now democracy has re-entered political discourse as a result of the sudden pressure it has come under. Emerging powers that do not show allegiance to the practices, symbols and traditions of liberal democracy have become increasingly self-confident, and are certainly not just withering away. In addition to its manifestation in the case of the developing superpower China, blatant authoritarianism continues – or is indeed beginning – to rear its ugly head on many fronts closer to home for the supposedly victorious democracies, what with Russia, Turkey, the 'emerging' continent of Africa, and even within the EU. Simultaneously, constant fears are expressed about the erosion of the social basis of democracy: misinformation spread by means fostered by the internet age militate against democracy as we know it. The looming threat to democracy in this case is seen to be general ungovernability.

These concerns divert the left away from the agenda where it has been most at home. What could the left's reaction to this unfolding threat to democracy be? Clearly it will stand for democracy when the alternative is totalitarianism. Also, who would not be a supporter of a fact-based approach if the alternative is misinformation? Typically, the left will articulate these ostensibly self-evident positions and then hope to shift the agenda to economic issues and other preferred topics. But by reacting to authoritarian pressures on democracy by defending democracy as we know it, the left makes its own voice on democratic ideals fairly inaudible. There is not much to gain from defending the status quo of democratic politics.

Here I argue that instead of accepting the existing framing of the problem of democracy, the left should actively seek to deepen and radicalise its vision

of democracy. This radicalisation means also avoiding the compartmentalisation of 'democracy issues' on the one hand and 'economic issues' on the other. Democracy is certainly of value, under threat and worth defending, but the hegemonic liberal capitalist version of democracy is a very limited, even distorted, version of this. Defending democracy should not mean defending this institutional constellation, but rather articulating a vision of radical political equality, extending to economic relations. Essentially, democracy is not a model, but a utopian goal – perhaps unattainable, but worth moving towards.[1]

I develop this argument below as follows. First, I will analyse in more detail the current threat to democracy. Subsequently, I will present an analysis of the liberal capitalist model, categorising this as 'hybrid democracy', and describe its particularities in terms of the economy, liberal individualism and expert rule. In the context of this analysis, I will set about articulating a conception of radical democracy, evolving into a potential blueprint for one possible left-wing approach to democracy.

Keywords:
liberal capitalist democracy
authoritarianism
expert rule
left-wing democratic strategy
radical democracy

THE CURRENT THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

As noted, democracy has long been taken as something of a centre of gravity and interpreted with a geopolitical twist, the assumption being that interaction alone would turn the remaining dictatorships into democracies. In this connection, it was believed that China, for instance, would transition into a democracy by means of commercial engagement (Weede 2003), perhaps supplemented

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1   On utopias as politics, see Eskelinen et al. (2020).

with scientific collaboration (Weiwei 2020). Markets would automatically bring about a democratic sentiment, and exposure to education would open the eyes of the Chinese people to the supposed wonders of the West, including its political institutions.

What we are seeing today is democracy losing its place as purportedly everyone's common destiny and the norm that everyone is moving towards. The world has largely accepted that liberal democracy cannot simply be assumed to be the future without political contestation (see e.g. Mounk 2019). This is forcing democracy to go back to some basic questions, starting with why is it superior to its alternatives, and why is it worth defending? And ultimately, what deserves to be called democracy?

The main problem with the current discourse on authoritarian threats is its geopolitical framing. Anti-democratic tendencies are believed to exist outside established democracies: authoritarian governments are known, for example, to rig elections and suppress the independent judiciary and are criticised accordingly by countries that view themselves as irrefutably functioning democracies. At worst, this can be a justification for aggression against 'non-democratic' governments. This was most apparent in the United States' operations in the Persian Gulf, with the related complex power relations and struggles with the Middle Eastern regimes being presented simply as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism.

However, the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism is *not* a geopolitical one. Rather, democratic practices and freedoms are in retreat everywhere. Freedom House (2018) notes that civil liberties around the world deteriorated to their lowest point in more than a decade in 2017. The global umbrella organisation for civil society CIVICUS (2017: 8f.) reports that the participatory freedoms of civil society have been curtailed around the world, not only in authoritarian regimes but also in countries generally regarded as democracies, as a growing intolerance of dissent comes to characterise all kinds of systems. Plurality and spaces for contestation and genuine participation are restricted to a narrower space, whatever the formal means of decision-making. Furthermore, there is a certain sense of powerlessness when it comes to the democratic steering of society: it is worth noting that northern European welfare states were dismantled despite strong popular support for them – and despite the nations being praised as particularly effectively functioning democracies.

So the worrying state of democracy should not be seen only in terms of the number and power of authoritarian states increasing, but also as a symptom of systems we routinely call "democracies". The immediate follow-up question is: should democracy not be first and foremost protected 'at home'? How can democracy be defended if it is gradually weakening everywhere? Furthermore, do we know exactly what to defend, i.e. is the essence of democracy as self-evidently clear as could be assumed from the discourse surrounding authoritarian threats? And most importantly, why do there seem to be so few people rallying around democracy if it is so clearly superior to alternative political ideologies? These questions prompt us to turn now to asking questions about the essence of democracy.

DEMOCRACY AS WE KNOW IT – THE CONCEPTION OF A HYBRID

The meaning of democracy might seem to be unambiguous, but this is only the case if democracy is seen as synonymous with the liberal capitalist democratic model of decision-making and governance, which currently dominates the discourse and practice of democracy. This is an understandable fallacy, because of the virtual omnipresence of the liberal capitalist model. While on the surface, the model comes with some variation – say, some varieties might perhaps be more protective of rights and others perhaps more deliberative (see e.g. Held 2006) – this ostensible variation conceals the uniformity of the widely disseminated model.

But an existing situation says nothing about what has been and what could be. Democracy, in its dictionary meaning, refers only to the idea of equal political participation by everyone, and this idea can be institutionalised in myriad different forms. For example, classical ideas of democracy departed significantly from this currently hegemonic conception. More to the point, there are few limits to possible ways of organising a democratic system. Also, it must be said that democracy has never been disseminated as a society-wide principle of organisation, and so we can only imagine what a completely democratic system would look like.

Indeed, all existing 'democracies' are hybrid forms of government, containing both democratic and anti-democratic elements. Therefore, democracy can be approached from two perspectives: by looking at what the democratic and anti-democratic elements are in the model calling itself 'democratic'; or by

trying to conceive of what an ideally democratic system would be like. The latter perspective also raises the question how the current social system would need to change if there were to be a move towards this kind of ideal democracy.

The liberal capitalist model of democracy is based on representation, the popular vote, majority decision-making, constitutionalism and the idea of democracy mediating between individual rights and government sovereignty. Most importantly, it involves a strict conception of which issues belong to the domain of politics to be decided in a democratic manner, and which issues do not: most strikingly, economic organisation is largely pushed outside the scope of the 'democratic' sphere. Furthermore, although emphasis is placed on the method of decision-making, this notion of democracy is essentially a formal one, with the essence of democracy lying in the appropriate voting system, legal institutions that support the functioning of democracy, individual rights, and various checks and balances in political decision-making.
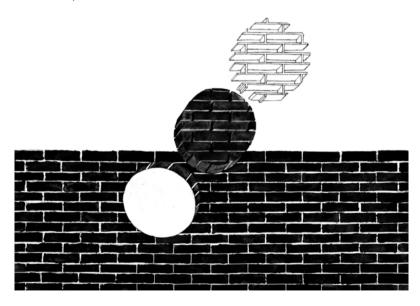
However, because of its emphasis on the formal side, the liberal capitalist conception of democracy says very little about the substantive aspect. As indicated in relation to the CIVICUS reference above, the space for political participation can be reduced despite the formal procedures remaining intact. It is all too common to observe that the space for civil society is curtailed while formal procedures are emphasised; that corporations exercise significant power despite the existence of a procedurally functioning democracy; that the economic policy space is shrinking; and that outsourced public services escape the control of the democratic political body. While democracy remains formally intact in this scenario, the versatility of public discourse and the scope of democratic politics are emasculated.

As a hybrid model, contemporary capitalist liberal democracy constantly seeks to strike a balance between the egalitarian ideals of democracy and hierarchical modes of organisation. Indeed, liberal democracy is not a static and ahistorical model, but a compromise between democratic and anti-democratic ideas. To analyse a hybrid model, we need to look at where the democratic ideas have been realised and where anti-democratic tendencies are at work.

There are certainly democratic practices on show in current liberal capitalist democracies, most obviously the highly democratic tradition of voting, based on the principles of one person, one vote; anonymity; and the inalienability of

voting rights. Democratic practices also abound in various kinds of contentious politics, experimental spaces and micro-democratic initiatives still relatively well tolerated by liberal capitalist democracies, despite recent adverse developments. Yet in other spheres of social organisation, quite different principles are applied. For instance, the organisation of a government office, a factory or a competitive market are without a shadow of a doubt very far from democratic. Within liberal capitalist democracies, there are many such hierarchical organisations, which are often defended on the basis of their 'efficiency'. Typically, business leaders see democratic procedures as nothing more than obstacles to be overcome. Such hierarchical organisations are so frequently encountered in everyday life that we even stop paying attention to their lack of democracy.

Hybridity implies two points that deserve further analysis. First, a hybrid system comes with a variety of possibilities. In the context of the current system, it is noteworthy that only the coincidental occurrence of political events binds democracy and capitalism together in contemporary political imaginations. While there could have been a historical moment in the early 1990s when democracy seemed most naturally compatible with capitalism, already back then relevant studies were arguing that this was mostly illusory, underlining the compatibility of economic development with authoritarian systems as well (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992).

Second, the form of hybridity is always open to change. The sphere of democratic politics is also continuously on the move and therefore has the potential to expand or contract, even if the functioning of formal elections and the like remains the same. Liberal democracies have experienced this tendency for decades. The current developments *within* liberal capitalist democracies demonstrate that the interlinkage between capitalism and democracy, which was always weak, is fading away ever more clearly. Every instance of a publicly controlled system being privatised or a university reform transferring power to the leadership is a struggle between democracy and hierarchy. The issue of democracy permeates society, rather than only being a legitimisation criteria in formal politics.

LIBERAL CAPITALIST DEMOCRACY: THE DETACHMENT OF THE ECONOMIC SPHERE

Perhaps the most defining feature of the hegemonic conception of democracy is its alignment with capitalism. Liberal capitalist democracy, as its name suggests, views democracy and the key capitalist institutions as being naturally attached within a single political system. Therefore, according to this way of thinking, departures from capitalist institutions (private property, commodified labour, markets, the banking system, universal money) would in practice also mean departing from democratic practice.

However, democracy and capitalism are clearly not interchangeable, as is apparent from looking at history or current organisational frameworks. Historically, capitalists have always organised their system to counter democratic pressures and manoeuvred to "take the risk out of democracy" (Carey 1996), although admittedly capitalism might have initially enabled democratic development by breaking up traditional power structures and creating a larger, more organisable working class. Capitalism then "creates democratic pressures in spite of capitalists, not because of them" (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Organisationally, liberal democracies entail a deep division between spheres of social life that are subjected to the need for democratic legitimisation and those that are not. Democratic practices are then compartmentalised into a distinct 'political' sphere, while the economy operates without such pressures. Importantly, nothing in the notion of democracy itself points to any justification for such a division. This is a feature of a particular interpretation of democracy, not of democracy itself.

The problem related to the distinction between politics and economics is captured by the old socialist slogan "democracy stops at the factory gate" (see e.g. Heller / Feher 1991: 107ff.). This highlights the essence of liberal capitalist democracy as a paradoxical form of democracy: It simultaneously celebrates the formal democratic procedure and yet limits the impact of democratic politics on society. The 'victory' of democracy after the fall of the 'Eastern bloc' can also be viewed through this prism of a hybrid or paradox: one aspect of the victory of democracy, and even a precondition behind this, was compartmentalising democracy to limit it to such an extent that it was not seen as threatening the organisation of the economy. In other words, democracy could win only if it was tamed – while ever more people would get to vote, voting itself would have less impact on society.

Applying the hybridity perspective to liberal capitalist democracy also leads us to note an internal tension. Not only is it the case that capitalism and democracy are not naturally attached, but they are in conflict: the capitalist tendency of concentration of power and its preferred hierarchical system of production tend to constantly counteract democracy, or create parts of life insulated from calls for democratic legitimisation, circumventing democratic procedures in decision-making. In other words, a liberal capitalist democracy unchecked by strong democratic counterpowers pushing for political egalitarianism will gravitate towards anti-democracy. The existing hybrid form, then, is not a product of arbitrary elements being matched together, but a fragile compromise in which capitalist interests continuously push society away from democratic virtues.

A key problem in contemporary democracy, as indicated above, is the strict narrative-based and institutional demarcation between 'economic matters' and the democratic sphere. Drawing on concepts such as "new constitutionality" (Schneiderman 2000) and "disciplinary neoliberalism" (Gill 2008), many scholars have theorised how an 'economic constitution' has been established to form a neoliberal order, which is extremely difficult to dismantle democratically. 'Constitution' is intended as an analogy: just like any state has a constitution, which cannot be easily changed in a routine democratic process, so the neoliberal order institutionalises its economic basis across countries to such an extent that this becomes similar to a constitution. This consists of sanctioned deals related to for example trade and investment, and *de facto* mechanisms which markets can use to 'punish' governments for deviating from market discipline. Indeed, 'free trade deals' both at the end of the

20th century and at the start of the 21st were much less about removing barriers to trade than about protecting investment from democratic politics.

Furthermore, corporate power takes precedence over democratic control. Capitalism should be understood not only as a logic of production, but also as a system in which big business wields significant power over politics. Therefore, no analysis of the state and future of democracy would be complete without pointing to global multinationals' existing interests and how they are promoted. This can mean simply using money to influence regulation, but the problem goes beyond detailed regulation to the very essence of the present-day multinational company. Crucially, multinationals today are not productive organisations. For a long time now, big business has outsourced production and logistics, and typically prefers not to own anything directly. Present-day multinationals are essentially systems of balancing money flows with risks, and managing risks. Risk management happens at all levels: firms will have to calculate, what kinds and magnitudes of risks to tolerate, when to be insured, and so on and begin to see reality as a set of risks, e.g. political risks, market risks, logistical risks and currency risks. Many of the risks can be mitigated by means of insurance and securities (Lipuma / Lee 2004), but 'political risk' remains a problem here, i.e. the ability of a democratic community to decide on its future. As a result, companies very actively focus on achieving sanctioned investment deals, sanctioned trade deals, and generally the lock-in of politics: a typical demand from industrialists is 'protection' for investments throughout their lifetime, and more generally mitigating the 'regulation risk'.

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LIBERAL CAPITALIST DEMOCRACY: INDIVIDUALISM AND COMPETITIVE REPRESENTATION

Another special feature of contemporary capitalism is its attachment to liberal individualism. Liberal individualism is generally portrayed as a strategy for seeing to it that individual rights are respected, which is necessary for democratic participation to function. But it can also mean that prospects for a better life and hope in general are 'privatised'. The privatisation of hope (Eskelinen et al. 2020) means that circumstances are such that people find it difficult to conceive of a better collective future and to organise to advance this, and so instead pursue their individual, private dreams.

This individualism is not only a form of governmentality, but also a political ontology. In other words, the essence of politics is regarded as a problem for mediating between individual valuations, thereby resembling a market. Individualist ontology also maintains an idea of detached, readily formed or non-communicating individuals. As a theory of society this is rather implausible, as if human beings emerged fully formed and all set to begin negotiating based on their existing wants (see e.g. Graeber 2011: 209f.). The consequence of such an approach is that the perspective of societal change, collective organisation and a public critical political discourse is downplayed.

Typical conceptualisations of politics subtly promote this approach: for instance, a common visualisation of politics is the 'political compass', which represents the political community as (unconnected) individuals placed on (fixed) axes. Polling techniques, for their part, implicitly suggest that politics can be seen as an exercise in revealing pre-existing needs. This notion was originally coined as a way of defending marketing, which was widely criticised for encouraging conspicuous consumption (Lears 1995: 235f.). The bottom line of individualist ontology is that it is not the antithesis of repressive collectivism, but the antithesis of collective societal change. If society is seen to consist of disconnected individuals, the prospect of organising for social change, or the prospect of a different kind of society, is gone.

Another characteristic of liberal capitalist democracy is competitive representation. Organisationally, this means representation instead of direct democracy, although small chinks of light guiding the way towards direct and participatory democratic systems do exist. However, this representation also takes a hierarchical form; indeed, the mindset typically points more towards electing leaders than electing representatives. The electorate hardly has available to it any checks on the conduct of the representative until the next election comes around. Indeed the very concept of representation is a complex one, and if taken seriously, poses difficult questions in terms of how a democratic system should be organised.

Furthermore, the existing interpretation of representative democracy is based on 'democratic competition'. While often viewed as self-evident today, this concept was only coined in the 1940s by Joseph Schumpeter, who conceptualised democracy in market competition terms. Before that, politicians were largely seen as conveyors of the will of their electorate, yet Schumpeter saw them as competing for votes (Schumpeter 1942; Mackie 2009). This concept,

while important in recognising the conflict aspect necessary for democracy (Leppänen 2016), was instrumental in emphasising the idea of politicians as competitors, for whom the electorate would only show support or a lack of it, as if the political subjects themselves were only a group of spectators.

OUTLINE OF A CONCEPT OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY

Above, it was argued that procedures and institutions we routinely call 'democratic' are not the same as democratic ideals – or perhaps it would be more appropriate to talk about the democratic spirit. Indeed, democratic politics should be always informed by such ideals, rather than giving too much weight to the existing compromise. I will now move on to outlining some initial reflections on what this spirit of democracy entails. Such manifestations have sometimes been called "radical democracy" (see e.g. Little / Lloyd 2009), even though it could just as well be argued that such ideas are in fact just being faithful to the democratic idea, as they go to "the root of democracy" (Laclau / Mouffe 2001). Qualifications such as 'radical' are not needed: we only need to look at the very idea of democracy without the limitations imposed on it by the existing system of power – or, in other words, the problem for deeper democracy is to "rescue the concept of democracy" (Eskelinen 2020).

Generally, the main distinction is whether democracy is seen as a social ideal or a method of decision-making. Liberal capitalist democracy clearly takes the latter view: democracy is seen as a method, merely the best political practice or due procedure for how a decision is reached. I will adopt the former view and suggest that democracy as an ideal could be based on three separate notions: egalitarianism, political community and an open future.

Egalitarianism is perhaps the most obvious starting point. Democracy is about everyone's power in the sense that no one should be in a privileged position in the political process: democratic practices such as voting are based on strictly egalitarian principles. A stronger version of this is that democracy means the institutionalisation of equality (Rancière 2009), the antithesis of any form of power based on the superiority of an elite of any kind. Democracy as 'anyone's power' also means that humanity as such forms the basis for legitimate political power, regardless of identities or personal characteristics, acquired or inherent qualities. These personal characteristics also include any formal qualification to rule.

So democracy could be defined as a construct in which social reality reflects everyone's will equally. This means that within society, all individuals should have an equal influence on the future form of the practices, institutions and principles that constitute this domain. Defined in this way, democracy is the opposite of hierarchy, in which some have more power over the form and future of social reality than others. Given the currently existing hierarchies, mechanisms of exclusion and inequalities in participation, the democratic ideal is quite far removed from the reality of the liberal capitalist democracy.

Being opposed to hierarchies in all social spaces and practices, egalitarianism is also the antithesis to the repression of minorities by the majority. While the threat of majoritarianism is sometimes presented as an argument against radical democracy, it should be mentioned that the politics of minority repression is a form of hierarchy, and therefore the diametric opposite of strict egalitarianism.

Moreover, democracy is always a quality of the *political community*. Rather than individuals having fixed (or arbitrary) preferences with only the need to find a method of institutional compromise between them, democracy should be seen as the means of a political community to contemplate on its future. This means not only an ontological but generally also a communicative starting point: it is not irrelevant how preferences are initially formed. Ideally, in the spirit of deliberative democracy, opinions are formed in an informed manner, and as a result of being subjected to public scrutiny and open criticism. We can conceive of societies with various degrees of procedural quality in decision-making, but however democratic the formal procedures are, this does not say anything about such issues as spaces for critical debate, informed public, free and investigative media, transparency, the capacity of citizens to force decision-makers to defend their positions, and so on. Such qualities of the community are not addressed if democracy is reduced to just institutional issues.

Seeing democracy as a quality of the political community also means that there is no reason to exclude any part of social reality from democratic politics. For example, as long as economic organisation has an impact on the lives of multiple people, it should be subject to democratic legitimisation just like any other public institution. Seen in this way, democracy is not a form of government, but a principle which can be applied to assess and develop existing practices and institutions, or to imagine completely new ones. Categories such as the market and the state should not be seen as informing predetermined institutional arrangements. Rather, all categories and institutions, including the language used to describe them, should be kept open to democratic experimentation (Unger 1998). In illustrating the possible extent of democratic considerations, sociologist C. Douglas Lummis (1997) discussed *anti-democratic machines*. While the concept seems to involve the paradoxical combination of incompatible elements, what is for instance an assembly line that allocates people into hierarchical positions if not an anti-democratic machine?

Another highly significant, almost defining, feature of democratic ideals is the notion of the *open future*. While there are of course various kinds of continuities in social life, democracy is a system in which the future fate of the political community should be kept open for reconsideration at theoretically any point of time. This also means responsibility of the political community over decisions: decisions should not be characterised in advance as 'wrong' or 'irresponsible', and instead, democratic responsibility and learning as a political community requires there to be the option to decide between a wide range of possible choices. The notion of the open future is particularly important in the context of contemporary politics, as many anti-democratic procedures have the specific aim of 'locking in' political outcomes in advance and shutting down the democratic space of the future. This is what many of the mechanisms described above do: the 'economic constitution', the general insulation of 'the economy' from democratic politics, and the tendency of big business to seek to secure 'predictable regulation regimes' for decades to come. Furthermore, expert rule seeks to pre-ordain only some possible future scenarios as 'sound' or 'possible'.

EXPERT RULE: WHY IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO DEFEND 'FACTS'

The political system of liberal capitalist democracy can be described as follows: the neo-constitutional economic order is accepted as given, and politics is largely seen as a form of management within this frame. Both aspects of this description (the limiting frame and 'politics as management') point to anti-democratic tendencies. While the symptoms of economic anti-democracy were already discussed above, it is worth analysing management and expert power as defining features of contemporary politics.

'Politics as management', or a management-based politics, means treating politics as technical problem-solving, i.e. 'running things', with an emphasis on procedures and skills involved in governing. Contemporary society is dominated by such technocratic governance based on expert knowledge of society, a promise to take politics out of policy, at the expense of democracy. Not only has the neoliberal order been a result of political decision-making, but this type of politics has been externalised into the realm of technical decision-making. Experts typically see their skill in administering a highly complex society as also informing the right to govern. As an element of the neoliberal order, some of this expert power is further outsourced to consultants, contributing to even lower levels of transparency and less democratic control over expert power (Ylönen / Kuusela 2019).

Judging by economic criteria, meritocratic expert governance is considerably more successful than unadulterated authoritarianism. A good example is China, where power is not based on just brute force but on effective planning. Political legitimisation is drawn from the power of the most capable and educated, instead of there being equal power for all citizens. From the perspective of meritocracy, democracy looks dangerously unpredictable, giving political power to the unenlightened (Bell 2015). The need that has been felt in the West for there to be predictable governance in a capitalist system and to insulate key institutions from democratic influence is indeed closer to the Chinese mindset than Western democrats are prepared to admit. This creates hard questions, e.g. what happens when democracy and economic interests collide?

Indeed, it is all too easy to ignore the development of capitalism when looking at the status of democracy, and it seems that current developments point to increased instability, which is seen in expert-led politics as a reason for

restricting the space for democratic politics. This instability is largely due to financialisation and increasing inequalities: investors can become jittery at the slightest unprecedented move by central bankers; multinational enterprises are wary about investing if they do not secure binding protections for their investments, overruling any future democratic decisions; and financial markets are filled with securities, as everyone seeks to obtain insurance for economic activities.

So there are, according to a rough categorisation, two main ideas regarding the justification of political power. The first is the 'Chinese-style' notion of justification on the basis of merit and the current ability to run a contemporary capitalist system; the other is the democratic idea of justification on the basis of popular will ultimately based on political egalitarianism. It is important to note that the 'Chinese' justification is by no means geographically restricted: for example, central banking in Europe is explicitly based on the idea of the formally qualified making decisions over monetary policy, and insulation of monetary policy from democratic control, despite the clearly political nature of involved choices. This is typically justified by referring to the 'functionality' of the arrangement in economic terms, and indeed it is difficult to point to any major difference between the narrative of the European Central Bank (ECB) and the Chinese narrative in terms of the justification provided in both cases.

However, expert power does not only come in the form of actually 'running things' without the need for democratic legitimisation, as is the case in contemporary monetary policy; often, expert power functions in a more subtle way. This results in the tendency, alluded to above, to turn politically contentious issues into ostensibly neutral management issues and thereby 'rationalising' the existing political order, and sometimes defining the realm of 'plausible' political courses in advance (Brown 2015). Thus there might be spaces for democratic decision-making, but the set of alternatives to choose from will have been defined in advance in an expert-led process.

EXPERT RULE: ANTIPOLITICAL SENTIMENT

The tendency towards expert rule could sound like an isolated phenomenon, and indeed on the surface, governance systems might seem to have little to do with individualist ontology. However, it is no coincidence that the idea of politics as management has emerged in conjunction with the strengthening

of liberal individualism. With individuals being viewed as increasingly isolated bearers of values and needs, the perspective of collective organisation for social change gives way to management. Liberal individualism then acts to create a mentality that is hostile to social change. Sometimes the concept of "rights without democracy" (Mounk 2019) has been used to describe a system within which liberal rights and consumer rights are protected, but a large number of predominantly economic issues are removed from public contestation into the field of management.

Furthermore, a general anti-political sentiment feeds into expert rule. It is easier for policy and management to displace politics if politicians are regarded as untrustworthy, selfish and corrupt, and democratic procedures in general judged to be inefficient. While of course it is necessary to reveal misuses of public funds, as a general sentiment or a caricature of political motivation, this necessarily entails the takeover of democratic politics by management-focused organisation. This sentiment is both captured and promoted by the

influential school of public choice theory (e.g. McLean 1987), which pictures politics as similar to market behaviour: politicians are thought to distribute public funds irresponsibly to their supporters to gain better positions in the political game. While empirical evidence of this actually happening is scant, by creating a caricature of politicians, public choice theory has helped to foster an atmosphere in which experts are seen as responsible and rational decision-makers, pushing aside notions of democratic responsibility.

The narrative of post-truth against democratic institutions has been frequently heard over the past decade. It sees a group of populists capitalising on an anti-globalisation sentiment and spreading misinformation, sometimes perhaps with the aid of non-democratic regimes. Most left-wing politicians today see themselves as enlightened in the sense of having a firm belief in science and rationality, and therefore can be tempted to follow the narrative on the post-truth threat. Furthermore, most often the label 'populists' is attached to right-wing extremists, and any rhetoric directed at such distasteful groups can seem justified.

However, while actual lies and propaganda sometimes do distort democracy, the post-truth narrative needs to be seen in context. The context is an era not particularly characterised by lies and propaganda, at least compared with many other recent periods in history, but an era of neoliberal constitutionalism involving a preference for expert rule. Reason and rationality are the rhetorical moves routinely used to justify the neoliberal order. This order came about with bland experts managing the economy, drawing on assumptions about the economy and governance (based on competitive markets and optimisa-tion, new public management, and public choice theory), and not so much as a result of raging neoliberals with a political platform, at least after the initial neoliberal revolution.

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As neoliberal governance is based precisely on this concept of 'expertise', the defence of 'facts' leads very easily to restricting the democratic space. This system of power sees any departure, be it populist or democratic, from its self-imposed norms as irrational. There is a need to show the political commitments concealed behind ostensibly merely reasonable management, not to provide more scope for this depoliticisation. The 'post-truth' discourse appears to offer a diagnosis and remedy for the problems of democracy, but in practice it actually reinforces the restricted idea of democracy.

DEMOCRACY AS COLLECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

Any criticism of expert power is often seen as a call to put all knowledge into perspective. However, this ignores a key aspect of democracy: the capacity of the democratic political body to develop. Expert power portrays all non-expert approach as unenlightened, while relativism leads to the conclusion that any point of view is equally good – both of these positions overlook collective learning and development.

The democratic utopia could then be understood as a political community learning how to govern itself without hierarchies. Sometimes this requires emancipation to achieve political subjectivity, for example in the case of independence movements, when the political subject understands that the colonising power is neither necessary for governing nor legitimate. Typically, in contemporary capitalism, what is required is the equalisation of political skills through education. In ideal terms, learning self-governance extends to all material positions and identities and becomes a strong anti-elitist stance.

A distinction worth making is the one between citizens as spectators and citizens as participants. A spectator can follow political processes, be interested in them, discuss them, and so forth, but does not have agency in the process. Participants in a process are 'on the stage' of democratic politics, as opposed to being spectators: functioning democracy is built exactly on this kind of active and critical subjectivity.

Institutionally, the meaning of the ideal of self-government is not perhaps fully clear, and yet we do not need an organisational blueprint to uphold the ideal. The notion of a self-governing community is the strict opposite of the idea of expert rule, the power of the qualified. The implication is not that anyone should assume positions of governance, but rather that the community has to learn to govern itself. Indeed, ideally democracy is first and foremost a communal learning process: by learning from mistakes, and negotiating representation and participation, the political body becomes the master of its own destiny. While Karl Marx never went into detail about the democracy discourse, the idea of democracy as the process of learning self-governance could be seen as coming quite close to Marx's philosophy of history. Democracy is the process of learning to live without hierarchies. This also highlights the importance of what could be called 'democratic skills', given the great significance of what kinds of critical and participatory skills citizens have. For socialists, a long-

standing aim has been to develop political skills: having some level of critical political literacy has been seen as important in this context. Democracy can then be seen as a continuum of the development of democratic skills – while a long way has already been travelled, there is still some distance to go when it comes to establishing an egalitarian political community.

Generally, democracy should be seen as a process rather than a procedure. This means that we do not expect people to be merely individual holders of values to be mediated, but see the political body as a self-educating and self-reflecting entity. Procedural ideas of democracy lack the perspective of development and reflection.

The point is not to deny that experts have skills – they do. But the democratic challenge is how everyone's skills can be promoted on the path to self-govern-ance. If the democratic community is not interpreted as a static system but as a system undergoing maturation, we can learn lessons from history, because through the ages, the skill to govern has been translated as false justification for being in power. However, this is the opposite of democratic legitimisation, which asks how everyone can develop political skills. The division between those who can rule and those who cannot is not fixed, and for example the history of the expansion of schooling and the development of venues of partic-ipation is a history of the development of democratic skills. The question then is how to move further in this direction.

PRO-DEMOCRACY POLICY WITHIN THE HYBRID AND BEYOND

Given the broad acceptance of democracy as a concept and the wide range of possible interpretations, various ideas fall within the purview of 'pro-democ-racy policy'. Therefore, it is worth reviewing such approaches to understand the broad choices related to the ostensibly straightforward stance of promoting and defending democracy.

First, as noted previously, democracy can be seen, in a geopolitical inter-pretation, as a defining characteristic of liberal capitalist democracies, while authoritarian countries are regarded as deviating from these ideals. As was argued above, this is a superficial approach because it fails to interrogate the developments within liberal capitalist democracies – at worst, it can even be used as justification for geopolitical aggression.

Second, there is an existing pro-democracy discourse speaking to issues within liberal capitalist democracies, but it comes in a highly trivialised form. There is an ongoing anxiety about decreasing voter turnout in elections, and yet there is also a failure to address the potential levers for democratic change. This means that low voter turnout is not treated as a symptom of an underlying disillusionment with the possibilities of democratic politics within the existing hybrid. Rather, democracy programmes tend to take trivialisation to an extreme: for example when the Finnish government launched a policy programme for democracy, practical outcomes for promoting democracy included a 'democracy prize' and an online democracy quiz.

Third, a long-standing strand of pro-democracy policy takes the paradoxical position of aiming to save democracy by limiting it. Clearly the 'post-truth' discourse involves the kind of fear of democracy which conveniently turns into an argument to limit the powers of democratic politics. In addition, expert power increases as the governability of capitalism becomes more difficult, and as democratic politics is satirised as instinctively wasteful. It is worth noting that while these can seem as entirely novel phenomena, the paradoxical approach to saving democracy has been apparent since at least the 1970s. By promoting "governability" and "moderation in democracy", back then it was hoped that "the twin dangers" of popular mobilisation and ballooning public expenditure could be kept in check by placing limitations on democracy (Crozier et al. 1975; Maisano 2019). The fear of public expenditure lingers even now, and indeed, today anti-democratic sentiments are typically countered by arguing for expert power, good governance and generally upholding the restricted democracy model.

The final alternative, for which I have argued throughout this text, is to push ahead with more systematic, deeper and more radicalised ideas of democracy – democracy that is genuinely participatory, unrestricted in scope, and based on uncompromising political egalitarianism. This should also form the basis for the approach of the political left. I will now outline this approach in more detail.

PATHWAYS FOR A LEFT-WING DEMOCRATIC STRATEGY

The above remarks are mostly theoretical and might sound abstract from the perspective of politics here and now. But some starting points can indeed be laid out for a democratic strategy for the left. 'The left' in this context should

be understood in the sense of a broad movement, i.e. not only consisting of political parties.

First, the emphasis should be on democratic ideals, not on existing compromises. As themselves the product of compromise, existing democratic institutions capture something of the spirit of democracy, but they are unnecessarily restricted. It is pointless to argue for liberal democratic capitalism; rather, democracy as political equality should be defended everywhere. This applies to solidarity towards movements for democracy in openly hierarchical contexts, and to attempts to democratise the system we live in. At times of turbulence and contestation, existing institutions and practices are questioned and new ideas are sought –ideas which may also emerge very quickly. However, it is crucial that in the event of such contestation, those concerned do not aim to uphold the existing compromise but to push for their vision.

Second, there is no point in believing in *ex ante* feasible or rational policies, but in everyone's power as opposed to the power of the qualified, and learning from mistakes when necessary. This could cause unease, in that it may feel uncomfortable to subject a policy to a democratic process, as defeat is a possibility. However, restricting democracy will very soon turn into a dead end, and indeed all democratic politics needs to take a 'leap of faith' in trusting everyone's power as ultimately the only source of legitimate power. If democracy is seen to mean 'anyone's rule', the challenge will be to elevate the 'anyone': the human being with the rightful claim to an egalitarian say on the future course of society, regardless of the qualities and qualifications of that individual.

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Third, democracy should be understood as a virtue of participation and a realm of public criticism: it is crucial what kind of information and what kinds of critical spaces are available. Discussion platforms and semi-public assembly spaces can be equally important for the democratic procedure as formal voting; the same applies to the existence of critical media. Participation has value as such. For example, a political party does not exist only to espouse its desired policies as much as possible but also to engage citizens. Or more to the point: compromising on engagement means also compromising on the goals. Upholding arenas for social criticism is important in itself.

Fourth, democracy should be widened and deepened. In other words, it is worth supporting direct democracy initiatives such as referenda and participatory budgeting (Kaufmann et al. 2010), and pushing the concept of

democratic legitimisation beyond the constraints of what is currently accepted as the scope of politics. There is a need to insist on the inseparability of 'the economic' and 'the political'. This means, for example, pushing for democratic control over institutions such as central banks. It also means industrial democracy: the scope of the politics of the left should be extended into the 'internal' system of organisation within organisations forming part of the economy, such as large firms.

Moreover, note that there are economic conditions associated with political participation and economic inequalities that have to be eliminated for participation to be egalitarian – and therefore democratic. The liberal capitalist conception of the separability of the economic and the political also means that economic disparities are not treated as problems for democracy. A way to formulate this idea would be as follows. Ancient democracy was limited to free men, as only they were seen to have the economic independence, education and available time needed for informed decisions and substantial participation. While the liberal capitalist conception says that such qualities are irrelevant, a democratic goal could be for everyone to be like those free men of Antiquity: viewed in this way, a functioning democracy means that everyone should enjoy a sufficient degree of economic independence; have enough free time, i.e. time not doing work or household chores; and have sufficient access to relevant information, the skills to process it, and appropriate outlets for expressing their opinions.

Fifth, democratic practices should be seen where they exist. Our societies are full of democratic micropractices, but we just tend to call them 'activism', 'community development', and so on, instead of seeking to support such practices as democracy policy. This extends to international solidarity: while democracy movements are typically seen as large outbursts of political energy, micro-practices always exist. Much democratic practice exists in marginal spaces, and the macropolitical level needs to ask how to promote such existing democratic forms.

Finally, there is a need to look beyond the immediate political community to ensure the proper remit of democratic participation, e.g. apply the all-affected principle. In practice, this means taking decisive steps towards a post-national or global democracy. This is articulated in many visions of a democratic planetary community, while the current state system is conflict-prone, unstable and involves belligerent tensions (see e.g. Wagar 1999; Attali 2009). Furthermore,

there is a broad set of existing ideas for democratic reforms of the international system as we know it (Teivainen / Patomäki 2003); visions for global political parties (Sehm-Patomäki / Ulvila 2007) and world parliaments; and ideas for global democratisation of the world system in general (Boswell / Chase-Dunn 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, the question most vital for the future of democracy is whether democracy has a sense of hope or not. It is not a set of institutions, and most definitely not the 'end of history', where political contestation has settled. Democracy is a vision of an egalitarian politics where all voices are equally loud and where material positions are organised so as to enable truly egalitarian participation. Hope, which is perhaps the most overlooked concept in democratic theory and practice, means both that democracy is worth struggling for, and that democracy remains only an aspiration: "The horizon for radical democracy […] is the (impossible) realisation of democracy itself" (McNeilly 2016).

Historical struggles for democracy have not limited themselves to the liberal capitalist conception. From 19th-century socialist movements to the South African anti-apartheid struggle prior to the 1990s, the hope invested in the notion of democracy was clearly based on the idea of economic justice, i.e. broad and substantial egalitarianism. What are the reasons for defending democracy today? "Hardly anything" is the answer if democracy is interpreted as the existing hybrid. For democracy to be something to struggle for, it needs to convey hope. The prospects for democracy are not based on the future of formal institutions but on the general confidence that democracy can provide in terms of matters that are relevant to people's quality of life. Only when becoming subjects of a process do citizens come to care about democratic politics: some relations come to *feel important*. The recipe for saving and deepening democracy starts with avoiding indifference.

The liberal capitalist form of democracy has been tamed long enough to cease to be an ideal. Liberal capitalist democracy has given democracy a bad name, as it has become widely interpreted as *the* democratic model. The hybrid has been done very badly in terms of winning support. New democracies have experienced this hybrid model, with all the inequality and desperation involved, and are full of people reluctant to support it. In this light, it is unsurprising that

democracy has begun to crumble. The answer to the threats facing democracy is not to defend the existing liberal capitalist institutions, but to restate democracy as an ideal. This means treating economic inequalities and expert and corporate power as obstacles to democracy, instead of confining these to the economic domain.

The first strategic starting point in deepening democracy, as banal as this might sound, is to not be afraid of democracy. However, we are so used to various restricted forms of democracy that the idea of radical democracy can feel unsettling. But the capacity to rule and the related responsibilities only emerge with sufficient powers. So instead of democracy in some matters and some spheres of social life, the goal should be to push for the unrestricted idea of democracy. In other words, either the future is open for the democratic community to take responsibility over it, or it is closed in the interest of some other power than democracy. This applies to all politics. Ostensibly, efficient but non-democratic paths to promote one's political agenda can be adopted, but in reality, this agenda cannot be detached from the means of promoting the agenda. Either we strive for political egalitarianism, or we do not. This is what democracy is all about.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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THE NEXT TECHNOCRACY?

JANA TSONEVA

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This chapter argues that the unwillingness of European governments to take on COVID-19 with draconian, China-style quarantines (rooted in the prioritisation of 'the economy' and profits over health) amplified the role of technology and automation in the (futile) efforts to suppress the disease. As the second wave shows, this strategy failed abysmally resulting in thousands of unnecessary deaths while economic hardship is hardly going to be averted. I discuss these issues from Deleuzian and Marxist perspectives, deploying the concept of the 'society of control', and showing the limits to any drive to automation, especially in a pandemic context. Technology grew in importance in lieu of lockdown, and with it – corporate power over state power. All this has palpable effects on democracy, discussed in the penultimate sections. The chapter concludes by marshalling instances of resistance to these developments, urging more thorough mobilisation against 'algocratic power'.

INTRODUCTION

In 1972, Yugoslavia stopped the last outbreak of smallpox in Europe with a rigorous and uncompromising two-month-long lockdown (Marinov 2020). In 2020, Europe is taking on a pandemic with partial and intermittent lockdowns opposed by broad swathes of society. Despite being taken from the toolkit of 19th-century epidemiology, the 1972 lockdown proved highly effective in Yugoslavia's socialist economy where the state could quickly centralise the supply of essentials with the help of the country's army. In contrast, contemporary neoliberalism cannot cope with prolonged periods of stoppages to economic activity, not least because of models shaping production along "Just in Time" (JIT) lines as well as the mountains of debt our economies are sitting on, which can all too easily trigger serial bankruptcies when the chain of transactions breaks somewhere (Marinov 2020). The fundamental inability of neoliberal capitalism to pause its activities, even if just to save lives, ramps up the role of technology in suppressing the disease.

This chapter traces the effects of the technological handling of COVID-19 and the concomitant increase of corporate power on labour and democracy. It asks to what extent the pandemic has consolidated pre-existing developments in automation and digitalisation, and the rise of corporate power. Automation is one of those entangled and polarising issues which embodies both great hopes and great fears. It promises ultimate control over nature, liberation from strenuous work, more leisure time, freedom from scarcity, and absolute knowledge. Yet it has also been a harbinger of unemployment, longer working days, less freedom, subjugation, and the loss of whatever illusory control humanity enjoyed over nature, leading to a crisis of knowledge and incalculable uncertainty (Bridle 2019). It seems unstoppable, buttressed in part by the exigencies of the pandemic-induced social distancing measures.[1]

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Will the sweeping deployment of digital tech and automation in the fight against the virus usher in an era of a new, high-tech totalitarianism, a veritable "technopolis"

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[1] In actual fact, technological progress has slowed down, with the exception of information and communication technology (ICT). According to the late David Graeber (2015), technological progress grew at an exponential rate from the 17th century onwards but have stalled since the 1970s. Among the numerous reasons listed for this, are the shift of investment towards labour disciplining tech after the revolutionary tremors of the 1960s and the realisation, on part of capitalists, that too much automation indeed undercuts the basis of capitalism. Thus, argues Graeber, instead of the proverbial flying car, the most significant advances have been in surveillance, control, discipline and communication technology (such as computers). To this we can add as another reason the fact that after the 2008 crash, a lot of idle venture capital propped up the emergent digital start-ups (Srnicek 2016).

where distinctions between state and corporate power cease to obtain as they grow stronger between the social classes? Maybe. Yet crises do not merely speed up existing contradictions, but create capacious possibilities for progressive political action: despite social distancing measures, mass protests have not abated in 2020 (Tsoneva 2020).

The chapter begins with a discussion of the differences between modern and post-modern power to understand COVID-19's likely political impact. Then it shows the "elective affinity" between the handling of the disease and the workings of post-modern power, understood through Deleuzian optics. While COVID-19 revealed the vulnerabilities of "Just in Time" capitalism, triggering the most dramatic rise of unemployment across the developed world (Tooze 2020), the chosen anti-pandemic measures fit perfectly with what Deleuze called the "society of control" where power targets subjects in precise, technologically mediated ways. Further-more, the chapter shows how COVID-19 entrenches the workings of corporate power by amplifying automation. It concludes by marshalling instances of the limits of automation and by calling for social resilience that could keep corporate power in check, and thus save and renew democracy.

Keywords:
technology
automation
COVID-19
societies of control
Deleuze

DISEASES AND THE DISCIPLINES

An understanding of disease outbreaks is crucial to a grasp of the evolution of regimes of power. In a new book comparing the British and American responses to infectious disease in the 19th century, Charles Allan McCoy (2020) differenti-ates between extensive and intensive state power. The former constitutes the lateral expansion of state territory achieved through war and conquest, while the

latter is the *augmentation* of power. There are many ways to augment power but none as efficient as a major disease outbreak. This is because an outbreak necessitates a deeper reach into the everyday lives of the citizens or subjects.[2] In these events "tactic becomes technique" as the state at first experiments with *ad-hoc* management solutions until they get institutionalised as the "normal" and permanent response (McCoy 2020). The 1892 cholera outbreak in Hamburg is a case in point: it spelt the end of the *laissez-faire* regime of the city state and deepened the centralisation of the modern German nation state (Evans 2005). In retrospect, deadly outbreaks have historically been "ground zero" for innovations in modern power. This gives us every reason to suspect that because of its magnitude, the COVID-19 pandemic will leave indelible marks on contemporary democracies.

Deadly epidemics, as Michel Foucault (1996; 2009) has shown, lubricated the formation of modern capitalist governance. The (early) modern containment of deadly epidemics exemplified what Foucault calls "disciplinary society". Power in this type of society operated via prohibitions and enclosures: the exemplary spaces of enclosure being the school, the factory and the prison. Foucault details the shift from the regulation of leprosy, by excluding the afflicted *outside* cities, to the regulation of the bubonic plague, by quarantining the sick and those suspected of being "contact persons" *within* the city limits. This novel institutional "management" of the disease was predicated on a whole new institutional apparatus, designed to gather information to "contain" the spread.

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In the 19th century, the management of epidemics overlapped with the management of the "dangerous classes", marking the ascendance of the modern bourgeois state order in Western Europe. Epidemic control and the containment of class strife obeyed the same protocols: hygiene, instruction, instilment of bourgeois values, containment, individuation, housing reform and modern urban planning which built large boulevards to frustrate both the erection of revolutionary barricades and the generation of miasma, blamed for the outbreak of diseases. Designing the city to ensure the circulation of fresh air and the free circulation of capital became one and the same project (Hristov 2006).

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2   McCoy (2020) adds that state responses are mediated by the dominant scientific paradigm. As the main approach to disease, miasma theory inclined authorities to adopt sanitary and welfarist measures. Then, he goes on, in the late 19th century, miasma was displaced by germ theory, which focused state governmentality onto the bodies as repositories and vectors of infections, and this in turn increased the role of the military and surveillance apparatus of the state.

The paradigmatic confinement spaces of disciplinary modernity were the school, the asylum, the factory, the camp and the prison, while epidemics provided the most concentrated image of the disciplinary response to contagion of the (early) modern state. Power generalised the disciplinary mechanisms of governance from the enclosed space of the factory to the whole of society. The practice of confinement, with quarantine as its quintessential form, exemplifies disciplinary modernity to such a point that it has even been argued that the (concentration) camp is modernity's purest institution (Agamben 1998; Mrázek 2020).

What, though, of late (or postmodern) capitalism?

While in the early months of the COVID-19 outbreak, most European countries and some US states experimented with lockdowns and quarantine, COVID-19 was met with no drastic measures in summer 2020, despite failing to disappear as most common respiratory diseases do over the summer. Similarly, there was a lot of opposition to lockdown during the second wave, at both societal and governmental levels. Despite high infection rates, lockdowns Europe were 'soft'. Even so, they were unpalatable to many. For example, the UK government's strategy of tiered shutdowns unravelled after regional leaders "mutinied" (The Guardian 2020). What explains the short-lived recourse in "the West" to disciplinary modernity's main line of defence against contagion? In the next section I attend to the way neoliberalism shapes the response to the outbreak. My main argument is that technology's importance outweighs (and displaces) the recourse to the "traditional" method of disciplinary modernity (the quarantine) for the sake of the economy as JIT capitalism cannot handle long pauses. I develop this argument with the help of Gilles Deleuze's notion of "the society of control", showing how COVID-19 increases the grip of power over us, albeit corporate rather than state power.

DISCIPLINARY POWER VS THE SOCIETY OF CONTROL

Here the "society of control" concept promoted by Gilles Deleuze (1992) is immensely helpful to understanding the workings of contemporary (bio)power. Deleuze (ibid.: 3) takes the generalised crisis of disciplinary "spaces of enclosure" – the family, the prison, the factory and the school – as pointing to the emergence of a new historical form of power: the "society of control". Unlike disciplinary power which encloses, inhibits, represses and negates, the postmodern society of control operates via activation, motivation, incentives and coaxing (Han 2017: 18).

It does not repress but seduces. In short, it promises freedom rather than exacting outright subjection.

Unlike disciplinary society that casts the subject into distinct spaces of enclosure, a universal logic of modulation obtains in the society of control (Deleuze 1992: 4). Whereas disciplinary institutions act like fixed casts enclosing the subject, the society of control is a liquid, "self-deforming" cast which perpetually changes and adapts (ibid.: 2). While the former is akin to hardware, the latter resembles software and digital tech (Deleuze, after all, was describing the computer age.) This means that the old disciplinary institutions become nodes in a continuum or a *network* where modern distinctions cease to obtain, i.e. schools and hospitals start to behave and look like corporations which do not confer fixed identities but modulate their subjects by putting them in continuous competition.

For Deleuze, nothing captures this transition better than the corporation's dethroning of the factory system at the apex of the capitalist economy, with team building and corporate competitions replacing the drab and repressive factory discipline espoused by modern management. Unlike the factory whose power both individualised and massed the workers, favouring both managers and trade unions, corporate control *dividualises*.

Dividuals are people divided and grouped according to shared characteristics. The way Facebook advertisements work is a textbook example of dividuals as the target of power. Facebook tailors ads based on pre-defined criteria such as 'male', '30 to 40 years old' and 'university degree holder'. To make individual micro-targeting possible, 'smart' tech relies on huge agglomerations of data. And precisely this makes it the opposite of the mass approach; it does away with the *population*, replacing it with a vision that enforces the division of the 'mass' into myriad micro-targets. In the process it breaks with disciplinary modernity's production of individuals.

Deleuze, prefiguring the dominance of big data and algorithmic rule, argues that power in the society of control operates through *passwords*, *codes* and *watchwords* which "mark access to information, or reject it". To illustrate this, he invokes Felix Guattari's notion of the new city of control where modulating access replaces the old rules of confinement. In this view, residents can only leave their home or their city with a "dividual card" which modulates the city's frontiers:

"what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position – licit or illicit – and effects a universal modulation" (Deleuze 1992: 6).[3]

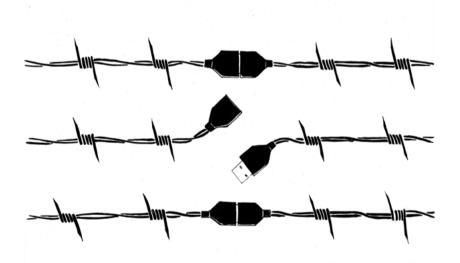## COVID-19: APPS, DEMOCRACY AND INFECTED SOCIETIES OF CONTROL

The pandemic gave Guattari's vision an eerie reality. For example, the UK considered rolling out an app which only lets you leave your home post-lockdown if it finds that you have no symptoms and have had no contact with infected people. This is reminiscent of the Chinese government's "health-code" app, which gives its users colour-coded warnings if they have been in contact with an infected person or have a confirmed COVID-19 infection. Chinese President Xi Jinping also suggested that the whole world should use a QRcodebased system to facilitate the cross-border travel of "healthy individuals" (BBC News 2020). Turkey's Ministry of Health developed its own tracking app, HES, which issues barcodes enabling travel within the country. The app also notifies the authorities of any quarantine dodging. The precision underpinning the ubiquitous micro-targeting we are familiar with from social-media behemoths proved appealing in terms of the 'smart' management of the pandemic, with this approach being applied to dividuals, who semi-voluntarily divulge information about their movements, social contacts and symptoms.

A still more worrying development in the modulation of access and movement came when some months into the pandemic, policymakers seriously began discussing the introduction of 'immunity passports', so that those who have got through a COVID-19 infection, can safely go back to work. For example, one boutique Bulgarian wine producer is already requiring job applicants to produce positive antibody test results. Less than a year since the Chinese city of Wuhan reported its first cases, there is still no conclusive evidence that Sars-CoV-2, i.e. the coronavirus strain causing COVID-19, generates any immunity, let alone lasting immunity, which only serves to underscore the temerity with which the

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3   I suspect that the universality of modulation as articulated by Deleuze is the narrow universality of class. In other words, far from being applicable in the same manner to everybody, this kind of tech-mediated governing regime subjects the different classes to different/differential regimes of inclusion and rule. Here, the perspective that Byung-Chul Han (2017) adopts concerning big data is useful as it is sensitive to the nodes where (bio) security and social class intersect and modulate each other, "leading to the emergence of a new digital class society" where a "banopticum" algorithm assigns some people to the "waste" category, thereby excluding them from Guattari's magic city (ibid.: 56).

elites in some Western European 'herd immunity' vanguard states such as the UK and Sweden gambled the lives of their populations to avoid severe disruption to their economies. (Thankfully, both the countries named here have long since abandoned this approach.)

To recap, philosophers like Deleuze and Han help us understand how power in neoliberal capitalism and the kind of subjectivity it engenders made the option of strict lockdown rather short-lived. After all, COVID-19 does not behave like Anthrax spores, lying dormant in ice for thousands of years before being picked up by an unfortunate passerby (Marinov 2020). As many experts agree, a strict three-week lockdown should have sufficed to nip the disease in the bud. (By this I do not mean what happened in spring 2020 with the numerous exceptions to the lockdowns, including allowing cross-border movement of 'essential workers', but a proper shutdown, with the army delivering food, etc.) However, the various governments chose otherwise, thereby upping the importance of digital tech for the management of the disease. Yet the increased reliance on technology has repercussions far beyond the immediate economic effects for its providers. What implications, if any, does this have for the technological management of the pandemic and its effects on democracy?

THE CORPORATE/COVID NEXUS

As COVID-19 wears down organised labour (including physically, in the case of 'key workers' on the front line of the efforts to contain the pandemic), tech corporations are wielding disproportionate influence. Changes to work, in the form of automation and working from home and also data mining for the purposes of contract-tracing and disease suppression, have immensely leveraged corporate power. The pandemic has lent controversial data mining the legitimacy of public health exigency. This has led commentators to inveigh against the threats posed by the involvement of big tech in the fight against COVID-19. As Yuval Harari (2020) says, the new digital technologies can lead to an unseen totalitarianism, far outstripping the worst totalitarian excesses of the 20th century. And as technological advances are quite compatible with 19th-century public health protocols, social distancing initially fuelled fears that civil society would be immobilised just when it is most needed to keep state and also private corporate power in check (Jäger 2020).

In the absence of societal mobilisation, corporate surveillance inches closer, gnawing both at citizens' privacy and at state sovereignty. This portends the emergence of a new technocracy – replacing the liberal experts of old – at the vanguard of post-political technocracy, beleaguered by populists on both the left and the right, but one embodied in the inordinate political influence of big tech and platform capitalism (Srnicek 2016). Digital start-ups and platform capitalism do what governments should be doing. Governments' bid to catch up with them will likely reshape the very parameters of sovereignty along corporate and big data lines. As Tom Westgarth (2020) puts it, the dependency on tech is so complete that "the technology informs the policy, rather than the policy informing the technology".

Many governments were caught off guard by the pandemic, which revealed their weakness in gathering and accumulating data to manage the outbreak. To this day, testing trails behind infection rates, and most governments do not know – and probably will never know – the actual number of infected people. Some particularly egregious examples come from Eastern Europe. For example, while the chief statistician in the Bulgarian coronavirus task-force team was explaining the spread of the disease with hand-written, numberless graphs (bTV 2020), Google took the initiative of collecting and publishing comprehensive statistics about movement trends in Europe in the wake of the lockdowns. While the Bulgarian government cannot say exactly how many migrant workers returned to Bulgaria following

the onset of the pandemic, the small Polish start-up Selectivv produced useful statistics detailing the cross-border movement of so-called "essential workers" (Hristova 2020).[4]

While this example could easily be dismissed as irrelevant coming from such a peripheral EU Member State, core states were not doing significantly better. To see this, you need go no further than the scramble for personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators at the peak of the contagion in Italy, aggravated by the partial suspension of international trade (since then, it has been suggested that outsourcing production to destinations for cheap labour is not necessarily the most economically sound option). Germany – praised in the 'Western' media for having the best response to the pandemic, had 5,000 deaths at the peak of the first wave, while Vietnam had zero at that time. As commentator Indi Samarjiva (2020) wrote, Germany can be presented as a success story only in terms of a "whites-only curve" and in comparison with even greater failures like President Donald Trump's America, which sets the bar incredibly low anyway. In France, state-administered PCR COVID-19 tests results come up to 15 days late, thereby invalidating the whole point of tracing the spread of the disease (Martin 2020). The UK herd-immunity strategy signified state abdication right from the outset, which was confirmed by the country incurring the highest infection numbers and death toll in Europe, and changed only after a team of scientists at Imperial College London predicted a death toll of 250,000 unless the government changed course.

THE CORPORATE/COVID NEXUS 2: A WEAK STATE VS STRONG PLATFORMS

While many developed countries (specifically in Europe), fearful of imposing stricter restrictions so as not to hurt their economies, are losing control over an elusive virus, there has been a concomitant strengthening of private platforms like Amazon, which saw record profits in 2020. Digital behemoths like Google and Microsoft are joining forces to create infrastructure that can harness user data for the purposes of controlling the disease, amassing even more data for sale. Big tech is better prepared to rise to the challenge of the coronavirus's highly

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4   Corporate tech giants might seem better equipped to handle the coronavirus's networked mode of spreading, but they are not necessarily more efficient at doing so than other players. Instead of collaborating and sharing the data publicly, the logic of market competition which these companies still follow, can actually frustrate or downright upend the efforts (Toh 2020).

networked means of transmission with untold consequences for the modern state and the state of labour.

Yet we should not fall into the (liberal) trap of pitting the state and markets against each other. As Evgeny Morozov (2020) says, the pandemic is "supercharg[ing] the solutionist state, as 9/11 did for the surveillance state", increasing the state's dependence on private corporations in the process. The pandemic has really made digital platforms like Zoom and Google the very basis of public life, ultimately leading to a privatisation of politics (as neoliberalism privatises the economy) (ibid.). Contrary to criticism of "surveillance capitalism", Shoshana Zuboff's contention that users are the new democratic force, akin to workers and consumers in the 20th century (Keating 2020), the privatised public spheres of digital platforms reduce citizenship to yet another strain of digital consumerism, simultaneously underscoring the vast inequalities in access to digital tech. Thus, where European governments are managing to exercise some control over the virus, this is partly thanks to the deployment of technology, developed by the private behemoths. And this is irrespective of whether the relevant countries are democracies or have authoritarian regimes. For example, Kazakhstan moved early on the virus and imposed the usage of obligatory tracking apps on its quarantined citizens back in March 2020 (Gussarova 2020). Albania was an early pioneer of the tech-mediated containment of corona, enforcing the curfew with traffic police drones (Koleka 2020). Ultimately, however, the outbreak of the second wave in the autumn shows the limits of tech-based solutions to public health crises.

My contention is that contrary to pronouncements that the lockdown is a "closed [undemocratic] society" (Krastev 2020), we can safely say that the problem for democracy did not stem from the introduction of lockdowns and the containment of the sick in order to disrupt the transmission of the disease, but the quick and premature lifting of such measures that inflated the importance of digital technology in lieu of disciplinary public health measures. And it did not stem from the restrictions but from their absence, nor from the introduction of a new alienated, contained and demobilised normal, but from the return to the old, if radicalised, normal, aided and abetted by digital technology.

That the Chinese contact-tracing app was developed to manage movement post-lockdown shows that digital technology is a tool to manage the pandemic in lieu of lockdown. Of course, it can also help authorities during lockdown, e.g. in the form of drones and contact-tracing apps forcing users to abide by the curfew by taking daily selfies at home or by other means. Technology does not always take

the place of quarantine but helps to enforce it, yet its greatest utility was manifested after lockdown (which was a short-lived phase in the management of the pandemic anyway). One notable example comes from Spain which redeployed a smart analytics system to trace the coronavirus in sewer water after lifting the curfews. Thus, the primary utility of technology is that instead of imposing a quarantine for all, which disrupts the economy, the apps use data to micro-target real and suspected virus bearers and isolate only these people.

THE CORPORATE/COVID NEXUS 3: INVERTED TOTALITARIANISM

The first wave of social distancing measures enforced by the upping of governmental executive powers led a plethora of scholars and commentators to decry the immanent roll-back of liberal democracy and even capitalism. The swift imposition of lockdowns indeed came as a surprise: who could have expected the ease with which governments would reclaim powers over globalised capitalism and bring it to a screeching halt to save lives? Things previously considered impossible suddenly became the order of the day. Debt cancellations, nationalisations, and variants of the universal basic income pointed to a nascent "public capitalism" (Jäger 2020), with governments energetically assuming control over the economy, in a way that had long been considered passé by mainstream economic thought.

This short-lived situation was mistaken for the new normal, leading some commentators to prophesise "permanent quarantine" (Kassabov 2020), resulting in the proliferation of apocalyptic visions of unbridled social control and the pacification and atomisation of society (Cunliffe 2020). Perhaps the faith in governments' commitment to care for and preserve life is unwavering, including (or especially) among critics on the left. The strengthening of the executive arm through the imposition of a state of emergency lent credence to expectations about the eclipse of democracy and the return of the disciplinary mode of control, exemplified by the logic of containment in the camp or quarantine. Giorgio Agamben's early texts on the pandemic, as well as the public debates they provoked, exemplified the fears of abuse of an exceptional situation as a normal paradigm for government (Agamben 2020), the replacement of a dignified life (Piron 2020), and of democracy with totalitarianism (as expressed in the more febrile rejections of the restrictions imposed to fight the virus).

I beg to differ. Contrary to the widespread fears of return to some old-school authoritarianism and an overconcentration of executive power in the hands of

governments, a new form of concentration of *private* power characterises the new authoritarianism. Here the notion of "inverted totalitarianism" introduced by Sheldon Wolin (2010) is helpful. This notion expresses the merger between corporate and political power. As Wolin (ibid.: 17) puts it, inverted totalitarianism is "the political coming of age of corporate power and the political demobilisation of the citizenry". It is a totalitarianism that does not negate electoral democracy and is instead compatible with it. And it makes good use of digital tech. In turn, this gives it a peculiar "aperspectival" quality promising total control (Han 2017: 50).

Unlike 'big brother' (the embodiment of classical totalitarianism) who had at best an indirect way of usurping the innermost space of the subject's mind and memory (i.e. by redacting history books and crippling language), big data "never forgets anything at all" (ibid.: 54). Unlike the analogue panopticon which isolated and silenced inmates, the digital panopticon harvests the data needed by the government by making us communicate and expose ourselves: "data is not surrendered under duress so much as offered out of an inner need" (ibid.: 13).

In that sense, we can expect COVID-19 to entrench a totalitarian inflection of the society of control, not through the (disciplinary) repressions and prohibitions that thinkers like Agamben anticipated in March and April 2020, but with a view to avoiding lockdowns and any further suspensions of capital accumulation. We are not observing some kind of return to 20th-century totalitarianism, understood as the overpowering of the state, but "inverted totalitarianism", understood as dominance of private corporate power making up for that of the state, reshaping state power in the process.

Yet an epidemic that has got completely out of control will also hurt capitalism, and so it cannot be allowed to run riot through the population either. Only at this critical juncture when we are preserving capital accumulation while also paying lip service to public health, can we understand the pivotal role of digital technology in managing the pandemic. This brings to mind the example of South Korea, where technologies and surveillance apps helped to keep the economy running without the need for a lockdown and with much fewer people falling victim to the virus than in the 'West'. For example, South Korea introduced a mandatory government app for contact and location tracing as well as bracelets for infected persons who dodged quarantine. Bloomberg reports that the government there repurposed "smart city" technology that is normally used to monitor and relieve traffic flows, for the fight against the coronavirus (Holmes 2020). The software traces the movement of the virus (along with that of infected people), showing the ease

with which the "Guattarian" smart city can transmogrify from an instrument of infrastructure management into an oppressive biopolitical-corporate tool.[5]

The upshot of this is that the new inverted totalitarianism is the product not of the strengthening of the repressive arm of the state in the name of public health, but of private corporate power in the name of capitalism's health. One effect of the increased relevance of digital tech power for the management of the disease is that state power is starting to resemble this. A case in point is China, whose "social credit" from before the pandemic combined the worst of two worlds: an authoritarian state "tradition", and the deep penetration of digital surveillance technology pioneered by the "progressive" Silicon Valley. Thanks to this pre-existing unholy mix of cutting-edge technological authoritarianism, China managed to suppress the coronavirus outbreak faster than the rest, at least with regard to the first wave of the disease. Even so, the role of technology should not be overestimated. China's success is also in large part due to the strict quarantine and extremely well-developed neighbourhood "patrols" and election "ushers" who could readily run the gauntlet of quarantine enforcement when the need arose (Long 2020).

More worryingly still, technology developed for the coronavirus came to the aid of the anti-democratic impulse of some governments. Contract-tracing apps designed to limit the infection began infecting democracy. The neat compatibility between epidemic-management tools and authoritarian technologies of governance was most clearly demonstrated when the government of Hong Kong began using contract-tracing apps, developed for the public health crisis, to trace and arrest participants in the city state's burgeoning democratic movement, establishing a symbolic equivalence between public health and the health of the body politic. Such a spurious connection also endangers the well-being of minorities. In a rerun of early modern patterns, every epidemic rekindles prejudice of minorities and the poor as "inclined to putrefaction" (Maglaque 2020). Modern technology is anything but colour-blind. In Bulgaria, for example, city authorities dispatched drones to walled-off Roma ghettos to remotely monitor the movements and

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5   "Smart" here indicates that data are collected and items and processes are managed through automated decision-making, but if we leave the theoretical realm, we see that this is a euphemism for corporate control over domains that were previously out of reach (Sadowski / Bendor 2018). This is an effect of private tech firms' dominant position on the market, but this could not happen without governments actively soliciting and promoting the introduction of "smart" technology into every aspect of social life (Sadowski 2019). It is the perfect governance model for the austerity state inasmuch as it promotes spending optimisation and entrepreneurship.

temperatures of residents as crop dusters and helicopters poured disinfectant over them from above, while the central government deflected responsibility more than once by blaming the outbreak on working-class migrants returning from other countries (Hristova 2020).

COVID-19 turns out to be the perfect disease for our times, striking at the very heart of how power operates in the society of control, such as through the precise micro-management of individuals and mass surveillance. As full lockdowns hurt the economy, the state is forced to resort to technology to contain the disease. This leverages the power of private corporations which supply such technologies and reduces pandemic control to the level of data extraction. The society of control inches thus closer to a state of "inverted totalitarianism" not because of the half-hearted attempts at lockdown in spring 2020 but because of over-reliance on tech. This is not to say that the society of control emerged because of COVID-19. Rather, the pandemic and the response to it mirror, make more visible and intensify *situated* tendencies in the society of control, most notably automation, and the rise of immaterial labour and technocracy. Yet the over-reliance on invasive technology and the concomitant rise of the new digital 'inverted totalitarianism' discussed above, spectacularly failed to contain the pandemic, as attested by the amazing force of the second wave. The next sections deal with the 'totalitarian' tendencies that COVID-19 intensified, and also with their limitations.

TECHNOLOGY'S CONTRADICTIONS

The theorisation of neoliberal, post-disciplinary society is frequently premised on an understanding of capitalism as bent on a dematerialisation course. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's *Empire* (Negri / Hardt 2000) gave rise to a prolific critical tradition conceptualising capitalism in post-material terms. In this view, the commodity-churning factory system that dominated the 19th and 20th centuries has been succeeded by a "smart" and "networked" capitalism exploiting affect, signs, intellectual production, "likes" and codes. According to Byung-Chul Han (2017: 10), "industrial capitalism has now mutated into neoliberalism and financial capitalism, which are implementing a post-industrial, immaterial mode of production".

The effects on state power have been tangible. As Han (ibid.: 23) argues, if disciplinary society discovered both the individual body and the population, to be managed via biopolitics, in the neoliberal society of control the psyche becomes the primary target for power as well as productive force, while "immaterial and non-physical

forms of production […] determine the course of capitalism" (ibid.: 26). Even the body drops out of the picture of the new regime of capital accumulation, except as an affective and aesthetic resource for capital to exploit (ibid.: 26).

These visions are quite compelling. Superficially, even mining became "dematerialised" (see Arboleda 2020): the modern coal mine is an automated facility, remotely run by miners-turned-control room operatives. As impressive as the automation of one of the most labour-intensive sectors in the economy is, it is affecting even professions that not so long ago seemed insulated from such developments, such as teaching and surgery. Tesla's Elon Musk just announced his latest start-up's brain chip, implanted by a surgical robotic hand.[6] In the UK, because of the pandemic, the government pushed for algorithm-based (i.e. automated) grading in schools instead of conducting examinations (e.g. school-leaving exams such as A-levels).

In both menial and non-menial occupations, the penetration of digital tech has been relentless. An example of this is university education, where distance learning in recent years facilitated the rapid migration to online classrooms during the outbreak. The same applies to all other jobs amenable to virtualisation. Suddenly online shopping and self-checkout machines in supermarkets have a new allure as a safer alternative to face-to-face contact. Indeed, some wax lyrical about the usefulness of digital tech in times of social distancing (e.g. Patrinos / Shmis 2020). But the discussion abounds in dark prognosis (e.g. Jäger 2020; Dörre 2020). For instance, commentators fear that the home office and lectures on Zoom are here to stay even if we drive the virus to extirpation. Should these predictions materialise,

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6   This development is the ultimate embodiment of the dialectic of freedom and subjection. While such chips are meant to provide increased brain capacity, functionality, near-perfect memory, and deliverance from common neurological degenerative disorders, I believe they also chip away at our freedom (excuse the pun!). And they do so in a much more fundamental way than the immediate concerns they inevitably raise about user privacy and remote control over one's data. Specifically, at one point in his presentation, Musk showed a slide of how such a chip predicts the leg movements of a lab pig with near 100% accuracy. What happens to the idea(l)s of free will when a human subject starts walking around with a device which knows exactly what their next step is going to be, before the subject is aware of it? As if anticipating such developments, Byung-Chul Han (2017: 54) argues that technology can intervene in psychological processes "in a prospective fashion. Quite possibly, it is even faster than free will. As such, it could overtake it. If so, this would herald the end of freedom." Building on the "code/space" ensembles of Kitchin and Dodge (2011), we can speak of "code/bodies", with developments like Elon Musk's Neuralink which take the proverbial cyborgs of Donna Haraway to an entirely new level; or code/citizens arising from the fantasies of immunity passports and code-mediated regimes of movement prompted by COVID-19.

it is considered that this will spell the end of organised labour and the eight-hour working day (Kassabov 2020). A joint Harvard/New York University (NYU) study shows that the home-office working day is on average 48 minutes longer (Green 2020). To make matters worse, it merges into the household chores, creating a seemingly endless, gruelling working day for women forced to juggle corporate Zoom meetings with supervising their children's online homework, showing that COVID-19 surely must be the single biggest challenge to each and every 'work-life' balance initiative in the EU. Is this the future? Well, four out of the five biggest US tech companies expect to continue the home-office experience in 2021 and possibly beyond that. Meanwhile, employers are seizing on the crisis to force down wages and get rid of 'excess workers'. It is also feared that the crisis will automate more people out of their jobs, speeding up the alarming emergence of a class of superfluous workers whom nobody wants to exploit anymore.

The most disconcerting developments have included the deployment of robot dogs to enforce social distancing rules in Singapore parks (Nalewicki 2020) and the use of drones for the same reason, and automated freight. Autonomous freight and drone deliveries may help to limit the spread of the disease, but they may also provide fresh impetus for the relentless technological onslaught on workers. Freight companies have already been experimenting with automating long-haul deliveries, reflecting the view that motorway driving is the easiest part of their work. However, now social distancing requirements are accelerating this tendency, resulting in an increased reliance on autonomous delivery within cities. For example, Chinese cities have been using robots to deliver food and medical supplies to quarantined patients (Rajamanickam 2020).

AUTOMATING THE STATE

This not only affects the economy but also the state. The pandemic is speeding up the adoption of neoliberals' signature governance model, namely "lean" government. COVID-19 is hastening not only the automation of manual or low-skilled service jobs – as Harari (2020) says, people can get infected while robots cannot – but also the automation of public governance. This could accelerate the transition to what A. Aneesh (2002) calls an "algocracy" or algocratic governance. In Bulgaria, the push to "reduce the administrative burden on businesses" has been the hallmark of incessant pressure over the past decade from liberals, businesspeople, libertarians and members of the creative classes, who rail against "red tape", cumbersome "analogue" administrative procedures, and "bloated" state bureaucracy, inherited from the "20th century".

The pandemic gave government streamlining renewed impetus. In the case of Bulgaria, paradoxically, this came from the very people who are the first victims of the neoliberal optimisation drive: civil servants. Thus, when in late spring the coronavirus lockdowns disrupted global supply chains, sending shockwaves through the very open Bulgarian economy, the newly unemployed (some 300,000 of them, or 10% of the workforce) stormed unemployment offices to claim state assistance. The workers in these understaffed and underfunded agencies, whose take-home salaries are sometimes lower than the unemployment benefits they dispense, demanded (and achieved) the acceleration of the online application process to reduce the risk of infection (Podkrepa 2020). While necessary as a short-term *tactic* against the pandemic, this may well morph into a long-term *strategy* that will hurt public-sector workers by automating them out of their jobs.

However, the loss of jobs in particular sectors does not mean an overall loss of jobs. Similarly, the virtualisation of jobs hits a limit, embodied by the return of the so-called 'essential workers' who were exempted from lockdown. Demand for warehouse, delivery and logistics workers spiked. Take, for example, the pandemic-induced growth of online shopping platforms like Amazon, which hired a record 100,000 employees at the height of the first wave in the United States (while also breaking all profit records, as well as boosting to unprecedented levels the personal fortune of Amazon boss Jeff Bezos, who is set to become the first trillionaire in history) (Sonnemaker 2020).

LIMIT*S* TO AUTOMATION

What is wrong with the vision of the relentless automation and immaterialisation of labour? Well, the fact that it takes at face value the claims by contemporary capitalism that it has liberated itself from physical constraints, can decouple environmental degradation from economic growth and has outgrown class antagonisms in classical industrial relations. In the mainstream literature we read about the "Fourth Industrial Revolution", Industry 4.0, in which the growth of automation and smart tech, machine-to-machine communication and the internet of things is displacing traditional production and labour exploitation with communication technology.

In *Workers in a Lean World*, Kim Moody (1997) refutes the premises of immaterial labour and "lean capitalism". He shows that the transition from the traditional Fordist style of production and management to the so-called Toyotist JIT or "lean" production, associated with flexibility, digitalisation and automation, is in practice

merely a push for more severe disciplinary measures for workers. This includes the application of 19thcentury scientific management calculating efficiency in seconds per minute and controlling every bodily movement. In line with this, big data's perfected panopticon seems capable of a more nefarious totalitarianism than before. The critique of totalitarianism has been historically narrowly focused on the public sphere – maybe because this is what intellectuals inhabit, making them most sensitive to changes and modulations to the freedoms there (such as freedom of speech). But the private sphere is not immune to 'totalitarian' phenomena – especially in the digitally mediated 'gig' economy, traditionally assumed to be reliant on so-called 'immaterial' labour and free from the oppressive constraints of industrial capitalism.

Take, for example, Amazon fulfilment centres and Uber. As James Bridle (2019) argues, the typical Amazon warehouse is organised in such a way as to completely disable basic human intuition and orientation. Goods are stored not in a logically taxonomical way, i.e. detergents in one corner and canned vegetables in another, but in line with the decision pattern of the average online shopper. The only way packers can reach the goods is by being guided by their hand-held devices which, in addition to directing them, track their movements (every worker is supposed to cover on average 15 miles a day), their toilet and lunch breaks, clocking in and out, and so on. Workers are reduced to robots, responding only to the incessant signals of their smart devices. Because of the excessive requirements surrounding walking and packing, workers barely find time to talk to each other, let alone organise (ibid.: 98f.).

The functions of surveillance and productivity optimisation also coalesce in the technology deployed in Uber. For example, drivers are punished if they reject rides and are incentivised to take more rides. This led to a situation where they cut down on toilet breaks and urinate in bottles in their cars (Kalra 2019). Similarly, meat-packing plants across the United States force workers to wear nappies to avoid interrupting the ever-increasing pace of work (Owen 2016).

Therefore, automation is less about the replacement of the worker by the robot than the *reduction* of the former to the latter. No robots at all are needed to make an actual displacement. I recently saw how a major Bulgarian public utility provider employed someone to act as a queueing machine by giving customers hand-written tickets, instructing them to wait outside and then calling them to enter one by one. He acted as a ticketing machine, an usher and a sound system. The purpose of his job was to avoid crowding the building because of the social

distancing measures. This is reminiscent of the rise of platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk, which Amazon itself dubbed "artificial artificial intelligence", involving zero-security online jobs that could be done by computers, but where it is cheaper to hire people instead (Dai et al. 2011). Long hours of easily automated and poorly paid work (including online) were already the reality for a growing number of people even before the pandemic struck.

Such 'cautionary tales' show that once we direct our gaze away from the public sphere and peek into the 'hidden abode of production', including those of the gig economy, intellectual distinctions detailing the transition from the disciplinary society to the society of control become blurry. Disciplinary totalitarianism strike at the very heart of basic bodily functions (handling, urinating, walking), aided and abetted by digital technology which, far from signalling a break with discipline, merely perfects them and subjugates working bodies even more efficiently.

The coronavirus helps to dispel the fixation with immaterial labour and, *pace* Han, has highlighted the materiality of labouring bodies, whether within and outside the 'gig economy'. In some parts of the world, as the army of the unemployable swells, their treatment by the state makes one cower. For example, in late May 2020, Bulgarian legislators used the spike in coronavirus-triggered unemployment to pass an emergency law enabling forced labour on private agricultural farms in exchange for (meagre) welfare benefits (KOI et al. 2020). Given the sorry state of organised labour in the country, institutionalisation of this temporary amendment is highly likely (involving the transition from a tactic to a strategy). That a country striving to align its economy with "the 21st century" would end up legalising unfree labour is a logical consequence of the coalescence of automation-driven and COVID-19-driven unemployment. In a true dialectic of late capitalism, premodern indentured labour can coexist perfectly well with high-tech economies.

This is not to say that the scholarly pronouncements about the disappearance of material labour were correct to begin with, and suddenly COVID-19 brought back ("essential") labour. Rather, COVID-19's epochal consequences undermined the illusion of the disappearance of labour, as demonstrated by the sudden celebratory visibility that the so-called essential workers were accorded. This tension also obtains in terms of tech. Far from a vision of the immaterial, ephemeral and "cloudy" world shared by its apologists and detractors alike, big tech does avail itself of some very crude forms of labour exploitation and control. For example, China uses inmates interred in the "re-education" camps for the Uighur minority to

train facial recognition software developed in the United States (Byler / Boe 2020). The private contractors providing the software then sell the improved versions to other state and private institutions. Meanwhile, everyone benefits from forced labour (ibid.). Camps here are not an unfortunate residue of the "analogue era" but must be understood as *primary machine learning sites*. This is a true dialectic of the most brutish forced menial labour regime and the "21st-century digital economy" hype.

COUNTER-TENDENCIES

The spectre of automation and the increased penetration of digital technologies in all areas of private and public life, including state governance, understandably worries commentators – so much so indeed that previously marginal calls for the introduction of a universal basic income (UBI) for the unemployed (and unemploy-able) are steadily becoming marching into the liberal mainstream. (As a result of the pandemic, some countries like Spain considered permanently institutional-ising the UBI relief extended to the worst affected workers, while in August 2020, Germany rolled out its own experimental version of a UBI.)

"Automation anxiety" is a recurrent phenomenon which has alternated with automation utopianism since at least the 1950s (Bassett / Roberts 2019). But the pandemic has achieved the perfect intersection between the two modalities of expectation: while tech pundits celebrate the increased role of digital technology, progressives worry about its effects on democracy, privacy and employment. Even though they value it differently, both pundits and detractors share the fundamental premise that technology obeys the logic of a linear progression and that it necessarily displaces labour.

The linear thinking occludes concomitant dialectical tensions obtaining within the movement towards automation. In fact, this is not a recent problem. Karl Marx also grappled with this. Unlike the liberal idea of automation which anticipates the total displacement of human workers by robots, for Marx, automation does not mean the effacement of human labour *in toto* because this is tantamount to the effacement of value, and hence would spell the end of capitalism. In his *Grundrisse*, Marx (2015) defines automation as an increase in the share of fixed capital in production (technology and machinery) vis-à-vis variable capital (human labour). He says this is almost a "natural tendency" of capitalism because of the relentless drive to reduce the share of necessary labour time (the time a worker needs to work in order to reproduce themselves physically) for the sake of increasing surplus labour time (the time the capitalist appropriates). The effect of this movement is the introduction of more machinery which makes labour more productive and efficient, to the point that indeed fewer workers are needed than before.

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However, workers do not disappear, but are merely reduced to passive appendages of the machine, executing a simple task like feeding coal into a machine, which is tasked with the truly "creative" work. As David Harvey (2020) says, deskilling is the natural outcome of the expansion of machine production in the factory system. Capitalists loathe depending on workers who possess a special or rare skill because this leverages the latter's power in relation to the former. Automation helps the bosses by transferring skills, knowledge and creativity from the worker (regardless of whether they are blue- or white-collar workers) to the machine. The worker does not disappear as much as their skill, and so workers become more fungible, weaker and, most importantly, cheaper. Automation is not the effect of some supposed self-evident progress of technology but the result of class struggle, or of the attempt of capital to gain upper hand over labour (Malm 2016; Harvey 2020).

In *Capital* Volume 1, Marx (1887) describes how the cheapening of workers kicks off a counter-dynamic which reverses automation. In one of the most compelling passages in this work, Marx tells how, despite the availability of technology, it was cheaper for English employers to hire poor women to pull ships into the harbour. The technology had made labour so cheap that instead of displacing the workers, it brought them back with full force. This does not mean that automation did not pose any threat to workers. On the contrary, it created the need for labour, albeit under worse conditions than before (cf. again the case of Amazon Turk). It was a huge waste of human labour to be used for something for which a machine already existed, simply because it was cheaper to do so. Yet such a waste of human capacity and labour was not only possible but necessary in the most technologically advanced country in his time (ibid.: 271).

AUTOMATION'S LIMITS

I will now illustrate why automation does not automatically lead to computers taking over previously human tasks. Let me take an example from the e-governance fad. Bureaucratic streamlining is predicated on reducing the formally employed workforce and simultaneously expanding what can be called 'informal bureaucracies'. This is because tasks which were previously carried out by the state workforce now get 'outsourced' to users themselves. This is true not only for state employees but also for private ones. Consider, for example, the now ubiquitous online flight ticket booking. Whereas in the past an employee of the company, physically sitting in an office, rented by the carrier, used to search for flights and connections for the customer, now the customer is their own ticketing assistant searching and booking their own flights, saving the air carriers millions on rent and salaries annually.

The same logic obtains in the domain of the 'optimised' civil service. Yet its ranks are both contracting and expanding as individual citizens take on services and responsibilities which used to be handled by the state. This million-strong army of autonomous bureaucrats is of course hardly recognised as such, their invisibility being ensured by their non-recognised (and non-recognisable) status as seeking and obtaining state services from the privacy of their home. In that sense, the so-called digitalisation and virtualisation of governments and production alike could be understood not as displacing labour but as making it cheaper and more insecure and invisible.

CONCLUSION:
IS THERE A SILVER LINING?

Technological progress and automation have both repressive functions in the conflict between workers and capital and emancipatory potential. Technology transfers skills from workers to machines, and hence to technicians who have the specialised knowledge for developing and maintaining them. New technologies also lead to rises in productivity and lower shares of labour costs, further disempowering and devaluing workers. The technological acceleration of production is facilitated by the intra-capitalist competition for market share, which explains the breakneck speed at which technology advances in capitalism vis-à-vis the slow pace of technological change in pre-capitalist societies (Harvey 2020). These are some of the less visible repressive functions of technology (more visible functions of this type are surveillance or military tech).

However, technology also erodes the foundations of capitalism inasmuch as value is produced only by labour. As labour gets sidelined by technology, this opens up the theoretical possibility of the emancipation from labour as a measure of value, or of a transition to "fully automated, luxury communism" (Bastani 2019). In *Grundrisse*, Marx claims that technological progress in the society of the future would enable value to be measured not in terms of labour time, but in terms of leisure time, used for the free development of each person.

These emancipatory potentials led Marx to become a strong proponent of mass technological education, believing that knowledge of how machines and production systems are structured gives workers the tools to emancipate themselves from the rule of technicians and technocrats who have monopolised this knowledge. Going back now to the pandemic, COVID-19 saw instances where technology could potentially innovate us away from neoliberal competitive markets and global supply chains which spectacularly failed to deliver ventilators and PPE when demand peaked. For example, grassroots 3D printing of PPE and the assembly of fast and cheap ventilator vents extricated tech from the grips of the market (Culver / Westcott 2020). Corporations immediately moved in to prevent the "pirate" production of ventilator spare parts (Kent 2020). In such instances, argues Morozov (2020), neoliberal solutionism kicks in to frustrate the growth of democratically developed and distributed technology.

Yet the hold of algorithmic power does not go unnoticed here either. In the UK, schools rolled out a grading algorithm to make up for reduced examination capacity during the pandemic. The change led to 40% of students – primarily

from working-class and minority backgrounds – being marked down. Meanwhile, private-schools and fee-paying pupils saw a 4.7% increase in A grades. This sparked angry protests in central London, eventually forcing the government to back down (Porter 2020). We can only hope to see more such instances of social resilience to "algocratic power"!

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the power of big tech and the COVID-19 outbreak fed off each other with very unpalatable consequences for liberal democracy (i.e. immunity passports, deepened surveillance, increased inequalities and automation-induced unemployment, among others). Far from putting an end to neoliberal capitalism, the pandemic exacerbated some of its worst features, such as how power operates in the society of control via micro-targeting of potentially contagious *dividuals*. Riding the waves of the pandemic, 'inverted totalitarianism' seems to be inching closer. Yet at the same time, there are limits to this trend, inasmuch as technology in capitalism is not contradiction-free. Some of these limits came in the guise of increased protests (BLM, Belarus, Poland, etc.), disproving widespread expectations of state-enforced quietism in the name of public health. But this is not enough. Protests have hitherto focused on visible (governmental) abuses of power, eschewing the less visible private power of corporations and the labour abuses meted out to workers. It is time to go to 'the hidden abode of production' to also counter the private despotism on the shop floor, including by wielding – and why not? – new technologies.

Deleuze's injunction "There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons" is as timely as ever.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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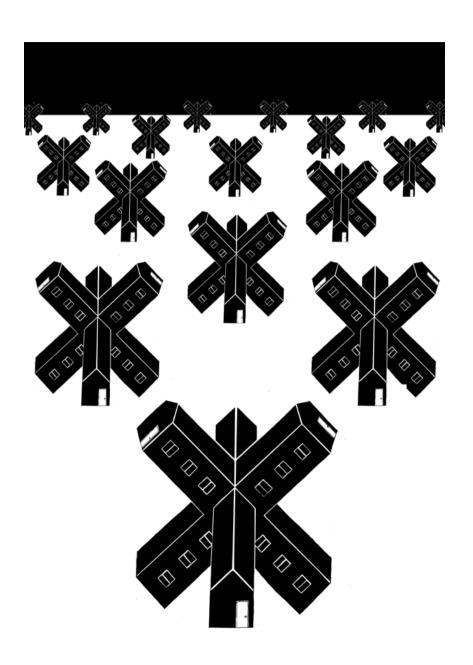
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FORTRESS CITY:
DEFENSIVE ARCHITECTURE AND THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF PUBLIC SPACE

BEATRIZ V. TOSCANO

6

This chapter examines the erosion of democratic systems from the point of view of spatial planning. Modern (and ancient) cities are but the material reflections of specific world views; their design enables, withholds and actualises a definition of freedom, property and citizenship. Given that liberal societies see acting as custodians of the right to private property as one of their key vocations, any attempt to retrieve democracy from decay will have to be based on the delicate balance between what can be privatised and what is part of the public domain. In this chapter I pay special attention to the use of architectural structures for anti-terror measures in European cities. While it is maintained that these shield democracies from their supposedly many hidden enemies, they also generate regimes of privatisation and corralling. The thesis of a direct connection between the perception of urban space as public and accessible and a healthy awareness of democracy in European societies will be analysed against the background of a steady increase in the construction and visualisation of defensive architecture in public space. In doing so, I attempt the difficult task of convincing the reader that it is better to make our cities less safe but more democratic. Moreover, although it is widely held that defensive structures protect citizens, their everyday lives and political systems from unwanted intruders, they also create the impression that the space they occupy is private and militarised, or reinterpret it as such. Starting from a conceptual and also more tangible connection between democracy, privatisation and the design of urban space, this article will present an array of instances (ranging from projects for urban development to specific regulations) where the protection of democratic values by means of its securitisation results in the erosion of democracy itself.

INTRODUCTION

The crisis of democracy has an urban dimension: not only is democracy in a poor state but we also live in less democratic cities. This chapter deals with the physical imprints of this quandary in the very architecture forming an intrinsic part of our everyday life, reflected in the spaces we inhabit, the infrastructure we depend on, and the communities we relish. With no shortage of examples of how democracy is being systematically undermined and erased in and from our cities, I posit that the urban domain is a promising place to start outlining how the crisis of democracy might be resolved.

In a broader sense, the crisis of democracy and the urban calls to mind the pledge of the *right to the city*. Scholars like David Harvey, Peter Marcuse, Setha Low, Loretta Lees, Don Mitchell and others (clearly drawing on Henri Lefebvre's original pronouncement in 1968) concentrate on the democratic premises of justice and equality and set out to uncover blatantly visible regimes of inequality in the post-Keynesian city, or the city after the collapse of the welfare state. Homelessness, gentrification and speculation are the ills of a city where unbalanced relations of property and access relegate disenfranchised individuals to the margins of society.

I fully acknowledge the merits of this body of work. However, my concerns lie elsewhere. In light of the increasing militarisation of urban spaces, which are now set up as if they are braced for an imminent attack, I assert that cities have become less democratic, and that this is not just a result of *latrociny* but due to an act of self-cancellation. Biting its own tail, democracy behaves as though it were writing itself off. My conceit here is that anti-terror artefacts, in the form of bollards, video surveillance, crowd management devices and the like, promise security in exchange for freedoms, and provide a sense of belonging (as in "who is with me?") against fear, squeamishness and self-restraint. Equally importantly, this is taking place not completely unnoticed but with at the very least our complicity and cooperation. Drawing on various examples, the case made here is that there has been a progression from these elements initially being viewed as formidable, highly conspicuous structures to becoming the stylish, unremarkable accoutrements to pavements and open spaces they are regarded as today. My thesis will be that democracy is compromised the moment that these elements are naturalised and upgraded, i.e. once they become the preconditioned way we have internalised of perceiving space prior to

understanding the city. Here this preconditioned way of presenting urban space will be explained in relation to an *epistemology*.

My contribution to this volume will then look at the democratic attributes of public space surrendering to a paradigm of immunisation and securitisation. What I propose is to complete the picture of the (un)democratic city created by appropriation/expropriation with one where the city is resignified as a means of keeping people out or, more precisely, as a form of self-protection and fortressing from democracy's alleged enemies and concealed threats. My hypothesis here is that the same process of conspicuous privatisation and reduction of urban land to its monetary value (charged for an undemocratic division of citizens into proprietors and dispossessed) has evolved into a way of determining who is a citizen and who is not and is potentially dangerous.

Let me already provide some hints regarding the broad thrust of my roadmap. In order to claim that a market-immanent dynamic of reducing urban space to its exchange and speculative value is responsible for transforming the city into a life-size bunker, we must prove that the same self-regulating markets in the managerial seat of cities are equally reliant on walls, fences and colonial colour divisions. The architecture of my argument will seek to uncover a fatally flawed connection between privatisation and securitisation, whereby urban space is reified as a commodity and subsequently transformed into a defensive realm. Or if you will, it intends to contribute to a discussion that sees a new emerging culture of nationalism and war, a product of the self-destabilising tendency of financialised capitalism and its unbridled markets to reduce everything to a commodity.

Apart from these worrying scenarios, urban spaces also harbour precious potential for the retrieval or even expansion of democracy. In my conclusions, I will refer to them as providing the tools to mitigate these ills: a new type of municipalist, integrated urban development that tests high-quality, impartial and innovative bottom-up mobilisation and participation initiatives. I will conclude that democracy is restored by expansion, not by restriction, and not thanks to more preservative privatisation, but thanks to more *publicness*.

THE FORTRESSING OF THE CITY, OR HOW IT ALL BEGAN

This paper aims to succeed in the difficult challenge of persuading readers that it is better to make our cities less safe if that makes them more democratic. Given that the connection between securitisation and an erosion of the democratic attributes of public space is not readily evident, some explanatory remarks are in order.

The Swedish government has recently rolled out a state-sponsored public information brochure entitled *If Crisis or War Comes*, instructing Swedes what to do in the event of a sudden social upheaval (MSB 2018). This initiative, whose like has not been seen since the Second World War, is being treated by Swedes with the kind of equanimity that is only matched by their dutiful sense of self-control (Henley 2018). Yet, although it claims to have the most pedestrian of intentions, namely of unaffectedly telling its population what to do if "your everyday life was turned upside down" (MSB 2018: 4), a purpose of a more serious nature begins to unfold as you leaf through the publication. With every illustration (e.g. of car bombs exploding in the streets, of panic-stricken people running, and of crawling subjects brandishing automatic weapons and creeping around), with every linguistic choice ("threat", "total defence", "we will never give up") and with every statement you read ("States and organisations are already using misleading information in order to influence our values and how we act"; "Be on the lookout for false information"; "Do not believe in rumours") (MSB 2018: 6), the message – reinforced by public statements

such as "Society is vulnerable, so we need to prepare ourselves as individuals" from Dan Eliasson, Director-General of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, which was responsible for the pamphlet (Lille 2018; Henley 2018) – becomes clearer: prepare for war.

In some parts of the Western world, we can see signs here and there of a growing tendency for the state to be on a covert quasi-war footing. Impact-softening artefacts and other security systems are sprouting in urban centres with the unsettling promise of counteracting an ever-haunting danger that is as diffuse as it is urgent to delimit and to keep out: bollards to stop vehicles mounting pavements, eerie blocks of concrete, at best concealed under flower arrangements, turning roads into meandering obstacle courses. Visitor attractions and historical landmarks have become hustles of carefully choreographed queues, checkpoints and armed patrols that have people doing only what is allowed. Given the striking sight of the Eiffel Tower in Paris appearing somewhat aloof behind its 2018 bulletproof glass "to protect the monument against terrorist attacks" (Pradier 2018), Bill de Blasio's pledge when running for New York Mayor to spend up to 50 million dollars on security measures if he was elected (Goldstein 2018) came as no surprise. Safety and counterterrorism now feature prominently in politicians' election campaigns.

But we would not be the first to ask how and when this 'urban armouring' drive – a nascent set of social interactions modulated by conflicting architectural vestiges of turning in on oneself and immunisation from and repulsion of 'the other' – all began. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a tentacular office of the United States Department of Homeland Security, has done this before. With its periodical consultancy projects concerning urban design for security purposes since 2001, FEMA, as an inconspicuous interloper, has now taken over matters of urban design and embellishment. In its guidance on the design of urban spaces and landscapes published in 2007 (FEMA 2007), FEMA encourages planners to take measures such as wrapping *important buildings* in envelopes (New York's Financial District served as a pilot project in this regard). Incidentally, according to Abi Carter, such enveloping has also become an enduring trend in new housing developments throughout Germany, a country which has clearly been immersed in a volatile housing bubble (Carter 2020). These developments, which are somewhat disjoined from the warp of the rest of the city, are tilted inwards and arranged around an inner courtyard, and so have been rather grandly labelled *Höfe* (the

German word also used for royal courts) and can be seen advertised with slogans such as *Meine Heimat* (my homeland), used by the developer *Rhein-wohnungsbau* (see e.g. its website, www.rheinwohnungsbau.de).

Other challenges for effective urban design include counteracting war-like hazards such as hand-grenade explosions and bombardments by tank and ballistic missiles. And then there are the more worrying artefacts aimed at 'crowd management' (another sub-competence of FEMA), which can be readily associated with urban rioting and political stand-offs. There is, however, an important caveat to all these recommendations, which provides a silver lining here: these recommendations must be no less attractive than they are effective. Therefore, sturdy concrete blocks and 'Jersey barriers', consisting of bare-bone hard plastic barriers, are strongly advised against: "Today's best practices," says the FEMA publication mentioned above, "often involve imaginative use of [...] new concepts and materials, [...] to balance the needs of security with those of site amenity" (FEMA 2007: 49.). Those artefacts, which were initially regarded with a feeling of regret and carried a sense of purpose in their blatant self-evidence, are now beguilingly slick in their inconspicuousness.

At this point I should mention my penchant for the idiom *urban space*, explaining why at this stage I will not resort to a more precise expression of urban *public* space in favour of its less revealing counterpart. Clues as to urban space's conceptualisation as part of the public domain and its functionalisation as accessible, especially with regard to urban space becoming owned (privatised) and defensible (or defended), although central to my argument, will be resolved in the course of this chapter. This is congruent with my main lines of argument here: for more *publicness*, more urban space, infrastructure restored to the public domain and less privatisation as the basis for a healthy democracy. For now, this conflation of appropriation, i.e. of space becoming *restricted* property, with 'defensivity' involves a level of suspense. We will also gain an insight into why, throughout this paper, the social, political and even historical discourses that tie in with an understanding of the term *polis* (the urban, the city) on the one hand, and of the term *polity* (from which political systems can emerge, and a notion of urban life) on the other, seem to link into one another. The stance adopted here will advocate more accessible, less angst-inducing and more spatially consistent cities as being better suited to enabling more integrated and less contested democracies to flourish. In anticipation of this

hypothesis, my suggestion would be that the reader should consider the word *city* to be interchangeable with the term *democracy* throughout this chapter.

But how can we convince ourselves that we still live in democratic and free cities? How can these look like we are not at war? How can we ignore the failure of a society that has to conceal its aggression and readiness for war behind aesthetically pleasing designs? Sure enough, the Allegory of Good Government likes to be staged in the polis, imbued with serene order and beauty. Fear and freedom do not mix well, as indicated in an article by *Quartz*'s design and architecture reporter Anne Quito (Quito 2016). As quoted there, Ruth Reed, President of the Royal Institute of British Architects, wrote in her introduction to the organisation's 2010 counter-terrorism design guidelines: "It is important that our built environment continues to reflect that we are an open and inclusive society", while Quito herself says in the same piece that our cities might already be "secured against terror, without looking like war zones […]" (ibid.).

Even before starting to look at my thesis of warfare revealed underneath the self-satisfying messages of peace and superiority our cities want to portray, I would encourage readers to ponder what a serious matter this war is. This is an undeclared, albeit self-legalised, war justified by leaning on the principles of the right to declare war. Let me explain.

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In theory at least, war is strictly regulated. In legal terms, war can only happen if declared overtly: an incursion of an alien power into a sovereign territory has to be proved. In order to declare war, you must prove the existence of an enemy. It will be noticed here that incursions and territorial sovereignty, or the definitions of these items, are curiously entangled. Aggression – and here is the crux – presents itself not only as a challenge in terms of the disintegration of national borders – it also enables national entity or national reaffirmation. It encourages nations in a technical sense. As such, wars are terribly useful instruments for the reinforcement of nationalistic sentiments. I claim that war behaves as a shock therapy for the historical nation state, which – to borrow a reflection from Marx (1852)[1] – struggles to survive as a farce after its initial manifestation as a tragedy fades away.

Now let us look at this process in reverse, beginning with the right to defensivity and thinking back to the city. If these are the signs of a *city at war*, could we not equally just take the principles of the *Jus ad Bellum* or the international law that regulates the conditions of war, at face value? And if so, what definition of sovereignty can we infer from its justifying social narratives about "the threat posed by various 'criminal' and 'alien' Others" (Loader 2002: 125)? Furthermore, how can the micro level of the urban be enacting (through the use of various fencing artefacts) an inner tension of democracy itself, in the face of globalisation, asserting its sovereignty as a matter of national borders?

In the pages that follow, I will attempt a diagnosis of present-day democracy, taking the pulse of its urban condition, in terms of its conceptualisation and management of otherness (or whatever compromises the confinement of its self-abiding subjectivities), inferred from the material forms that confinement may take. While asserting the crucial role of public space in making democracy possible (as a non-appropriable and fundamentally antinomical realm where the interplay between emergent selfhood and social shaping takes place), a case will be made for the grip-tightening space-specific manoeuvres of privatisation and defensivity being its deterrents, due not just to the class-struggle derivatives of exclusion, but also to how it changes our understanding of a (previously) public space.

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1   "Hegel remarks somewhere […] that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

THE CITY IS AT WAR

Some five to eight years ago, giving in to disbelief would have been considered a rather justified temptation. Even in the crucial months of November–December 2001, in the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Centre attacks, the urban theorist Mike Davis warned us that an important lesson is to be learnt from witnessing this straightforward example of the complete meltdown of Western civilisation through the lens of fear studies (Davis 2001: 35). And that lesson is realising how solipsistic and delusional the conviction of private property and freedom is, having constituted the republican values forming the basis on which social stability was granted (Hayek 1944).[2] Total reliability is always tantalisingly elusive and, if anything, founded on an acrimonious urge to dispute the return of the suppressed that arises from the realisation of those ideals – in our case, cast in the figures of the dispossessed and the obfuscated, or in whoever "fits the racial profile of white anxiety" (Davis 2001: 48), as underdogs distorting freedom and property.[3]

I would suggest that this is more the case in societies revolving around the premise of a meritocratic discourse of an all-controlling self-made individual. Paradoxically, while our societies make sense of themselves as self-regulating and confident, we are indeed becoming less tolerant to uncertainty. I agree with Niklas Luhmann in making a point of highlighting a shift in the level of tolerance to uncertainty, coupled with the process of our society becoming less structured around transcendental values of aristocracy and divine heirlooms, more *liberalistic* and self-governed, yet more keen to replicate the perfect autopoietic clockwork of Technocracy and Utilitarianism (Luhmann 1996).

That, I believe, is why those very foundational principles of property and freedom, while providing the historical and notional framework for liberal societies to thrive, have also created the conditions for their antinomies to emerge, i.e. the over-determined and forestalling versions of themselves (Toscano 2017). It is as if, in the process of being translated into the practicalities of society's abidance by these principles, those ideals needed to operate as

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2   My reference here is Friedrich Hayek's work defining the conceptual frame of neoliberal democracies, drawing not so much on the principle of freedom as on that of liberty in pressing for a reduction of the state and governmental apparatuses in the mediation of transactional activities.

3   Aporophobia (from Ancient Greek ἄπορος (á-poros)), or the irrational fear of the poor and the dispossessed.

manifestations of themselves that tried in vain to solve the relevant problems using the same methods that created them in the first place. A parallel if not identical argument is made by Davis when he states that the quest for the bourgeois fantasy of "a totally calculable and safe environment has paradoxically generated radical insecurity" (Davis 2001: 48).

There is a treacherous inversion of causes and symptoms here, with restriction and rampant privatisation (accompanied by their downside of bio-policing models of governance and permanent scenarios of dispossession) acting as the safeguards of freedom and property. This is especially clear in the Swedish Contingencies Agency brochure mentioned above, which bears an uncanny resemblance to the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution (US Constitution 1790).[4] The symbolic institution of *society* is sabotaged by the people's urge to defend it. These over-empowered individuals believe, in the words of that agency's Director-General, that "[s]ociety is vulnerable, so we need to prepare ourselves as individuals" (Henley 2018). It is more worrying still when proper communicational networking and exchange, which are essential instruments for a healthy, well-connected and informed society, are totally foiled by their own saturation. This communication failure is also referenced in the brochure when it says: "States and organisations are already using misleading information in order to influence our values and how we act", "Be on the lookout for false information" and "Do not believe in rumours" (MSB 2018: 6). Eat your heart out, Epimenides![5]

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The official enunciation of this predicament is that a social, epistemological, *inter alia* system is in crisis when any attempt to reaffirm or entrench it in the confines of its own abidance involves its own foundational principles being supplemented with more elaborate and complex versions of those same principles.[6] With no disruptive exteriority causing interference, the system is then assured by the ideal of a seamless non-divergent transfer of thought and

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4   The Constitution of the United States of America's Second Amendment (the right to keep and bear arms), ratified in 1791, states: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" (US Constitution 1790).

5   As in the paradox of Epimenides, the Cretan who stated: "All Cretans are liars". This statement cannot be proved either true or false.

6   Žižek (1989) calls this phenomenon, which is about using the same logic that created the problem to solve the problem, "Ptolemization".

action. This explains why at the 'end of history' the (free) market is believed to progress and become self-regulating, based on the purely unmediated terms of its inner logic. The thought of an autopoietic life system where self-made individuals can rely on the managerial capabilities of self-regulating markets may be a relief, but it is also highly deceptive. Markets are neither autopoietic nor self-regulating. They depend on armies or on favourable law-making. It is in fact quite dangerous to leave cities to the devices of markets, as these will do what they do best: while working on solving a problem, they will turn anything (e.g. public space, security issues, fear) into a commodity, something you can appropriate and trade with.

Sucking in as it does the air of the non-appropriable realm where political exchange could subsist, this is a dangerous incursion, giving rise to an alarming conflation of the governance functions performed by public powers and civil society, which, along with the implementation of the market-regulated actualisation of freedom and property (which, the reader will recall, is perceived as unmediated), has deprived society of the distinct space where the transversality of political agency could conceivably flourish.

This space is the unalienable realm reclaimed by Michel Foucault for the law-engendering exercise of *Parrêsia* or free speech (Foucault 1983), for communicational exchange within a healthy democracy by Jürgen Habermas, who called it the public sphere (Habermas 1989), for the dimensions of *social reproduction* by Nancy Fraser (Fraser 2009; 2013) and to which all citizens, according to Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1991; Gulick 1998), are granted some legal rights of access. This is the territory that allows for the citizen to become a political subject, as opposed to being an object or eccentric from any contrivance of objectification, simply on the basis of the presumption of innocence, of not being pre-framed. I agree with Margaret Kohn (Kohn 2010: 3) that anonymity, under these conditions, amounts not only to an ontological category, i.e. to the right to be un-signified, but also stands as an ethical proxy for citizenship. Fraser (a reader of Habermas) goes on to say: "This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourse […] The public sphere in Habermas's sense is also conceptually distinct from the official-economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather […] a theater for delating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling" (Fraser 1990: 57). Note the emphasis placed on the conceptual autonomy of the public sphere. Moreover, as Fraser would later argue, this is

the space that, by being located and somehow mediating between state apparatuses and the exchange-productive areas of civil society, is best equipped to provide the conceptual resources for the activity of law-making.

Going back to my previous point, the actualisation of freedom and property referred to above has lately taken on the form of a market commodity.[7] Meanwhile, that commodity (namely emancipation through inclusive/exclusive ownership)[8] has supplanted the *public sphere* (Marx 1858, cited in Brenkert 1979). Not only has it taken over in playing its mediating role, but more importantly in providing the epistemological framework for the elaboration of the law, its conceptualisations and meanings, and its interests and tactics.

It is, therefore, not surprising that along with this progressive shift in private property to become the conceptual axis articulating economy and law, securitisation and corralling have come to evolve as the exacerbated and forestalling version of ownership (Virno 1994). David Miliband made a series of statements in 2009 while UK Foreign Secretary, in which he described the "war on terror" as a tactical mistake that, if anything, was harboured in an epistemic mistake (Miliband 2009). So did Alberto Toscano, who stated that "antiterrorism [had] become a full[y]-fledged method of government" in the absence of what he calls proper *political literacy* (Toscano 2009). Both of these stances could be understood against the backdrop of this conceptual and functional usurpation.

DEFENSIVE URBAN DESIGN: THE AWAKENING OF A TREND

The city, as the very realm for the public sphere to find its physical rendering, has been quick to take account of this epistemological shift. It is no secret that security and counter-terror have been upgraded to a major concern, right at the top of urban planners and architects' agendas. A simple look at issues covered recently in the highly-regarded magazine *Dezeen* on urban design trends would suffice to confirm this (Yalcinkaya 2017a). So much so that, as already predicted when the 9/11 attacks in the United States occurred, security has become an intrinsic urban utility like water and power, a criterion modulating

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7   Fraser locates that transitional period at the point where a liberal economy becomes a neoliberal or paper-based economy.

8   I draw here on Karl Marx's arguments in his *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Fundamentals of a Critique of Political Economy).

the very plasticity of urban space and, as I will illustrate later, has an aesthetic style of its own.[9] Rather than creating spaces that are worth living in or appealing, urban designers now face the task of making spaces safer above all else. Interestingly enough, as we shall see, the role of designers does not just end with the projection of a projected security plan; designing endeavours also involves making repelling elements blend into the landscape of urban furniture and become invisible. Here, incidentally, cushioning artefacts, defensive architecture and video surveillance all seem to coincide: a good design, so they say, is one that works, especially if you cannot see it.

Police control scanners at the entrance to museums and cultural attractions are now widely accepted. There is a wild proliferation of unassuming architectonic elements such as bollards, chains, concrete blocks, banks, hedges and even sculptures. We are surrounded by technical building specifications promoting 'total unconcealment' and surveillance devices such as spoken recordings reminding us to be alert at all times and systems for the visual and auditory analysis of mass image and video data. Given all this, it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that cities are increasingly being transformed into a large-scale defensive device and, dare I say it, turning into a life-size bunker or a panopticon.

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The materiality and scale reached by this securitising imperative should be subjected to a careful critical analysis, especially on the grounds of our spaces becoming more fragmented, access becoming increasingly subject to checkpoints, self-restraint being interiorised and social interactions being widely monitored. Yet any attempt to make a proper critique of these processes – which are surely eroding the public sphere – falls short given the ever execrable reality of terror attacks. In light of this, the window for any convincing discussion on the ethical implications of that approach to city planning proves rather narrow. Oddly, the most immediate reactions (at least judging by what is registered by the media) merely address the discomforts generated by the more conspicuous and readily cumbersome of these elements: bollards impeding smooth mobility and parking (Geilhausen et al. 2018).

Another challenging aspect hindering any sound exposition of the problem is the claim that spaces being made public will not solve the conundrum

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9   A search for the term 'terror' in the journal *Dezeen* yields around 157 entries, from between 2017 and 2020.

of making them safer. See, for instance, Cindy Katz complaining about the entertainment industry taking over New York's playgrounds and supplanting them with the commercial offer of indoor play areas advertised as *safe*, which suggests that simply disentangling playgrounds from the commercial mechanisms that sell them as safe is not going to result in them becoming safer (Katz 2006: 106, 118). In my eyes, this is because privatisation and securitisation are bound not by a linear relationship but by a paradoxical one. So if anything, if one is to believe that the fortification of the city is growing at the expense of space remaining *public* (accessible, unalienable and anonymous) and that democracy is being eroded, this critical argumentation will have to be approached differently.

What I propose is to subject the securitisation of our cities to an analysis, in terms of those devices' potential of putting forward a fragmenting mechanism of defensivity and of perpetuating a regime where space in itself is regulated by the inclusive/exclusive epistemological frame that commodities typically entail, of sanctioning access. Therefore, my thesis here is that while every so-called defensive device and measure results from the *a posteriori* crystallisation of a well-justified counter-terror strategy, the conditions from which those devices emerge rest on a paradigmatic framing in which private property arises as the means of securitisation in the first place.

Private property (as in the commoditisation and outsourcing of the public / 263 sphere where the citizen formerly existed as an unclassified and disregarded political subject) replicates the same access restriction and selective accountability that security aims to provide, thereby ineluctably exposing securitisation as its over-determining and forestalling version, i.e. as the forestalling version of its efficiency. And I claim that it is forestalling because the more *private* the space becomes, the tighter and more fragile the rules of its securitisation will be; and also the more hostile the conditions of *reproductive space* are for the citizen to represent a political subject (as opposed to an object of total control and surveillance), the less resilient our democracies will be and the more prone to radicalisation our societies will become. A proper substantiation of the ethical implications of the instances of surveillance and fortification should take such an analysis into account: I claim that the conversion of cities into fortresses (through the implementation of architectonic and surveillance devices) is a suitable factor on which to base this critique, especially for defensive architecture, as I shall try to show below, to

condense both the cooperating and forestalling dimensions of privatisation and securitisation.

TOWARDS A NEW EPISTEMOLOGY OF URBAN SPACE

In light of the above, the question is: how can commodification become an epistemology? That is, how is it that a market-immanent process of economic reification of anything into a privatised form[10] becomes the marker of what we can know and judge to be true and justifiable (Weirich 2004: 499f.)? In other words, how is it that privatisation and corralling have successfully become frames of understanding and organising our experience of urban space? Let us not forget that what can be known depends largely on how reality is presented to knowers (Heil 2004: 316).

I do not want to bombard the reader with terminology here. Nor will I try to oppose a social constructivism of shielding and self-defeating democracies with a new over-imposing one. Instead, with this comparison my aim is simply to point out how the staging of the city affects what we can know and take to be true. We must not forget the type of decisions that are afforded within that same frame of analysis and perception. On top of the already elucidating disclosure of the conflation of truth and power that we can assume underlines the structural organisation of knowledge, including spatial knowledge, a new more worrisome twist can be added. Beyond just distinguishing the morals of good and bad, the visible and the invisible (Foucault 1995: 214), the epistemology that Elizabeth Povinelli calls *geontopower* is an all-encompassing quasi-divine might that discriminates between being, worth-sustaining life and non-being. Povinelli explains that what we are witnessing is a new form of biopower. Beyond Foucauldian concepts of sovereign power (power over death (17th century)) or biopolitical power (the power to control life (19th century onwards)), geontopower goes so far as to split life from non-life (Povinelli 2015; 2016). It is much preferred within colonial forms of domination, whether exerted on a global scale or at an intra-territorial level. It reigns over otherness by considering it 'non-life' and leads to a mythical place where, in Wendy Brown's words, "families were happy, whole, and heterosexual, when women and racial minorities knew their place, when neighborhoods

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10 My definition

were orderly, secure, and homogenous, when heroin was a black problem and terrorism was not inside the homeland" (Brown 2018: 5).

The legacy of that alliance between what are presented to be *true facts* and justified action may also explain Robert Kagan's approach. Back in the day when he was advising the administration of US President George W. Bush, he proposed to counteract an imminent Al-Qaeda attack by invading Iraq, using pre-emptive violence as a purportedly legitimate form of defence in the absence of any reliable motivation for declaring war. He justified his stance regarding Iraqi training camps and weapons of mass destruction on the basis that it was all *real*. That threat, otherwise unprovable, did not have to *be* real – it just had to *appear* so. "The threat posed by Saddam Hussein may not be imminent, but it is real, it is growing and it cannot be ignored," said the then Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle, cited in Kagan and Kristol (2004).[11]

So, by putting private property and the right to defend it[12] at the centre of societal relationalities (Waldron 1985), Western democracies extricate space from *publicness*. They do so by nominalising it, by bracketing it off – not just by appropriating/expropriating it, but by re-framing it. Consequently, I claim, it is not (only physical) urban space that is capitalised, but our perception of it. Otherness is not just excluded – it is erased and sublated as non-being.

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11 Incidentally, Robert Kagan, a major advocate of political realism, is the son of Donald Kagan, a much-acclaimed scholar of the work of Thucydides, the Ancient Greek realist and author of *History of the Peloponnesian War* (431–404 BCE).

12 Recall here the debate involving Milton Friedman and C. B. Macpherson about the centrality of private property in the stability of democracy.

FROM AIRPORT TO BUNKER: THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF THE BUNKER BECOMING INVISIBLE

The *Plan Voisin* 'airport city' model by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, better known as Le Corbusier (1925), for the City of Paris may shed some light on this, as a starting point. As part of a socio-political plan to get rid of the historic city centre, Le Corbusier proposed simply taking out the areas where social conflicts are staged. His proposal – an early rehearsal of what would later crystallise in the newly built aeroplane-based layout of Brasilia (1957) – was a space with the car- and helicopter-friendly orthogonality of wide avenues, where form and function, ideals and practicalities merged seamlessly into one another. The city of the future will be for cars and aeroplanes, not pedestrians. Incidentally, both Gabriel Voisin, the financial sponsor of the project, and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret himself were keen aviators, and so they enjoyed making sense of living space as something to be encompassed from above and on a model-like scale.

The *Plan Voisin* was largely motivated by a desire to make mobility more efficient and streets less predisposed to crime. Ironically, it had the opposite effect. Put simply, with the class divide that is associated with mobility, the segregation that impinged on particular spaces and the progressive disappearance of places for pedestrians to participate in the commonalities of everyday life, the airport and car city has become an example of the perpetuation of poverty – and stigmatisation and the crime related to this. Incidentally, no other city in the world has more heliports on the rooftops of housing units of the well-to-do than Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro. Meanwhile, the streets are simply deemed too dangerous to navigate. In short, it is the fact that the city is being turned into an airport and a motorway, rather than the embodiment of a plan to prevent crime, that raises the possibility of isolating the city itself, as well as perpetuating the kind of spatial disenfranchisement that is both the cause and the effect of that very crime.

The *Broadacre City*, also labelled *The Disappearing City*, by Frank Lloyd Wright (1932) follows a similar logic. Having emerged – and this is crucial – after the Great Depression and consisting of a huge compound of one-acre allotments assigned to every citizen to take care of their needs, the *Broadacre City* is rooted in the same seamless albeit obstructive connection between privately owned space and the reduction of hunger- and dispossession-related crime.

Wright's reasoning was much the same as above: more private property equals more safety.

As its name suggests, *The Disappearing City* draws on the idea that the problems of big cities would be eliminated by simply making these cities *spatially* dissolve, sublated into a huge patchwork of many privately owned vegetable gardens. The idea that proved the true saving grace for a one-acre city, however, was the healing potential of property, based on the assumption that property has the immaterial capacity to transform a criminal into a right-eous citizen. The idea is that a citizen overcomes the condition of subjugation by simply becoming an owner and so subsequently behaves as a free and honourable person.

Accordingly, private property becomes a parameter with the power to elevate or stigmatise simply by being a moral indicator in itself, serving as an encoded *disciplinary* mechanism of alienation or emancipation. This comes with a caveat, of course: Wright pinned his hopes on the healing, transformative effects that the organised labouring and systematised lifestyle attached to the working of the land would have on beggars, day labourers and drifters. This could be taken as a nod to the infamous Nazi slogan *Arbeit macht frei* ('Work sets you free'), underlying which was the belief that dispossession and idleness pre-frame and perpetuate the conditions of the outcast or perceived 'lesser humanity'.

The cooperating yet obstructive relationship between privatisation and secu-ritisation reaches its ultimate conclusion in the bunker city. A recent display of defensive architecture(s) embodies this same paradox, turning public space into an enclosure where access and use are always governed by discretionary rules of arbitrariness and a state of exception; certainly, this makes space safer, but also less of *a space*. This was increasingly highlighted by a spate of vehicle-ramming attacks, with formerly open streets and circulating arteries now transformed by bollards, plant pots, etc. into eerie cul-de-sacs and corral-like enclosures.

Regardless of designers' efforts and disputes regarding the elements we may prefer, while surely disfiguring the apparent serenity of historical monuments and plazas – complained about by urban designer Stefano Boeri (Yalcinkaya 2017b) – the truth is that cities have always activated a regime of human distribution through a spatial-material arrangement. In fact, furthering my

argument stated above, the very morphological genealogy of this modality of urban design and of its practicalities was born of the wish to prevent people from using the streets for anything other than consumption or production, as defensive architecture was first popularised as anti-homeless architecture. I am talking about spikes protruding over pavements to prevent people from leaning on and sheltering under important buildings and quarters where the downsides of financial systems failing society would become all too obvious in the face of homelessness. That defensive architecture to hide dispossession that has surely inspired subsequent anti-terror measures (Andreou 2015) is not just a matter of analogy; it is, I claim, ingrained in the very epistemological framework that connects privatisation with security.

Indeed, the very first use of the term *defensible* appeared around the mid-1990s within the realm of social sciences, namely at the interface with pre-crime building technologies. I am talking here about the work and theses of Oscar Newman for the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Policy Development and Research, as well as for its Institute for Community Design Analysis. In his project *Creating Defensible Space*, Newman advocates housing units for the poor where publicly used space (including sports halls, swimming pools, hallways and gardens) encourages vandalism and crime. He argues that people defend what they perceive to be privately owned (Newman 1996). Therefore, building measurements – he makes a careful analysis of house typologies according to the length and size of those elements – should certainly be designed to reduce communality to a minimum and to create visual cues for privacy and restraint. Also, by placing less confrontational dwellers in the upper units, the idea was that they would act as supervisors of the spaces below. Fencing and gating are also suggested as of paramount importance for making a space *defensible*, i.e. not just *defensive* and *defended* but, more vitally, worth defending. The *MacGuffin* within all this material are, of course, the Afro-American and Latino communities, who are never named but implicitly addressed everywhere.

Defensive space gravitated in 2002 towards the realm of terror prevention, rising to become a first-range securitisation device. This is clear from *A City Transformed: Designing 'Defensible Space'* by Anthony Vidler, where he remarked on how much the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre would change the nature of public space: "closing off Times Square to traffic; limiting access to railroad terminals; reducing access to parks; adding more cameras

and security personnel in buildings" (Vidler 2002: 84f.) – a necessary albeit dramatic change we would have to put up with.

The privatisation of space, which has been increasingly accepted or simply deemed suitable to prevent crime and to cushion the effects of terror attacks, has gone so far as to commoditise the dwelling itself for the purpose of keeping undesired subjects at bay. This is the case of gated communities in marginal areas to act as fortresses against invasion or immigration. Gillad Rosen and Eran Razin (Rosen / Razin 2008) examine but do not criticise) the phenomenon of the so-called *Moshavot* or gated communities in occupied Palestine, in the Gaza Strip, encouraging dwellers to act as a kind of civil patrol guard ensuring security. Neslen (2007) writes about the settlement of Andromeda Hills in Jaffa as follows:

Much of the land reclaimed by house demolitions invariably gets sold on for luxury developments like the gated community of Andromeda Hill, "a virtual 'city within a city' surrounded by a wall and secured 24 hours a day," according to its website. Local residents complain that Andromeda Hill was built on land which was formerly owned by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate "so that rich Jews can enjoy the magic of the sunset in Jaffa without seeing Arabs".

FEMA makes no secret of its recommendation of private gating and appro-priating measures as anti-terror actors in big cities. In a 2006 manual, FEMA states that "[t]erritoriality […] promotes a sense of ownership", recommends the "use of physical attributes that express ownership such as fences, signage, landscaping, lighting, pavement designs, etc." and points out that "[d]efined property lines and clear distinctions between private and public spaces are examples of the application of territoriality" (FEMA 2006).

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Yet if city fortification and barbed-wire border fencing count as defensive architecture, a more evident connection needs to be made between owner-ship and securitisation in urban furniture and the dynamics of control and disenfranchisement. As I mentioned above, all attempts to intervene in the plasticity of these new projected and designed urban landscapes have one purpose in mind: rendering the *inside* safer. A wall de-intensifies danger by simply intensifying a sense of danger. But there are, of course, two sides to a wall.

I will let Rem Koolhaas and his co-authors provide an image of this dystopia from their *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* (Koolhaas et al. 1972):

Once, a city was divided in two parts. One part became the Good half, the other part the Bad half. […] After all attempts to interrupt […] undesirable migration had failed, the authorities of the Bad part […] built a Wall around the Good part of the city, making it completely inaccessible for their subjects. The Wall was a masterpiece. […] Division[,] isolation, inequality, ag[g]ression and destruction, all the negative aspects of the wall, could be the ingredients of a new phenomenon: Architectural warfare against undesirable conditions […]

UNDEMOCRATIC CITIES AND THE RHETORIC OF 'WHO IS WITH US' AND 'WHO IS AGAINST US': THE INSURGENT AS THE NEW TERRORIST

The reality of today's urban fortification is not too far removed from this dystopia portrayed by Koolhaas and his group of strangely prophesying architects. In cities like Düsseldorf, Florence and Barcelona, bollards and huge concrete blocks close off gathering places, and defensiveness overlaps with

the realm where ownership is enacted as the actualisation of belonging, of what some call 'our way of life'. However, for Western societies, the expression 'way of life' not only provides a lavish visualisation of a certain identity attached to freedom – it is also increasingly used in the rhetoric of US military training facilities and manuals, for example in the US Army War College's journal *War Room*. They speak of the city as a battlefield, of the moral task to defend their 'way of life', where the concept of *terrorist* is alarmingly being supplanted by the word *insurgent* (Tussing / Parker 2017).

It has yet to be determined whether there is indeed a reasonable connection between these places becoming a preferred target for attackers and them enacting ever more restrictive forms of belonging and identities. The fact is that making a convincing case that we still inhabit *free* cities is becoming a more and more perilous undertaking for urban designers. A tendency towards more refined formulations of the paradigm is emerging as we move to a situation where the politics of securitisation transitions to the poetics of securitisation. And the latter becomes a way of life.

In Germany, for instance, the design company *Runge* in Bissendorf, a municipality in the district of Osnabrück, manufactures the street bench model *concreta*, which, while suited to thwarting the effects of vehicles running into passers-by and also to taking a rest, features a seat that is simply too stiff and narrow to lie down and have a nap. The style is inspired by bunker architecture, with qualities and a sturdy anchoring weight that make it a great asset for our newly over-pedestrianised high streets. As these benches had already been used in Bonn, Christian Zaum, head of the department for civic order, intended to bring them to Düsseldorf too (Altenhofen / Löbker 2018).

Another interesting idea that has been suggested by FEMA involves erecting large sculptures around *important* buildings; these are preferably made of concrete and weathering steel to impair total perceptive access in open agoras. Spaces also have their own soundtrack; they talk to you, telling you to stay alert and warning you of some lurking abstract danger. In underground or metro stations, for instance, a voice repeats "Dear passengers, do not leave your luggage unattended at any time".[13] If you spontaneously think that this is either out of place (who carries luggage on the underground anyway?) or perhaps some trite recycling of old airport cassettes, you would be mistaken. There is no side effect here: sound recordings remind you that you are vulnerable for being the owner of property; when safety is at risk, identity is restructured around the outcome of reflective fear and reaction.

But "watch out for your property" comes second to "do not leave it unattended at any time", as if some strangely repeated refrain is subtly reminding you that *you* are not to be left unattended *at any time*. Invisibility, if we follow Foucault, is power; it "presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; […] the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible" (Foucault 1995: 170f.).

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13   This is the case in Düsseldorf, for instance, where the message is in both German and English.

CONCLUSIONS

The question of equipping our cities against alleged attacks cannot simply amount to a discussion about the discomfort or the ugliness of certain arte-facts, no matter how proven these dangers are. Deciding whether security or that sense of freedom that comes with carefree (danger/)ignorance matters more, is always a lost cause for the critical social scientist. Having long been a bookshop bestseller, the three-volume monumental work *Spheres* by philoso-pher Peter Sloterdijk (Sloterdijk 2011; 2014; 2016), featuring a premonitory epos of a society that chooses to inhabit the protected and self-enclosed space of the cocoon, seems to have cast Habermas's spheres into oblivion.

My claim for safeguarding democracy based on a conservationist view of public space would not be as challenging if public space in itself were not so increasingly difficult to locate and to define. What I consider to be specifically at stake here is where to locate public space and what is *public* in urban space, especially if its retention is so crucial to democracy's health. In the absence of a more conclusive judgement, I will now hark back to my initial approach in this chapter of reading this process in reverse: in the face of its progressive fragmentation, appropriation and 'weaponisation', public space is what resists expropriation, nominalisation or securitisation. For a tradition mostly steeped in Hayek and Friedman that praises democratic systems based on their capa-bilities (legal, cultural, financial) to warrant not only the right to private property, but also quite crucially the chance to obtain it, this is indeed a polemic claim. And with most urban developers insisting on shopping arcades being the new public spaces and convincingly declaring the important social responsibility they play in beautifying and *securitising* the commercial areas of the city, the future of democracy in our cities seems rather bleak.

In contrast to this mentality, I insist on an expanded view of democracy, certainly aided by an expanded view of public space. This was punctuated in Ancient Rome, where the *urbs* (city) was first and foremost the *civitas*, the realm where an ever-dynamic opposition between what is private and what is common could give rise to an abstraction called the *res publica*. I want to suggest that what makes an urban setting *public* space is not the quantity of people or activities, but the quality of citizenship that is found in a specific location. Publicness comes with a fundamental anomic and non-appropriable condition that space acquires when it becomes plural, when it is not nominal-ised or singled out by private interests. According to Jürgen Habermas, it is

"a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas et al. 1974). It is where truth is produced through multiplicity; in doing so, it shares with democracy a fundamental dialogical condition. Similarly, a movement of "radical municipalism" is growing across Europe, gaining seats on various city councils and taking over important parts of city government. Alliances between neighbourhood initiatives and specialist knowledge are taking place, gradually democratising the city by drawing on issues of commonality, decision-making and infrastructure (Roth 2022). My great hope is that municipalist initiatives will herald an expanded view of democracy, meaning that cities like Mumbai, Dhaka or Mexico City, the productive engines of our consumerist Western cities, will also be involved – and to an equal extent – in this aspiration.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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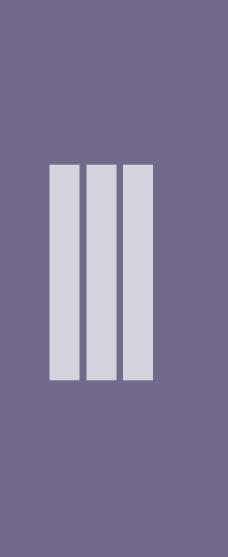
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DEMOCRATISING PROCESS

REAL DEMOCRACY IN A TIME OF CORONAVIRUS-CRISIS CAPITALISM

MÒNICA CLUA-LOSADA

DAVID J. BAILEY

SAORI SHIBATA

7

This chapter explores the development of contemporary neoliberal democracies during the COVID-19 crisis. It argues that contradictory pressures have combined to increase the tensions facing contemporary democracies, prompting a shift, in different ways, to authoritarian 'solutions'. Looking at the situation in four countries (Japan, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States), we find a common experience of considerable and growing strain being placed on contemporary democracies, which was already apparent before, but has been accelerated by, the COVID-19 crisis. Contemporary democracy under neoliberal capitalism is being increasingly challenged and destabilised by a cycle of hardship, anger and extra-institutional and grassroots solidarity initiatives, which are met with state-led repression and efforts to enhance and impose the social competition that underpins capitalist social relations. While the authoritarian efforts of the neoliberal state are of growing concern, the opportunities for innovative, emancipatory and disruptive forms of collective action that co-exist alongside these trends continue to provide grounds for hope. Indeed, it is in these new forms of collective action that we see the emergence and growth of the cooperation and solidarity that are necessary both to mitigate the harm and inequality inflicted by neoliberal capitalism and to create the opportunities needed to destabilise and ultimately transcend it.

INTRODUCTION

The tensions between democracy and capitalism have been present since the birth of liberal democracy. The move to neoliberalism in the early 1980s can be considered one attempt to resolve this tension, largely through efforts at de-democratisation. However, following the Great Recession of 2008, democratic neoliberalism has become increasingly untenable. We have witnessed a decade of austerity which has prompted a crisis in which neoliberal democracy is unable to achieve *either* legitimation *or* accumulation. Dissent, especially in the form of grassroots-level social mobilisation and protest, increasingly exceeds the capacity of formal political institutions to maintain orderly democratic representation. As a result, authoritarianism has increasingly become the means through which politicians and policymakers seek to stabilise and secure contemporary neoliberal capitalism. It is in these terms that we understand the democratic instability that preceded, and has now been accelerated by, the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. This is a crisis of capitalism in which moves towards 'real democracy' sit alongside, destabilise and threaten to replace the floundering institutions of 'democratic' neoliberalism.

Keywords:
neoliberal democracy
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solidarity

REAL DEMOCRACY NOW!

On 15 May 2011, thousands of people took to the streets and squares of Spain's major cities calling for "Real Democracy Now". This summed up the sentiments of many across the world. On a global scale, people undertook various acts of public dissent to express their opposition to the handling of the 2008 global economic crisis and the austerity that followed. This move towards protest grew throughout the decade (Carothers / Youngs 2015; Giugni / Grasso 2020). These grassroots movements were not only opposed to austerity, but were also seeking a collective voice, directed against public authorities who seemed unwilling to listen to popular demands for policies that would address worsening levels of inequality, precarity and environmental destruction. In doing so, they sought also to challenge the rise of right-wing authoritarian populism and exclusionary public policies (Clua-Losada 2018; Bailey et al. 2018b; Ribera-Almandoz et al. 2020).

It is with these grassroots movements in mind, and the democratic strain which they are part of, that we consider the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020. This, we claim, has prompted an acceleration of these processes: *both* democratic destabilisation *and* renewal.

In order to understand these developments, we first require a conceptualisation of neoliberal democracy that is able to account for its ongoing instability. Two contrasting pressures are particularly noteworthy. On the one hand, we see a steady rise of citizens with increasingly sophisticated demands and expectations, as well as the capacity to cooperate autonomously outside contemporary democratic institutions (Bailey et al. 2018b). This, however, exists alongside formal institutions of political authority that are subject to growing constraints arising from the neoliberal economic model based on which they are seeking to govern (Karkowski 2019; Bruff 2014).

Whereas common conceptualisations of democracy tend to view policy outcomes *either* as broadly representative of popular demands, *or* as reflecting the interests of dominant social forces, we advance an understanding of democracy that goes beyond this representation versus repression dichotomy. Instead, we see the enhanced capacity and frequency of grassroots-level social mobilisations as a phenomenon that increasingly disrupts, overflows and exceeds the capacity of the state to represent, channel, contain or repress the demands of the dominated (Azzellini / Sitrin 2014; Ribera-Almandoz et al. 2020). This, in turn, is prompting the 'democratic' neoliberal state to resort to

a range of authoritarian mechanisms that seek to (further) depolicitise, dele-gitimate and/or dampen popular demands. These dual trends are, we argue, producing an ongoing tendency towards democratic crisis and a retreat of formal democratic rights, at the same time as an expansion of 'real' demo-cratic experimentation and renewal.

This chapter shows that democracies in the core capitalist countries are expe-riencing serious strain because of the COVID-19 crisis, despite those countries historically having enshrined in their political systems more substantive demo-cratic rights than those available to people living in countries that are outside the core of global capitalism. The chapter compares and charts these developments in four national contexts – Spain, the UK, the United States and Japan – that have been selected to represent developments in a range of advanced (high-income) democracies prior to, and during, the coronavirus crisis. In considering democracies in America, Europe and Asia, each with notably different models of capital accumulation, we can also look at the common pressures that exist in different neoliberal contexts. In considering both the United States and the UK, we are able to explore the development of the two most neoliberalised advanced capitalist democracies, where the key features of neoliberalism – minimal welfare states, high levels of income inequality, a major shift towards financialisation, weak trade unions and labour market inse-curity – are all prevalent (Witt et al. 2018). In the Spanish case, we consider what is typically regarded as a Mediterranean variant of neoliberalism, with a relatively weak welfare state, a heavy reliance on fixed-term contracts within the labour market, a strong focus on tourism, high levels of financialisation and a heavy reliance on the family and traditional gender roles to maintain social reproduction that places an especially large burden on women (Rey-Araújo 2020). Finally, by examining the Japan case, we include the most advanced capitalist democracy in Asia, which has typically been considered to be characterised by high levels of cross-shareholding between banks and firms, which restricts market competition, a relatively closed export economy and a commitment to stable supply chains and labour market security. These longstanding features have meant that Japan has typically been viewed as a less neoliberal capitalist democracy, although these have been steadily eroded through the introduction of a series of neoliberal reforms advanced by the semi-permanent governing party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, over the past 25 years (Shibata 2020). In looking at a range of models of advanced neoliberal capitalist democracies, therefore, we are able to consider some of

the general pressures generated by the governing challenges associated with democratic neoliberal capitalism, as general trends have occurred in different contexts and to different extents, mediated by national-specific conditions.

Faced with the COVID-19 economic shock, we find that neoliberal states are struggling to perpetuate a finance-led accumulation regime riven by sharp (and sharpening) socio-economic inequalities and, as a result, are increasingly relying on political and judicial interventions that are dangerously authoritarian. Understandably, this has exacerbated existing hardships and grievances, and contributed to a further fraying of formal institutions of social cohesion. In response, (more) citizens have engaged in innovative, solidarity-based, autonomous and extra-institutional forms of social cooperation and collective dissent, in an attempt to overcome and challenge the impact of the crisis on both their health and their livelihoods. This has been met by state-level efforts to obstruct, discipline and delegitimate collective action and association. These mutually antagonistic trends are acting together to produce an ongoing escalation of social tension. Contemporary (formal) democracy is, therefore, likely to become more tenuous still, in a cycle of hardship, anger and extra-institutional and grassroots solidarity initiatives, met by state-led repression and attempts to re-impose the societal competition that forms a prerequisite for the reproduction of capitalist social relations. It is these trends that we explore below in our attempt to consider the development of democracy in the time of coronavirus-crisis capitalism. Before doing so, however, we turn first to consider in more detail the nature of contemporary capitalist democracy.

CONTEMPORARY CAPITALIST DEMOCRACIES IN A TIME OF MULTIPLE CRISES

In order to understand the contemporary crisis of neoliberal democracy, we also need to consider its historical emergence. In principle, democracy assumes that each individual citizen is equal, in terms of status, decision-making capacity and influence. Capitalism, in contrast, is driven by a logic of accumulation in which wealth is privileged, and the pursuit of profit is central to production and distribution. As set out by Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995), this uncomfortable relationship between democracy and capitalism – in which democracy both legitimates and challenges capitalism – requires that democracy be defined and understood in a restricted way in order for the two to be compatible. The historical emergence of existing capitalist democracy, there-

fore, was enabled by a move to redefine democracy as liberal democracy, in which property rights in particular were protected from erosion by popular democratic demands (see also Przeworski 2008).

Once democracy was in place, the 20th century saw the growth of labour movements translate into rising electoral support for socialist and social democratic parties, especially in Western Europe (Moschonas 2002). These socialist and social democratic parties represented a challenge to a number of key principles of property ownership, including through attempts to reform capitalist relations, by implementing legislation that would redistribute wealth, as well as more radical efforts to collectivise property relations (for the fortunes of such an experiment in Sweden, see Tilton 1991).

It was the expansion of demands by both organised labour and their social democratic party representatives, throughout the post-war period, that arguably enabled the wage inflation that formed part of the period of 'stagflation' of the 1970s. This saw the simultaneous occurrence of both inflation and sluggish growth. The profitability of firms fell, in part due to the growth of wage and welfare demands, as governments were unable to sufficiently stifle demands made by both labour movements and the new social movements that emerged around 1968, thereby prompting 'excessive' wage rises and public spending and, in turn, inflation (Glyn 2006).

The move towards a neoliberal model of governance and capital accumulation in the late 1970s/early 1980s therefore represented an attempt to place restrictions on popular democratic demands, in part in response to the experience of the 'stagflation' of the 1970s (Harvey 2005; Slobodian 2018).

The subsequent development of capitalist democracy during the neoliberal period has tended to be interpreted as a growing dominance of transnational and financial capital, reflecting the dominant socio-economic forces within contemporary neoliberalism (Walby 2013; Boyer 2013: 153ff.). Neoliberal capitalism has seen a move towards increasingly precarious and flexibilised labour, higher levels of inequality, asset bubbles created by financialisation, heightened global economic competition and welfare retrenchment. In turn, this has contributed to a decline in support for left-wing parties, as the social groups and economic conditions that were necessary for these parties to be electorally successful have dwindled (Benedetto et al. 2020). As such, democratic institutions under neoliberalism have become increasingly unable to

threaten dominant socio-economic interests (Brown 2015). Restrictions on firms' production decisions are avoided, business taxation is reduced, and labour-market policy is focused on ensuring 'flexibility' within the workplace. Redistributive welfare policies are avoided on the grounds that they are both too expensive and disincentivise the workforce. Walby (2013: 503) summarises the situation as follows:

As financialization developed, extending into everyday life through mortgages, pensions and credit cards and into industrial capital through fragmentation of company forms and shareholder value, finance capital increased its power through the associated political project of neoliberalism. The neoliberal project captured many political parties, states and international financial institutions, spreading as a global wave around the world, becoming embedded in governmental programmes and social formations.

THE PROBLEMS OF NEOLIBERAL DEMOCRACY: FROM DOMINATION TO OVERFLOW AND EXCESS

These critical accounts of neoliberal democracy correctly highlight some of the considerable limitations faced by contemporary democracies. In our view, however, they nevertheless fail to capture some of the pressures associated with contemporary neoliberal democracy – especially those pressures arising from the growth of grassroots social movements. While contemporary democratic institutions *are* increasingly captured by the interests of finance capital, at the same time they are also experiencing what we consider to be heightened democratic 'excess'. By this we mean an inability to contain and control the proliferation of demands and interests expressed by the citizens of contemporary neoliberal democracies.

During much of the neoliberal period, left-leaning activists, organisations and movements increasingly distanced themselves from, or sought to work outside, formal institutions of representative democracy. This was especially evident at the peak of the 2008 global economic crisis, when social democratic parties had largely moved towards a 'third way' position that abandoned the goal of substantive social redistribution, and trade unions appeared unable to pose a significant counterweight to the power of capital. Social movements and those engaging in a range of types of protest increasingly adopted a sceptical stance towards established parties and formal political processes. Leftist mobilisations tended often to be autonomous in the way they organised, with grassroots mobilisations structured through informal or non-institutionalised structures. This was most obvious with the so-called 'alter-globalisation movement' in the period prior to 2008, when the practice of horizontality became widely accepted as the preferred approach towards social mobilisation (Maeckelbergh 2009).

In terms of scale, the wave of public square occupations during 2011, to protest at the austerity measures of the post-2008 period, represented a significant expansion of the numbers of people engaged in these horizontalist forms of social action (Flesher Fominaya 2017). Faced with an unresponsive and repressive 'democratic' state, citizens increasingly identified alternative ways to sustain themselves. These included attempts by those in the most precarious situations to expand efforts to secure social reproduction through modes of social cooperation that existed outside and beyond formal institutions of polit-

ical authority (Arampatzi 2018). This was also facilitated by rapid and ongoing advances in information technology which enabled micro-level information sharing, discussion and cooperation, at a level unseen in the past, thereby challenging more traditional, top-down, modes of communication between institutions and individuals (albeit in a complicated and often problematic way) (Clua-Losada / Bailey 2019). As such, both forms of resistance and efforts of social cooperation and mutual support have increasingly occurred outside formally integrated institutions, such as trade unions, and instead there has been an expansion of autonomous modes of resistance with a commitment to grassroots rank-and-file participation (Ribera-Almandoz et al. 2020).

We see, therefore, a growing divergence between the incapacity of existing democratic organisations to meet the demands of contemporary democratic citizens, *and* the emergence of citizens with increasingly sophisticated demands and expectations and the capacity and willingness to cooperate outside contemporary democratic institutions. This has created a more and more antagonistic relationship between formal democratic institutions that are increasingly authoritarian and/or technocratic (Bruff 2014; Sandbeck / Schneider 2014; Brown 2015) and those ever more autonomous, subversive and fluidly and horizontally associating democratic subjects whose actions, demands and desires 'overflow' the boundaries of those institutions (Ribera-Almandoz et al. 2020).

In an attempt to reconcile these conflicting demands, institutions of political authority have increasingly resorted to a range of mechanisms of control that seek to *further* depoliticise, delegitimate and/or dampen the capacity for democratic expression (Burnham 2017). This includes the increasing promotion of ideas, concepts and practices that seek to reinforce the market, market logic and market-oriented subjectivities as a means of discipline, as well as more direct forms of repression and scapegoating – all in an effort to maintain control, order, acquiescence and consent in contemporary neoliberal democracies (Stanley 2014; Forkert 2017; Lazzarato 2014).

These antagonistic trends, we contend, have accelerated further still as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Contemporary capitalist democracies are facing yet more tension and strain. The formal institutions of democracy are increasingly unable to manage popular demands, especially those expressed through extra-institutional forms of social solidarity. As a result, the only response available to the democratic state is one of opposition and repression. This

has further propelled the cycle of tension, dissent and authoritarianism. While the initial onset of the COVID-19 crisis led to an apparently more interventionist (or neo-Keynesian) response from the state than had been seen for much of the neoliberal period, nevertheless popular demands have exceeded the state's capacity to achieve the social consent necessary to successfully manage contemporary capitalism. This, as we shall see in each of our national cases, has led to a series of desperate lurches between (largely unsuccessful) efforts to appease popular dissatisfaction through piecemeal (and insufficient) concessions and authoritarian efforts to undermine and prevent social mobilisation.

UNITED KINGDOM: LIBERTARIAN NEOLIBERALISM IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

The UK was already facing a democratic legitimation crisis prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. 2019 had seen the political establishment hopelessly divided over the question of Brexit, with both the Conservatives and the Labour Party facing serious internal divisions over whether to oppose or embrace the 2016 referendum vote to leave the European Union (Heinkelmann-Wild et al. 2020; Bailey 2019). The left-leaning Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn, suffered a major setback in the December 2019 general election, although many of those who supported the victorious Conservative Party did so arguably despite (not because of) that party's free-market agenda, and in the hope that Brexit would bring increased prosperity to poorer regions of the country (Carreras et al. 2019). Those seats in the UK Parliament which switched from being long-time Labour strongholds to electing a Conservative had experienced a disproportionate decline in welfare spending, suggesting that voters switching to the Brexit-backing Conservative Party were expecting the government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to bring about a reversal in the fortunes of those regions (McCurdy et al. 2020). This therefore created a difficult dilemma for the incoming Conservative government, committed to both low public spending and neoliberal pro-trade policies, yet with the support of voters who had expressed an interest in reversing the economic decline that had been produced by neoliberalism (Harris 2020). Indeed, this dilemma was to come to the fore later in the year when Conservative members of parliament (MPs) representing seats in the north of England wrote to criticise Government policy on the grounds that it was failing to address the needs of their constituents (Elgot et al. 2020).

The poor result in the 2019 election also represented the end of the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party as its left-leaning anti-austerity and mildly socialist programme was rejected. This left a bitterly divided membership, and was followed by a lengthy leadership election that re-opened the strategic question for the Labour Party over whether it should seek to appeal to the centre of the political spectrum and the liberal-left professional section of the electorate or to a more clearly left-wing grouping united by its commitment to anti-austerity activism, a socialist vision and the support of the trade-union base of the party (Quinn 2019).

Both the Conservatives and Labour therefore faced considerable strain as a result of the conflicting demands placed on them, with no obvious resolution on either side seemingly capable of producing a coherent programme with consistent electoral support.

FROM 'HERD IMMUNITY' TO THE IMPOSITION OF A NATIONAL LOCKDOWN

As COVID-19 prompted a national lockdown, many of the tensions faced by the UK's political class became more apparent still. The neoliberal/libertarian leanings of the Johnson-led government appeared to inform its initial response, with suggestions that this would be underpinned by the pursuit of 'herd immunity' and involve simply allowing the infection to be allowed to "move through the population", and that measures such as hand-washing would be sufficient to deal with the risk. It was arguably as a result of a dramatic decline in public confidence, as online discussion and information sharing resulted in widespread and rapidly growing anxiety in society, that the decision was eventually taken to impose a lockdown in March 2020 (Cooper / Furlong 2020). This posed the additional question of how to deal with the massive economic costs that would result from the lockdown. This presented a considerable dilemma for a government elected largely on a pro-business platform which simultaneously promised support for traditional working-class areas, but sitting alongside an intellectual commitment at the heart of the government to neoliberal and free-market principles. The economic measures put in place were often introduced as a knee-jerk reaction in response to the demands raised by a succession of social groups – a development that highlighted the impact that vocalised public alarm could have on the government. A furlough scheme was introduced to provide income protection for employees, and loans were issued to prevent a liquidity crisis for firms. Mortgage deferrals were encouraged for homeowners, and eviction bans were put in place to prevent those in rent arrears from being

made homeless (Anand 2020). Perhaps the key group that was 'left behind' in these considerations, however, were the sizeable section of the population in casual or precarious employment, with many slipping through the net of the furlough scheme as nearly one fifth of employees on temporary contracts reported losing their job instead of being furloughed (Cominetti et al. 2020: 30). Reflecting the anti-migrant stance of the government, moreover, migrants and international students were also severely affected as they were often ineligible for government support yet also unable to return to their home countries (Siddique 2020; Migrants' Rights Network / Unis Resist Border Controls 2020).

MOBILISATIONS AGAINST AN 'UNCARING' GOVERNMENT

The lockdown therefore generated hardship, isolation and anxiety. In response, grassroots initiatives emerged across the country in an attempt to develop means that would allow people to mutually support each other. Some of these initiatives were explicitly driven by neo-anarchist principles, something which was perhaps most evident in the fact that many such groups adopted the anarchist term 'mutual aid' in their title (Firth 2020). Others were less explicitly informed by a clear ideological position, but provided informal support, most commonly through the rapid creation of neighbourhood WhatsApp groups across the country as people sought to build mutual support networks (Kavada 2020). In other instances, pre-existing community groups rapidly turned themselves into organisations that could provide essentials, including food and company (see Allen 2020 for an excellent overview of a number of such initiatives in Sandwell in the West Midlands).

Trade unions and community activist groups also sought to find ways to mobilise, despite the restrictions created by the lockdown. One of the most successful trade unions in mobilising during the lockdown was a teachers' union, the National Education Union (NEU), which managed to stage a 20,000-strong online meeting, as well as organising a mass petition opposing the early re-opening of schools (Waugh 2020). On several occasions this form of collective action was sufficient to force a government U-turn on the question of opening schools, for instance reversing a plan to re-open all primary schools before the summer break, as the Government was forced to acknowledge that it could not do so safely (Weale 2020a).

Mobilisations were also commonly organised by, and in support of, those who the Conservative government labelled 'key workers' – those public-

sector workers who had been repeatedly denied pay rises or experienced a reduction in their pensions over the previous decade of austerity, but who were now heralded as essential to the national economy. Problems of a lack of protective clothing and testing were particular grievances. As Gregor Gall (2020) describes, "in Royal Mail, in meat processing plants, on construction sites, at distribution hubs and in fulfilment centres (warehouses) along with refuse workers, council library workers and local government workers have gone on strike unofficially". Cleaners at the Ministry of Justice downed tools and staged a wildcat strike due to concerns over health and safety. As the lockdown began to be eased, key workers also began to protest demanding better pay, with for instance demonstrations being held by National Health Service (NHS) nurses across the country (Busby 2020).

Likewise, youth mobilisations occurred through the summer, especially after school examination grade results were released. This prompted another round of embarrassing government U-turns as algorithms that would explicitly impose wider social inequalities on young adults were eventually reversed in the face of considerable public opposition (Weale / Stewart 2020).

There were also visible informal expressions of dissent, especially by young people, many of whom felt let down by the so-called 'boomer' generation and felt less at risk of experiencing severe COVID-19 symptoms than the rest of the population. As the lockdown dragged on, the country saw a return to what the government and media termed "illegal raves" (Hillier 2020). As these informal gatherings grew in popularity during the summer of 2020, the government increasingly turned to authoritarian measures to prevent their occurrence, and to scapegoat young people in an attempt to shift attention away from their own public health policy failures. This punitive approach also saw several students issued with £10,000 fines for hosting social gatherings (Jarram et al. 2020).

PANDEMIC? WHAT PANDEMIC?
In the face of growing dissent, the Conservative government responded in an increasingly authoritarian manner. This included downplaying the threat of the pandemic, scapegoating minority groups and seeking to close down democratic opposition.

Despite fierce opposition from university staff and their union, the University and College Union (UCU), universities were encouraged by the government to

re-open and stay open, despite the widespread fear (which turned out to be entirely founded) that this would prompt another spike in infections. And lo and behold, in early October, immediately after the return of students to universities, the country's second wave of the pandemic began (Tighe et al. 2020).

This second wave saw infection rates rise dramatically from October 2020 through to the end of the year. Press reports, and the National Audit Office, increasingly questioned the competence of the government, as well as the business links that had led to this poor handling of the pandemic. The protective equipment that had been purchased to deal with it was found both to be inadequate and to have been supplied by those with close political connections to government ministers (Pegg et al. 2020). Likewise, the government's 'test-and-trace' system was shown to be both heavily reliant on private-sector suppliers and to be consistently missing its targets (Syal 2020).

As criticism grew in light of the seeming incompetence and cronyism characterising the Government's handling of the pandemic, the response was a retreat to core themes that could be relied on to boost popular support. This saw an appeal to nationalism with the announcement of a large increase in defence spending that was supposed to ensure 'the defence of the realm'. There was also a tightening-up of security measures on the pretext of shoring up authoritarianism, including by adopting a new Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill (or 'Spycops Bill') that would allow undercover surveillance officers to commit crimes within the UK (Chakrabarti 2020). Opponents of the government were also increasingly vilified, with both the Home Office and the Prime Minister criticising "lefty lawyers" who were thwarting deportations of migrants by, it was claimed, defending the 'indefensible' (Bowcott 2020).

Objections to government policy regarding COVID-19 were increasingly responded to in an undemocratic manner. This was most clearly witnessed with the imposition of a local lockdown on Manchester, despite open opposition to the terms of the lockdown being publicly expressed by the Mayor for the region following a failure to reach agreement over the terms under which the lockdown would be implemented. Similarly, the Government threatened legal action against two London councils to prevent them from teaching online instead of in person, despite the clear risks to public health this posed (Weale 2020b).

These heightened efforts to silence dissent were perhaps most clearly evident, however, in the words of Women and Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch in a parliamentary statement in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests. As the Black Lives Matter protests spread from the United States to the United Kingdom, in the wake of the outrage at the killing of George Floyd, the protesters sought also to highlight the disproportionate impact that the pandemic was having on minorities within the UK. In this way, the Black Lives Matter protest movement became perhaps the most prominent protest movement in the UK of 2020. Reflecting the government's broader efforts to close down opposition and undermine those expressing dissent, Badenoch sought in her statement on the movement to undermine its credibility and the ideas that underpinned it: "I want to be absolutely clear that the Government stand unequivocally against critical race theory,", she declared, saying that it refused to support "the anti-capitalist Black Lives Matter group" on the grounds that it was "a political movement" (HC Deb 2020).

JAPAN – THE FAILURE OF 'ABENOMICS'

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the government in Japan was already facing a considerable decline in public support. Japan's political system has been dominated by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for most of the post-war period, with little opportunity for political opposition. Nevertheless, by January 2020, the ongoing failure of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government to produce a coherent economic stimulus package to lift Japan out of its decades-long economic slump had resulted in a fall in the net approval rating[1] for the cabinet from 29.4% in January 2017 to only 5.3% (see the Japan Political Pulse (Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA s.d.)). The Abe administration was increasingly viewed as out of touch with the electorate, bogged down in corruption scandals and focused on constitutional reforms that lacked popular support (The Japan Times 2019a; 2019b). Moreover, the economic reforms that Abe had overseen had resulted in a failure to improve the working lives of the growing number of precariously employed and low-paid workers in the country, despite the government routinely expressing concern for the plight of non-regular workers in response to a growing precarious workers' movement (Shibata 2020). Therefore, democratic legitimacy in Japan was already strained prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

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1   This is made up of the approval rating minus the disapproval rating.

These tensions increased still further following the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Two key trends were especially visible during the COVID-19 crisis in Japan. On the one hand, the Abe government was increasingly accused of seizing the opportunity provided by the COVID-19 pandemic to try to introduce measures that would undermine the country's democratic process. On the other hand, grassroots opposition to these moves escalated, especially in the form of online protest, bearing witness to a growing move towards 'online democracy' in Japan (Nomura 2020).

LOCKDOWN, POLITICAL SCANDALS AND THE RESIGNATION OF PRIME MINISTER ABE

Perhaps most noteworthy about the Abe administration's handling of the pandemic was its series of missteps that created a growing public impression that the government was incapable of dealing with the situation. This eventually led to Abe's resignation on 28 August 2020, the hope being that appointing a new Prime Minister would boost the LDP's approval ratings, as there had been an increasing sense that Abe's coronavirus policies were out of sync with the public mood, incoherent and a waste of money that could otherwise have been used for hospitals and coronavirus tests (The Okinawa Times 2020). For instance, the government's 'Go To' campaign, which involved subsidising the cost of travel and accommodation in an attempt to support the hospitality sector, which was struggling because of the COVID-19 crisis, faced fierce criticism on the grounds that it endangered public health, risked an exacerbation of the effects of flash flooding in Southern Japan and disproportionately benefited those on higher incomes. This sparked online opposition, with 93,000 people signing an online petition and tweeting on Twitter a Japanese hashtag that can be translated as 'Stop the 'Go To' campaign' (Yahoo Japan News 2020). As a result, the government was forced to make changes to the campaign, excluding Tokyo from the travel discount in order to reduce the number of tourists visiting the Japanese capital (Note 2020). Similarly, the government's decision to distribute two face masks to each household was met with public disquiet. The masks were referred to as 'Abenomasks', attracting mockery and criticism when many were found to be damaged or of poor quality, eventually prompting the government to end the policy (Zakoda / Fujiyama 2020).

The effects of the pandemic and the state of emergency were particularly keenly felt by the growing proportion of precarious workers on Japan's labour market, many of whom reported increases in injury rates, involuntary long working hours, bullying and harassment (Fujita 2020). Precarious workers became increasingly vulnerable to unscrupulous employers, with many employers refusing to adhere to the various government measures that were designed to offer some of them support for low-paid and temporary employees. For instance, some employers refused to pay the 'absence allowance' enshrined by the Labour Standard Act, which required them to pay workers if their workplaces had been closed down due to COVID-19 (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) 2020a; Sakakibara et al. 2020). Fraudulent temporary job advertisements were also common, with employers using inaccurate job descriptions – masking, for example, lower wages, longer working hours, lower overtime payments and worse working conditions – and thereby taking advantage of the COVID-19 situation (Precariat Union Blog 2020a).

Unemployment rose from about 1.5 million in January 2020 to 1.95 million in June 2020 (JILPT 2020b). Foreign workers were especially at risk of unemployment (Nikkey Shimbun 2020), with over 40,000 having lost their jobs by the end of July (The Asahi Shimbun 2020d).

In seeking to respond to these developments, Japan's growing precarious workers' movement sought to challenge the conditions of those on temporary or insecure employment contracts. Temporary contracted workers in the retail industry mobilised with the support of the Precariat Union to challenge dismissals (Precariat Union Blog 2020b). Drivers took legal action against their employers, with the support of the Precariat Union, managing in one instance to secure full compensation for unpaid wages (Bengoshi dottokomu nyuusu 2020).

Similar initiatives saw a number of unions and citizens' groups opening emergency helplines to support workers who were experiencing problems in the workplace. Another campaign saw laid-off workers and workers whose wages had not been paid mount a legal challenge against their employers, as well as conducting a series of street protests. The General Support Union (*Sogo Sapooto Yunio*) received over 2,000 phone calls in April and May 2020 relating to redundancies, the termination of employment contracts, and reduced

working time. Union interventions in a number of firms led to successful challenges to safety measures in the workplace, unpaid wages and overtime, the provision of an absence allowance, and the retention of employees (GoodMorning 2020). In the case of Konami Sports Co., the General Support Union staged a series of protests in front of the company, generating considerable media attention and eventually securing the payment of absence allowance for several thousand part-time workers following an initial refusal by the firm to pay it (Konno 2020). Citizens' groups also set up emergency shelters for homeless people and provided support for those making benefit claims (Tokyo Shimbun 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis also saw the continuation of an ongoing campaign to oppose Abe's attempt to revise Article 9 of Japan's Constitution, which it was feared he would push through under the cover of the pandemic, and which threatened to result in the country's re-militarisation. Amid fears that Abe would use COVID-19 as an opportunity to force through the change, citizens' groups across Japan took part in protests, demonstrations and (online) petitions and made or listened to online speeches (Abe 9jyo kaiken No! 2020).

The government responded to many of these developments in a repressive manner. This became most evident when the Abe government proposed a change to the mandatory retirement age of public prosecutors, threatening to bypass the Public Prosecutor's Office Law and undermine the independence of the prosecution system, as well as the capacity of prosecutors to indict politicians (Ito 2020). This was particularly controversial as it allowed a close ally of the Prime Minister, senior prosecutor Hiromu Kurokawa, to remain head of the Tokyo High Public Prosecutor's Office, although he had reached the mandatory retirement age and had recently been found to have been involved in illegal gambling during the state of emergency.

These parliamentary manoeuvres prompted a massive outpouring of criticism online, including a twitter demonstration with a hashtag that can be translated as "I object to the proposed revision of the Public Prosecutor's Office Law" (*Kensatsucho hooan kaiseini koogishimasu*) which attracted the support of around 10 million people, with over 350,000 people submitting a coordinated faxed petition (The Asahi Shimbun 2020a; Abe 9jyo kaiken No! 2020). This, in turn, prompted Kurokawa to resign as head of the Tokyo High Public Prosecutors Office in May 2020, and the government was forced to shelve the legislation (The Asahi Shimbun 2020a).

In the face of mounting pressure, Abe resigned as Prime Minister on 28 August and was replaced the following month by Yoshihide Suga. The new government, however, continued to pursue an undemocratic political course, resulting in Suga's initial popularity declining sharply in a short space of time. The most significant act prompting this was his decision to reject six nominees to the Science Council of Japan who had openly opposed flagship policies of the preceding Abe administration. This compounded ongoing criticism of the government's stance on academic freedom (Johnston 2020). Over 380 academic associations and citizens' groups released official statements expressing their disagreement with this decision, and more than 140,000 citizens signed a petition opposing the move, which was widely seen as both an attack on academic freedom and an indication of the undemocratic and authoritarian nature of the incoming government (Kitano et al. 2020). As a result, the approval ratings for the Suga government fell from 65% in September to 53% in October 2020, with 63% considering Suga's explanation for rejecting the nominees insufficient (The Asahi Shimbun 2020e).

UNITED STATES – CORONAVIRUS RACISM IN POLARISED TIMES

The United States was already a highly polarised society before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, creating considerable political instability. The election of President Donald Trump in 2016 reflected growing popular disaffection with the political mainstream (both centre-left and centre-right). It resulted from the success of an election campaign that had been underpinned by far-right tropes, including xenophobic attacks on migrants, Mexico and China, and which openly sought to build on the stark racial divides that constitute US society, as well as being openly misogynistic. The public response to his election was on a similar scale, with a massive surge of public protest, including the Women's March held the day after his election and which at that time was the largest demonstration in US history and the very disruptive airport protests against Trump's so-called 'Muslim ban' that prevented people from travelling into the country from predominantly Muslim countries. This sharp social polarisation was driven in part by a longer-term erosion of popular confidence in the political elite throughout the neoliberal period, and especially after the financial crash of 2008, resulting in a climate in which, by early 2020, the antagonism between grassroots mobilisation and the authoritarian measures of the Trump

administration were already putting considerable pressure on the legitimacy and stability of US democracy.

DENYING A RACIALISED PANDEMIC

When the pandemic began, the initial response of the Trump administration was to simply deny the threat posed by COVID-19. This, combined with a macho attitude by the President that disregarded scientific knowledge, set the country on a dangerous path. From advising citizens to inject themselves with the disinfectant bleach (BBC News 2020) to recommending particular types of drugs, Trump's press briefings soon became examples of how not to lead a country during a devastating global crisis. The crisis also saw Trump seek to build further on his xenophobic platform, threatening to close the border with Mexico – a threat that however came to nothing as Mexico got there first by shutting down its land border with the United States.

The pandemic, and Trump's response, further exacerbated the racial divides within American capitalism. COVID-19 spread through communities of colour, highlighting the deeply intertwined nature of class differences and racial segregation in the United States, as the *de facto* segregation of communities there enabled (as it has also historically) a widespread disregard for the well-being of entire communities defined along racial lines (Pulido 2016; Ransby 2018).

Racial divisions also overlay the United States' privatised health system, with parts of the population having no access to healthcare and/or having higher incidences of health conditions that put them at risk of hospitalisation. This paved the way for the death rate for COVID-19 in some parts of the United States to reach five times the national average (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center s.d.).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS FOR AND AGAINST COVID-19: FROM THE ALT-RIGHT TO BLACK LIVES MATTER

The impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the United States has prompted multiple rounds of grassroots mobilisation driven by different forms of dissent. These mobilisations also reflected the polarisation that marked US society, with right-wing anti-lockdown campaigners and white supremacists also staging protests and counter-protests, as well as those undertaken by those on the Left of the political spectrum. While these right-wing protests reflected the underlying distrust towards the political mainstream elite expressed by

many within US society, nevertheless in taking this reactionary form these protests were clearly not interested in demands for 'real democracy'. They also tended to be a minority of social mobilisations overall, with the vast majority of protests and collective action being carried out by progressives.

The protests witnessed in the United States were held in four waves. The first of these, concentrated in late March and early April, saw a large number of strikes staged mainly by key workers, employed by grocery and online stores, who became even more vital for people's everyday lives (Selyukh / Bond 2020). The lack of basic protective equipment available to them, and the spread of the virus among supermarket and warehouse workers, led them to seek ways to publicly vocalise their concerns, resulting in wildcat strikes in a number of workplaces, including Amazon, Whole Foods, and Sprouts.

A second wave of protests saw the emergence of right-wing groups as the alt-right questioned the pandemic and the measures put in place. These protests were designed to force states to re-open after the lockdown, fuelled by tweets by President Trump such as "LIBERATE MICHIGAN" and "LIBERATE MINNESOTA" and others along similar lines. These protesters were also openly against mask wearing and questioned the science behind infectious diseases. Some of these protests were violent, and in many cases the partici-pants attempted to break into state capitol buildings, e.g. in Michigan (Beckett 2020), yet they were met with little or no police presence, even though many of the demonstrators were heavily armed.

A third wave followed the murder of George Floyd by a police officer, and brought the Black Lives Matter movement back to the streets. This led to some of the biggest protests seen in modern times, with marches taking place right across the country, including in some smaller towns that had rarely seen demonstrations before. These protests garnered overwhelming support, not just from ordinary members of the public but also from the business commu-nity and celebrities and so managed to change the nature of public discourse. Indeed, the 'Defund the Police' critique both repudiated police actions and became a cry for the protection of public services, such as education, social services and even healthcare. This has accelerated what Ribera-Almandoz (2019) has termed the "judicialisation of resistance", whereby the demands of radical movements are taken up by political institutions. An example of this was the announcement on Twitter by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) that they were calling for "the dismantling of the Department of Home-

land Security". The Democratic Party's nomination of Kamala Harris as their candidate for Vice-President of the United States can also be considered a reflection of this insurgent mood in the streets.

Finally, a fourth wave, perhaps the most radical yet, followed on from the BLM protests in early June. Many people decided to continue creating spaces where they could do more than express dissatisfaction. One particularly striking illustration of this was the establishment, by residents and protesters, of a policing- and state-free area, the Portland autonomous zone. While this drew criticism from some quarters, especially among moderates in the Democratic Party, it also demonstrated a form of radical organising that had long been missing from protest movements in the United States.

DETERIORATING DEMOCRACY AND CRIMINALISING DISSENT

These multiple and increasingly radical waves of mobilisation were met with growing hostility and a worryingly authoritarian response, especially from the US federal government and President Trump. This included overt moves to further criminalise resistance and dissidence. From the President calling the anti-fascist and anti-racist movement Antifa a terrorist organisation to sending in federal troops to deal with protests in cities run by Democratic mayors, there was a heightened sense that not only were resistance groups being criminalised, but so indeed were subnational levels of government. Coupled with the existing severe lack of public trust in the media, science and public services in general, this created a particularly dangerous situation. A significant part of the population had no confidence in certain public institutions, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the United States Postal Service (USPS), yet blindly trusted the police, the Department of Homeland Security and the President. Epitomising these moves to undermine public confidence in democratic institutions, Trump sought to attack the USPS and question its ability to handle postal votes, or 'mail-in votes' as they are known in the United States, thereby undermining in advance the credibility of an election he clearly feared he might lose.

SPAIN – CORONACIAO, AUTHORITARIANISM AND CORRUPTION IN PANDEMIC TIMES

Democracy in Spain had already been facing a severe crisis for nearly a decade before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis (Clua-Losada 2018). In 2010, Spain adopted a constitutionally binding commitment to austerity, sparking a chain of events and forms of grassroots mobilisation that saw the emergence of advanced social movements and radical forms of civil disobedience that challenged Spain's deeply authoritarian state (Clua-Losada / Ribera-Almandoz 2017). This authoritarianism became most apparent during the Catalan crisis, with the imprisonment of political prisoners and the criminalisation of resistance. While many hoped that the progressive coalition between the social-democratic Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the left-wing party *Podemos* that took power in December 2019 would signal a real break from this authoritarianism, the handling of the COVID-19 crisis has put paid to much of that hope.

RECENTRALISE, RECENTRALISE AND RECENTRALISE – SPAIN'S SOLUTIONS TO CRISES

On 15 March 2020, the Spanish government imposed a strict lockdown. In doing so, the government deployed rarely used powers to declare a state of emergency. These were limited by law to 15 days, with each 15-day extension having to be approved by the Congress of Deputies (the lower house of the Spanish Parliament). This ensured that the process of extending the state of emergency became a highly politicised event exposing the government to ongoing scrutiny.

The lockdown also exacerbated the ongoing democratic strain in Spain, in particular heightening regional tensions as Madrid increasingly moved to consolidate its power vis-à-vis the country's regions. Subnational governments were stripped of all their powers, despite health provision having been devolved for over 20 years. This meant that policies were implemented uniformly across Spain, in a way that ignored regional differences or varying epidemiological concerns. In one case that was subsequently considered one of the most damaging episodes for public health in the region, Catalonia was refused permission to impose a local lockdown in the town of Igualada, despite the fact that the occurrence of a 'super-spreader event' had been identified there.

The central government's handling of the crisis also further undermined public confidence in its ability to enact meaningful change, with the government increasingly being associated with authoritarianism. This shift was symbolised by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez being surrounded by high-ranking members of the military rather than public-health experts at his daily press briefings. Similarly, the refusal by Sánchez to revoke the 'gag law', which criminalised protest and resistance activities, was widely perceived as being because it served a useful purpose in terms of imposing fines on those breaking lockdown or the requirement to wear face masks.

These contradictions in the PSOE/*Podemos* coalition were brought further to the fore in summer 2020 when the 'King Emeritus' (Juan Carlos I, the predecessor and father of the current monarch, King Felipe), facing two judicial charges against him for corruption (one in Spain and the other in Switzerland), fled the country. It soon transpired that high-ranking government officials and Pedro Sánchez himself had enabled him to take refuge in the United Arab Emirates, a country with no extradition treaties with either Spain or Switzerland, and so helped him evade justice.

THE MOST PROGRESSIVE GOVERNMENT IN HISTORY?

Popular expectations that the PSOE-*Podemos* coalition would adopt a progressive response to the COVID-19 crisis were, therefore, largely dashed. The country's market-based and underfunded healthcare system was unable to avoid high death rates, in part due to an absence of preventive services (Benach 2020). Announcements that private hospitals would be taken over by the public healthcare system concealed the fact that this privatised form of public-health provision would be billed to the Ministry of Health and/or the devolved health authorities of the autonomous communities (Valdés 2020). The much-heralded basic income (IMV), which initially appeared to be an advanced furlough scheme, turned out to be a highly targeted, bureaucratically mismanaged subsidy. The scheme was adopted in May, but by mid-August it still remained unclear whether it would be managed by the central government or by the autonomous communities. In addition, claimants were forced to wait for months to receive any payment at all (Babiker / Albarrán 2020).

The crisis also led to mass redundancies. Nissan announced in May 2020 that it would close its plant in Barcelona, causing the loss of hundreds of jobs. This prompted an indefinite strike, which was met by much stricter policing of a

protest of this type than would normally be possible, because of the repressive measures involved in the state of emergency. Eventually, following arduous negotiations with the trade unions, the closure of the plant was delayed until December 2021 (El Diario.es 2020).

GRASSROOTS ORGANISING AGAINST DISORGANISED AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNANCE

In response to the repressive nature of Spain's state of emergency and lock-down, mutual aid groups organised across the country. These efforts built on the high levels of social and political mobilisation that had been witnessed in previous years. In Catalonia, a whole network of mutual aiders emerged within the first 48 hours. Young people were paired up with older members of society who needed help with their groceries, or even someone to talk to them on the phone to avoid a sense of social isolation. Face masks were mass-produced by groups, mainly made up of women, that soon sprang up to counter a severe shortage of these items. These masks were then often given to healthcare workers and even the general population. Remarkably, Top Manta, a cooperative brand created by Barcelona's undocumented street vendors, quickly began producing masks and delivering them free of charge to public hospitals (Kashila 2020). Other forms of collective action managed to get the authorities to adopt emergency protective measures. The tenants' union, for instance, successfully pressured the Catalan Parliament into passing legislation to establish rent protection (Maideu 2020).

As in the United States, there have also been limited attempts, driven by far-right groups, especially in Madrid, to protest against lockdowns and the wearing of masks. The rhetoric for these right-wing protests, many of them taking place in Madrid's wealthy Salamanca neighbourhood, focused on the curtailment of certain 'freedoms' during the lockdown. They also often person-ally targeted *Podemos* leaders Pablo Iglesias and Irene Montero, through, for example, daily harassment outside their homes.

In sum, and as we have seen in each of our cases, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the strain on Spanish democracy. Ever-growing examples of grassroots-level social mobilisation are accompanied by ongoing efforts to increase authoritarian constraints on democracy. The result is a never-ending spiral of tension and antagonism. The management of the COVID-19 crisis by the PSOE-*Podemos* coalition is increasingly being viewed as a tale of

empty promises. From the basic income that never arrived to the inability of job centres to cope with the large number of unemployment-benefit claimants, and with many not receiving any income since March 2020, the situation of many people in Spain is precarious to say the least. Efforts at solidarity and mutual support have been met with an authoritarian response that seeks (unsuccessfully) to limit the development of autonomous forms of social cooperation. As time has gone and the handling of the crisis has come to be perceived as undemocratic, people's discontent has become more apparent.

COMPARING PANDEMICS: AUTHORITARIANISM, SOCIAL MOBILISATIONS AND DEMOCRATIC CRISIS

Despite the markedly different contexts in the UK, the United States, Japan and Spain discussed here, the trends are remarkably similar. In each case, we witness a pattern in which democracy was already under considerable strain prior to the onset of the pandemic. These tensions were further exacerbated by both the impact of the pandemic and governments' response to this crisis.

In particular, the precarity and inequality that mark contemporary neoliberalism created a context in which vulnerable workers in particular experienced a further deterioration in their conditions. The pandemic prompted a range of non-institutionalised forms of social cooperation to emerge, as those who were vulnerable or facing anxiety sought to offer each other mutual support, as well as seeking to object to or oppose the imposition of hardship by the neoliberal state, which itself was clearly ill equipped to respond competently to the needs of its citizens. This has created a spiralling cycle of tension in which hardship is prompting social mobilisation, which in turn is prompting authoritarian political responses that only further fuel this escalation of civil antagonism. As we set out in our initial discussion on the nature of neoliberal democracy, the contemporary neoliberal state is unable to represent its citizens, but it is also unable to successfully repress them. New forms of civil association are creating new forms of grassroots democracy that continually challenge and contest the flawed claims to democracy of formal political institutions, resulting in authoritarianism being the only option available to those institutions, thereby escalating these tensions further still.

As we have seen, these trends can be witnessed in each country. In the UK, a haphazard crisis-management approach has left much of the population unable to follow extremely unclear, complicated and contradictory guidelines.

In Japan, the pandemic has accelerated an already existing political crisis and has brought to the fore the precarisation of the labour market (and life in general) that had been exacerbated by 'Abenomics', i.e. the economic policies of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. While the number of infections in Japan was extremely low in comparison with the other countries in our study, the state of emergency imposed there prompted notably similar political and social outcomes. In the United States, the pandemic has highlighted the racialised form of capitalism that has once again left large sections of the population unprotected and victimised. Finally, Spain has shown itself once again unable to cope with a crisis, even with an incumbent progressive government.

Despite these similarities between the four countries considered, there are also significant differences, reflecting their different national political traditions and models of capital accumulation. Perhaps most importantly, the different social movements and traditions of solidarity that existed before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis have shaped the way in which dissent and mutual support have mobilised during the pandemic. In countries where

there had been more social protest in the decade preceding the pandemic, movements for real democracy organised more effectively. This means that throughout the pandemic, civil-society responses have been most fulsome in those countries and contexts where solidarity movements and social movements were most fully developed. This is perhaps most evident in the case of Spain. Both the speed and the scale of self-organised solidarity movements that emerged in Spain during 2020 reflect the depth of such movements as they have been organising since the 15-M anti-austerity movement of 2011 (and even before that). In contrast, in countries such as the UK and Japan, where solidarity movements have been less developed, these initiatives have been less prominent.

The forms that social mobilisation have taken has also reflected the underlying grievances that mark the particular national context in which they have occurred. In the case of the United States, the re-emergence of Black Lives Matter, a movement which originally came to prominence in 2014, reflects the highly racialised nature of the country's social divisions. The ongoing development of Japan's precarious labour movement, despite lower levels of more militant forms of disruptive dissent, also reflects the growing social strain emerging in Japan. The relatively pacific nature of Japan's post-war labour movement represents the commitment by successive governments to avoiding social conflict and the associated practice of lifelong employment in Japanese companies. This has resulted in an absence of a tradition of militant labour organising. However, as a result of the neoliberal labour market reforms that have been introduced over the last 20 years, precarious workers have been forced to seek ways to mobilise, as became clear during the pandemic.

Finally, as we saw especially in the case of Spain and the United States, contemporary protest is not solely progressive in its content. A right-wing strand of dissent has become increasingly evident throughout 2020, opposing lockdowns and mask-wearing, at the same time as vocalising nationalism, patriotism and xenophobia. This also poses a challenge to liberal democracy, albeit from the Right of the political spectrum, complicating the pressures that are generating the cycle of (predominantly progressive) social mobilisation and authoritarian responses we have documented in this article, and is certainly something that will need further reflection and research.

CONCLUSION

As we have sought to show, contemporary neoliberal democracies have experienced considerable strain during the COVID-19 crisis. Contradictory pressures are generating an escalating crisis, arising from the need for politicians and policymakers to perpetuate a financialised neoliberal economic model that denies the demands of increasingly mobilised societies that refuse to be silenced. These trajectories have combined to increase the tensions facing contemporary democracies, prompting a shift, in different ways, to authoritarian 'solutions'. As we have sought to show, while there are differences between each of the national cases, we also see a common process that is resulting in considerable and growing strain being placed on contemporary democracies, and which has been accelerated as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Contemporary democracy under neoliberal capitalism is increasingly challenged and destabilised by a cycle of hardship, anger and extra-institutional and grassroots solidarity initiatives, which are met by state-led repression and efforts to enhance and impose the social competition that underpins capitalist social relations. While the authoritarian efforts of the neoliberal state are of growing concern, the opportunities for innovative, emancipatory and disruptive forms of collective action that co-exist alongside these trends continue to provide grounds for hope. Indeed, it is in these new forms of collective action that we see the emergence and growth of the relations of cooperation and solidarity that are necessary *both* to mitigate the harm and inequality inflicted by neoliberal capitalism *and* to create the opportunities needed to destabilise and ultimately transcend it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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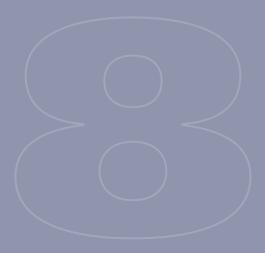
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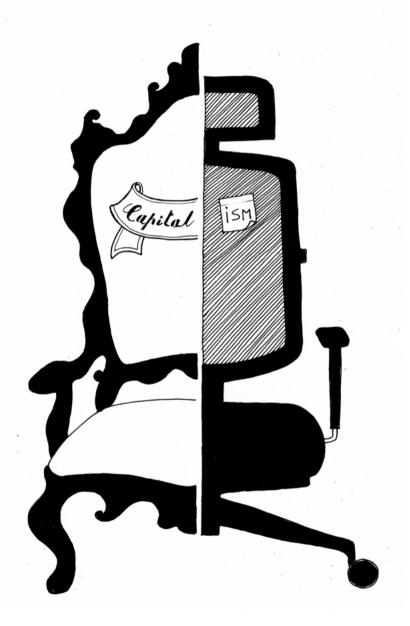
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DEMOCRATISATION AND DE-DEMOCRATISATION IN TIMES OF A PANDEMIC

BARRY CANNON

The COVID-19 global pandemic, beginning in January 2020, launched an unprecedented complex global crisis, which had profound consequences not only for health, but also for the global economy and for politics. In this chapter, I situate this multifaceted crisis in the midst of a much longer-running 'crisis of democracy' among the mature democracies of the European Union and the United States. This 'crisis of democracy' has generated an extensive literature, which I divide between a political science, or institutionalist, approach and a political economy, or structuralist, approach. I argue here that while the latter more accurately identifies social and economic inequalities as the central driving force behind the 'crisis in democracy', both approaches need to take a longer-term and more wide-ranging perspective on this crisis. I consequently suggest a democratisation/de-democratisation perspective, pinpointing the process-oriented approach set out by Charles Tilly (Tilly 2007) as a more flexible, longer-term and broader framework for examining the situation. Tilly (ibid.) identifies three basic, interdependent and co constitutive factors as ultimately shaping democratisation processes: trust between the ruler and the ruled; the shielding of public politics from categorical inequality; and the checking of autonomous power centres. I then use this frame to both re-read 'crisis of democracy' data and to analyse the emerging literature on COVID-19's impact on politics. I identify a clear de-democratisation tendency in both, with COVID-19's impact on politics being layered on top of and probably reinforcing the pre-existing crisis of democracy. I conclude by providing four possible scenarios for the future of democracy in the post-COVID-19 world, ranging from optimistic to pessimistic, and argue that if a process of re-democratisation is to take place, democracy itself needs to be democratised, providing some suggestions on how to achieve that.

INTRODUCTION

Woods et al. (2020: 2) observe that the disruption, uncertainty and structural indeterminacy that the COVID-19 pandemic has produced fulfils most standard definitions of a crisis. This can be viewed as a crisis on multiple fronts: as a health crisis, first and foremost, but also as an economic and social crisis. Ultimately, however, it can be viewed as a political crisis in that, as Ramonet (2020) astutely observes, governments had received many warnings that such an event could occur but chose to ignore them, giving primacy to the interests of capital rather than health, a recurrent theme of the COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus crisis, then, is a political crisis, and in democracies, also a crisis of democracy.

A crisis is conventionally viewed as "a moment when there is a possibility of large-scale change consequent upon a small event in a narrow window of time" (Walby 2015: 74). Hence, crises are both punctual, in that they occur within defined temporal limits, but also historical, in that they emerge from history and can impact how history may develop in the future. They, then, can cover both the short term and the long term. However, they are also "socially constructed through discourses and narrative" (ibid.: 32), and the temporal delimitations of a crisis, as well as its actual narrative, are loci for a hegemonic struggle over outcomes between different social forces. This means that both theoretical and narrative frames are crucial in determining how crises are viewed, diagnosed, critiqued and resolved. This contribution offers one such frame, placing the coronavirus crisis not just within the now frequently discussed 'crisis of democracy' affecting mature democracies in the 'West', but also arguing that this in turn must be viewed within a broader, longer-term perspective of democratisation, and importantly, its antithesis, namely de-democratisation. The key question for this paper, then, is whether the coronavirus crisis has the potential to democratise or de-democratise mature 'Western' democracies in the post-COVID-19 era.

I will address this question by first presenting the two main frames which are used to analyse the 'crisis of democracy' (called the 'political science' and 'political economy' frames here); and then arguing how these can be combined within a (de-)democratisation frame, which is viewed as a more flexible, comprehensive and historically sensitive analytical one than the 'crisis' device. It is posited that the conceptualisation of democratisation provided by Tilly (2007) is particularly useful for the present purposes. I use his three key

processes of democratisation – trust networks, inequalities and autonomous power – to evaluate the recent trajectory of democracy pre- and post-COVID-19. I finish by speculating on four possible future scenarios for democracy in the imminent post-COVID-19 future – a return to the *status quo ante*; accelerated de-democratisation; re-democratisation; or a mix of all three – concluding that while the last of these scenarios is most likely, it is not inevitable.

Keywords:
democratisation
de-democratisation
crisis
COVID-19
Tilly

CRISES OF DEMOCRACY, DEMOCRATISATION AND DE-DEMOCRATISATION

Veteran political scientist Adam Przeworski (2019: 16) identifies two structural conditions which make democracies vulnerable to crises. First, there is the paradox of democracy and capitalism whereby the first depends on political equality whereas the second is "a system of economic inequality" (ibid.). Second is the "sheer quest for political power" (ibid.) "inherent in political competition" (ibid.: 19), which can lead to some rulers, usually those from parties which are "highly ideological" (ibid.: 20), enhancing "their electoral advantage" and using "all kinds of instruments to defend themselves from the voice of the people" (ibid.). These two conditions are in fact the basis for the two main conceptual approaches in the 'crisis of democracy' literature, which I identify here in reverse order to Przeworski (2019) as a political science and a political economy approach. The first of these, the political science approach, identifies crises primarily in democratic institutions, taking the line that if the problems with these institutions are remedied, the crisis will be solved. Socio-

economic conditions, if considered at all, are viewed as secondary to the institutional aspect. The second, political economy approach finds the source of the problem primarily in increasing socio-economic inequalities, which in turn have undermined political institutionality. Its advocates believe that remedying these inequalities will help to ensure that democracy's legitimacy is restored. A problem here, however, is that existing institutionality may not be able or willing to take the steps necessary to do this, underlining the circularity of the dilemma.

In both approaches, existing (or previously existing) models of democracy are taken as 'democracy' *tout court*: for the political science perspective it is liberal democracy, while for many political economy analysts it is the post-World War Two (post-WW2) social democratic settlement which prevailed in most mature 'Western' democracies until the 1980s. Here, I argue that these two perspectives can be seen as complementary, not contradictory, but in the final analysis both institutional and socio-economic weaknesses in real-life democracy can be ascribed to underlying contradictions between it and capitalism. This, I argue, points to a need for a conceptual frame which can embrace both while moving beyond the notion of short-term crises to a much longer-term process, which I suggest here, following Tilly (2007), is provided by that of democratisation and de-democratisation.

THE POLITICAL SCIENCE APPROACH

The political science approach dominates the 'crisis of democracy' literature as it is the most prominent in terms of affecting government decision-making circuits and public discourse on the content, meaning and impact of democracy. This literature is associated primarily, but not exclusively, with mainstream US political science, a prominent example being the *Journal of Democracy (JoD)* of the bipartisan National Endowment for Democracy (NED). While the *JoD* is mainly concerned with democracy beyond the so-called 'core' (i.e. North America, Europe and associated democracies), this journal showcases key analysts who have a major impact on public policy and discourse on democracy, including Larry Diamond, Francis Fukuyama, Phillipe Schmitter and Steven Levitsky. A defining characteristic of this perspective is that it equates democracy with liberal democracy and its existing institutionality; its frequent reliance on quantitative data, such as influential US non-profit Freedom House's annual *Freedom in the World* reports; and a geopolitical outlook based on one

of the United States' principal foreign policy goals being to spread, nurture and protect liberal democratic institutionality worldwide.

An early forerunner of this approach was the 1975 report on democracy by Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watanuki (Crozier et al. 1975) for the private Trilateral Commission, in which they argued that democracy was 'overloaded' with social demands, the fulfilment of which fuelled such demands even further, resulting in a bloated and overextended state. The authors' solution to this problem was to reduce democracy to a procedural-ism which excluded and put an end to such demands, prefiguring today's neoliberal decline in political participation and social policies, as found in many mature democracies (Urbinati 2015: 16). With its emphasis on procedure and institutions, this report provided the template for most political science read-ings of the crisis of democracy.

The influential work *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (Levitsky / Ziblatt 2018) is a good example of this approach. Drawing on a wide range of examples from around the world, including many from Latin America, to specifically inform analysis of the crisis of democracy in the United States under President Donald Trump, these analysts locate the source of democracy's "death" in an unchecked, power-hungry, and eventu-ally all-powerful, executive. Democracy is killed from within, they claim, by "elected autocrats" who "maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance" (ibid.: 5). The solution they put forward is for "committed demo-crats" to rally to the defence of what they call "the guardrails of democracy", that is the democratic norms which allow democracy to function, mobilising civil society actors to that cause. Recent works by Madeleine Albright, who served as US Secretary of State under President Bill Clinton (Albright 2018), and influential US historian and journalist Anne Applebaum (Applebaum 2020) offer variations on this perspective.

In such analyses, the theatre of democratic crisis can be found squarely within existing political institutionality, the main concern is with the perceived decline of (negative) freedoms associated with liberal democracy, and the crisis is regarded as a global one that has now, however, become more pressing because it is affecting the so-called 'core' of the democratic world, including the United States. The analyses are largely descriptive rather than analytical, and there is little attempt to identify the reasons why these institutional failings emerge. Levitsky and Ziblatt (ibid.), for example, do acknowledge the role of

inequality to some extent, but that role is neither expanded nor interrogated. Nor is existing democratic institutionality critically examined as a source of such instability, particularly with regard to its role in creating the conditions for such inequality to grow in the first place. Rather, these aspects are minimised in favour of an agent-centred analytical frame, with the crisis's cause and solution falling solely within the purview of political actors, with the citizens (i.e. civil society) playing an important but supporting role. The dominant political science analytical frame, then, is essentially conservative and neoliberal, as it suggests "a version of democracy completely tied down to the concept of freedom, to the detriment of the other substantive value of democracy: equality" (Giannone 2010: 74).

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH

The political economy approach, on the other hand, admits that there is an institutional crisis but firmly attributes it to the failure or refusal of the democratic state to control and lessen inequalities. Much of this perspective was prefigured by Jürgen Habermas's legitimation crisis theory, according to which citizens withdraw from "reasoned deliberative participation" as a result of the state withdrawing "from its commitment to take care of the social conditions of [that] political deliberation" (Urbinati 2016: 17), i.e. the post-WW2 welfare state. The solution, for Habermas, lies in the reintegration of both. Similarly, Merkel (2014a: 20f.) identifies what he calls a "hollowing out crisis", in which according to him, citing Crouch (2004) and Streeck (2013) (although Mair (2014; 2016) is relevant here too), neoliberal financial capitalism challenges democracy; globalisation challenges the nation state; and socioeconomic inequality challenges the democratic principle of equality.

Merkel (2014b), in a closer examination of the crisis of democracy, concentrates particularly on the last element in this triumvirate, socioeconomic inequality, which he argues, "challenges the core democratic principle of equality in participation, representation and governance" (ibid.: 123). While the post-1945 social democratic settlement "socially embedded […] economically […] stabilized and nationally regulated capitalism", thereby considerably reducing this challenge, it did not definitively resolve "the general tensions of socioeconomic inequality and the political principle of equality" (ibid.) which have now been exacerbated by neoliberalism. In a comment on this article, Streeck (2015: 50) welcomes the fact that it "challenges nothing less than the foundational assumption of post-war political science that capitalism and

democracy are birds of a feather". What is missing from Merkel's diagnosis, however, he argues, "are the fundamental political categories of class and power – and the insight that both capitalism and democracy are shorthand summary concepts [for …] underlying conflicts between social classes and their different and historically changing capacities to impose their interests on society as a whole" (ibid.: 53). The balance between capitalism and democracy, then, is historically conditioned depending on the relative strength of capital and labour in each era: in the post-WW2 era labour was strong and capital weak, leading to the social democratic compromise, while in the post-Cold War era the opposite was the case, leading to neoliberalism.
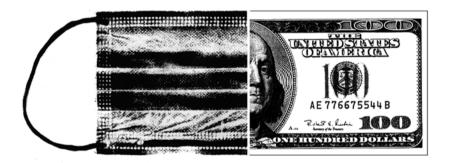
The relationship between capitalism and democracy, then, is "dialectical and dilemmatic" (ibid.: 54) rather than complementary as institutionalist approaches would suggest. As Merkel (2014b: 123) succinctly puts it, while capitalism can exist without democracy, so far at least "democracy has existed only with capitalism". Yet "capitalism and democracy are guided by different principles", primarily expressed "in the different relations to equality and inequality" (ibid.). In other words, the relationship between democracy and capitalism is essentially dysfunctional: actual democracy, like a doomed lover, needs capitalism in order to exist, but this dependence poisons its very essence.

Son (2018: 40) goes to the heart of this dilemma in the dominant theoretical frames used by political science. He argues that the genesis of the current crisis of democracy emerges from (mostly US) Cold War political theory, which laid the intellectual groundwork for "the eclipse of democratic subjectivity by capitalist subjectivity". While classical democratic theory (specifically, the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill and John Dewey) "stressed […] that democracy's paramount requirement is the recurrent formation of a democratic people who are able and disposed to decide what's right to be their collective goals" (ibid.: 41), Cold War theorists (particularly Joseph Schumpeter and Seymour Martin Lipset) "view political claims merely as an instrument to promote [people's] immediate material benefits" (ibid.: 40f.), and indeed see common will formation as "a harbinger of totalitarianism" (ibid.: 41). Cold War democratic theory then sidelined classical theory's "inextricable connection between the common good and democratic subjectivity" in favour of a procedural conception of democracy which fuses democracy and free-market capitalism (ibid.).

Referring extensively to key neoliberal theorist F. A. Hayek, Son (ibid.: 42) shows "that the merger of capitalism and democracy even when it is accompanied by the welfare state, creates tendencies undermining democracy from within".

The crisis of democracy, according to Son (2018), therefore, does not stem from the implementation of neoliberalism as suggested by Merkel, Streeck, Crouch, Mair and others, but from a much deeper and long-running conflict between capitalism and democracy. Neoliberalism built on this contradiction, already nurtured in the post-WW2 era, exacerbating and strengthening capitalist subjectivity to the detriment of its democratic variant. Hence for Son (2018), post-WW2, US-dominated political science approaches to political theory have acted as a gateway and harbinger for the triumph of neoliberalism, reinforcing the early point made by Giannone (2010) about empiricism supporting and naturalising neoliberal perspectives on democracy. Moreover, Son's reading of what constitutes a crisis suggests the need for a much longer-term, more process-focused and indeed historical approach to the 'crisis of democracy' than what is offered by the political science and political economy approaches discussed here.

CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS? DEMOCRATISATION AND DE-DEMOCRATISATION AS ALTERNATIVE FRAMES

If, then, crises of democracy are not simply punctual events which emerge periodically for various reasons, but are fundamentally expressions of a dysfunctional relationship between capitalism and democracy, then it can be argued, along with Ercan and Gagnon (2014: 6), that crisis "is an inherent feature of democracy". Additionally, as our present systems of democracy emerged, alongside capitalism, with the Enlightenment of 18th-century Europe, a long-term perspective is required when considering these phenomena. Democracy, following this argument, "is fundamentally a normative and unfinished project" (ibid.: 7), and its crises, following Roitman (2011; 2013) and Walby (2015), are on the one hand real events – with real implications for real people – but on the other, also socially constructed through discourse and narrative. Crises of democracy, then, are in fact loci for a hegemonic struggle between various social forces shaped by capital and democratic institutionality, with the victors ultimately defining the crisis and, more importantly, any institutional settlement which emerges from it.

In this sense we can view democracy, along with Balibar (2008: 528) as "a permanent struggle for its own democratization and against its own reversal into oligarchy and monopoly of power". Therefore, crises of democracy are not ultimately those of existing democratic institutionality, which, as Son (2018: 55) rightly points out, are merely "historically situated instruments to approach the elusive ideal of the 'rule of the people'". Crises of democracy can rather be read as integral to democracy's "permanent struggle in the direction of democratizing existing institutions" (Balibar 2008: 528). This struggle, as Balibar (ibid.) judiciously warns, can experience "advances and setbacks [and] is never homogenous" and its objectives "cannot be summarized in either representation or indeed participation [as] there exists a multiplicity of criteria, which the democratic struggles themselves indicate…" (ibid.: 529). Crises of democracy in this sense should therefore be seen not as discrete events, as inferred by much of the literature cited above, but rather as the interpretations by distinct social groups with differing and differentiated levels of power and status of a longer, continuous process of democratisation and de-democratisation. Hence, the 'crisis' concept includes but is not limited to crises of existing

institutionality, or indeed of representation and inequalities; rather, both are a symptom and at the same time proof of the never-ending dance between capitalism and democracy and its periodic consensuses and disruptions.

Crisis theory then, can be short-sighted in its reach, and has a tendency to reify a particular type of democracy, be that liberal or social democratic, as democracy itself. Democratisation theory, on the other hand, can, in its more open-ended approaches, help us avoid these pitfalls. While there is no space here to discuss democratisation theory in detail,[1] it is dominated both by a modernisation theory approach which links democratisation positively to capitalist development, and a transitional or "transitology" approach which stresses democratisation as a result of elite action, with both privileging liberal democracy as the ultimate democratic end point (Cannon / Hume 2013). From this viewpoint, 'Western' 'advanced' democracies are 'democracy' itself, albeit rarely acknowledged as such. Approaches from historical sociology, a further influential school of thought in this area, take a longer-term, more wide-ranging analytical perspective, emphasising processes emerging from class inequalities and interactions, rather than personalities or deliberate policy, as motors for democratic development. Nonetheless, these may similarly take 'Western' democracy as their analytical yardstick for 'democracy'.

Tilly (2007: 22f.) provides a useful analytical framework which largely helps to avoid these pitfalls. He presents three central and complementary, but not necessarily synchronised, processes of change through which states can democratise and de-democratise: trust networks, categorical inequalities, and autonomy of major power centres. The first is when private, interpersonal trust networks (kinship, religious membership and relationships within trades, for example) become partially and contingently integrated into public politics. This process is important for democratisation as it can help to ensure citizens' consent to the state acting in their name (ibid.: 94). The second is when public politics become insulated from categorical inequalities around which citizens organise their daily lives, e.g. "gender, race, ethnicity religion, class, caste" (ibid.: 23). This area of change is subject to "a great deal of political struggle" in

1   Examples of modernisation theory's approach to democratisation are Lipset (1959) and Inglehart and Welzel (2010); for historical sociology democratisation analyses, see, for instance, Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) and Rueschemeyer et al. (1992). For transition theory see, for example, O'Donnell et al. (1986) and Diamond (1999). Good wide-ranging, critical discussions of democratisation theory in general are provided by Grugel and Bishop (2014) and Nef and Reiter (2009).

democracies (ibid.: 118), as the state's failure to provide "compensating adjustments in public politics" for increases in categorical inequality "can pose a serious threat to existing democratic regimes" (ibid.). The third and final process is when the autonomy of major power centres, such as "lineages, religious congregations, economic organisations, organised communities" (ibid.: 76) and especially groups "wielding significant coercive means" (ibid.: 23) (i.e. state or private armies or armed groups), "dissolve or become subject to public politics with extensive popular participation" (ibid.: 138). A key mechanism for this is through states' pursuit of "sustaining resources: money, goods, and labour power" (ibid.: 142), and in particular through taxes. Positive movement within each of these three areas, separately or together, can help to produce democratisation; movement in the opposite direction indicates a process of de-democratisation. Importantly, Tilly (ibid.: 24) insists that "democratisation and de-democratisation occur continuously, with no guarantee of an end point in either direction", and can take place in both developing and established, high-capacity, democracies (ibid.: 189).

Tilly recognises three important additional processes which can influence democratisation and de-democratisation: state capacity, struggle and shock. State capacity refers to the "extent to which interventions of state agents in existing non-state resources, activities, and interpersonal connections alter existing distributions [of these] as well as relations among [them]" (ibid.: 161), which if they take place at the right level (not too high and not too low), can help to create "the zone of feasibility for effective democratisation" (ibid.: 184). Struggle is inherent in democratising processes as states bargain with citizens to gain access to the resources which citizens control but which the state requires. Democratisation, therefore, can be a slow, evolving and sometimes violent process. Moreover, shocks (such as revolutions, domestic conflicts, economic crises, military conquests, and colonisations), while they do not "automatically" lead to democracy, can "often accelerate democratisation when some of its elements are already in motion" (ibid.: 40). In particular, shocks can weaken elites "that have the most to lose from democratisation", opening up the ability for ordinary people "to negotiate consent to newly emerging systems of rule" (ibid.). De-democratisation, on the other hand, Tilly notes, usually happens rapidly due to "elite defection" (ibid.: 39), as elites "control substantial resources […] including labour power" (ibid.: 196), while ordinary people, have "integrated their lives and life chances" (ibid.: 195) so deeply into democratic regimes that it becomes much more difficult for

them to detach themselves from these. Three conditions, however, will block democratisation and facilitate de-democratisation: "disconnection between trust networks and public politics, inscription of categorical inequality into public politics, and existence of autonomous power centres wielding substantial coercive means […]" (ibid.: 204).

The work by Tilly (ibid.) on democracy, then, provides the long-term perspective required for this analysis and recognises how democracy can wax and wane in both established and developing democracies. While Tilly (ibid.) can also reify "Western" democracy as a definitive model, and in so doing, cites Freedom House, with its emphasis on liberal freedoms as democratisation measures, his approach is more flexible and adaptable, in that it integrates both institutions and structures in the analysis. This is reinforced by his insistence that democratisation is about a "minimum set of processes that must be continuously in motion for a situation to qualify as democratic" (ibid.: 9), rather than a set of conditions, such as economic development (i.e. modernisation theory) or elite pacts (i.e. transitology). Overall, for Tilly (ibid.: 14), "the fundamental standard for democracy is the extent to which the state behaves in conformity to the expressed demands of its citizens, and that democratisation therefore consists of an increase in conformity between state behaviour and citizens' expressed demands", with the opposite being de-democratisation. This definition is sufficiently open-ended to include the processes of struggle inherent in democracy and democratisation, as noted by Balibar (2008). The (de)democratisation process framework provided by Tilly (2007), then, is sufficiently comprehensive both to "re-read" the "crisis of democracy" literature in mature democracies from this perspective and to help to analyse how the coronavirus crisis may have impacted on each of these dynamics, which we will do in the following sections.

TRUST, INEQUALITIES AND AUTONOMY OF POWER CENTRES IN MATURE DEMOCRACIES

TRUST

For Tilly (2007: 81), trust "consists of placing valued outcomes at risk of others' malfeasance, mistakes or failures". To examine whether we are experiencing democratising or de-democratising dynamics in this sense, we will look here at two crucial trust-building institutions, political parties and trade unions, and at the evolution of public opinion on democracy. With regard to traditional polit-

ical parties, i.e. those of the centre-left and the centre-right, Przeworski (2019) identifies an "unprecedented" decline in these in the OECD countries as were in the year 2000 (i.e. Europe, North America, the Antipodes and Japan). "Of the two top vote getters [of the centre-left and the centre-right] around 1924", he finds, "90 percent were still among the top two by the late 1990s, but only about 75 percent of them are as of now" (ibid.: 139). Additionally, as these parties declined, so radical "populist" right party support grew, largely as a result of "disgust with the parties themselves" (ibid.: 92), particularly among the traditional proletarian base of centre-left parties.

Mair (2006) identifies various reasons for this decline, much of it rooted in distrust. He notes a "mutual withdrawal" between party leaderships and their bases, as the former failed to engage with the latter (ibid.: 33), resulting not only in lower electoral turnouts generally, but also a "slackening in terms of partisan commitment" (ibid.: 40) among those who did turn out to vote. Additionally, centrist parties are no longer rooted in dense networks of "trade unions, churches, business associations, mutual societies, and social clubs" (ibid.: 41). Party members and volunteers, crucial for campaigning, informing the party agenda, working for the party and, of course, donating money (ibid.), became fewer, with party bases becoming "passive or privatized" (Pitkin 2004: 339, cited in Mair 2006: 48), retreating into "their own particularized spheres of interest" (Mair 2006: 45). Parties themselves have sought to loosen links with members, as they became more self-sufficient and rooted in the state and its institutions.

Hence, parties "lost their socially integrative function" (Przeworski 2019: 153). "Any kind of a daily, permanent connection [with their base] is gone" (ibid.) and hence any chance to "discipline their political actions" (ibid.). Additionally, parties of the political centre have become indistinguishable, in terms of their presentation, their connections with their bases and the wider citizenry, and in terms of their increasingly right-wing ideological positioning, particularly around neoliberalism, becoming what Ali (2015) termed the "extreme centre". The overall result of this "mutual withdrawal" (Mair 2006: 44) of party and citizenry, is to provide "more scope for the media to set the agenda" (ibid.), transforming what were popular democracies into "audience democracy" (ibid.). Trade union membership, density and power have experienced a similar and related decline both in Europe (Vandaele 2019) and in the United States (Kollmeyer 2018), especially among the young and in the private sector and

largely due to processes of globalisation, financialisation, deindustrialisation and casualisation of labour (Vandaele 2019; Kollmeyer 2018).

These dynamics were strengthened by the GFC, and the ensuing euro area debt crisis starting in 2010, both of which can be characterised as shocks. National state capacity to deal with these, at least in Europe, was reduced by what D'Eramo (2013: 24) calls "negative power" – that is, powers of prevention, surveillance and evaluation by "independent" central banks (including the European Central Bank (ECB)), international financial institutions (IFIs), such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), private ratings agencies, and, in Europe, the European Commission, the European Court of Justice and the Eurogroup, all of them unelected and unaccountable to citizens. The outcome of the crisis, as is well known, was the establishment of severe austerity programmes ostensibly to pay off this debt, prompting intense popular struggles, particularly in Southern Europe. The latter failed, however, to reverse austerity in any significant manner, thus weakening state capacity to face further shocks and undermining already weakened trust in the political system and democracy in general.

Indeed, in this regard, Foa et al. (2020), in their wide-ranging historical survey of global polling data on democracy, find that dissatisfaction with democracy in developed countries, has increased dramatically in recent decades. Reasons vary, but economic inequality between citizens, nations and regions, and the impact of the GFC are some of the most prominent discussed. While Przeworski (2019: 101) is right to warn that such surveys "predict nothing", they are indicative of a deepening distrust between citizens, political systems and the state in most developed democracies, which added to the noted declines in parties of the centre and trade unions, are indicative of a trend towards de-democratisation in Tillyian terms.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents an interesting real-time case study of these trends, as it is one of those historical 'shocks' that Tilly (ibid.) points out can be a true test of a democratic state's capacity. This is particularly true of popular trust in the state, as trust conditions people's disposition to believe official information about the virus (Krause et al. 2020: 5), and to follow recommended public health rules and guidelines that are "fundamental for the control of infection and mortality" (Fancourt et al. 2020: 465). Yet such trust is contingent on state capacity to manage the pandemic in an effective and efficient manner (Greer et al. 2020: 3). Preliminary studies suggest that trust in national leaders

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did improve in many advanced democracies at least during the earlier stages of the pandemic (Flinders 2020: 6; Oksanen et al. 2020; Baekgaard et al. 2020; Dohle et al. 2020; Bol et al. 2020). Some analysts (Flinders 2020; Baekgaard et al. 2020; Schraff 2020) attribute this to a "rally around the flag" effect, whereby citizens "tend to unify in times of crisis and at the national level [...] commonly exhibited through support for national leaders" (Flinders 2020: 6). Flinders (ibid.) warns, however, that this can be short-lived, especially when governments are judged to be unprepared, are seen to be improvising and/or implementing contradictory policies, and/or when members of the government or officials contravene state guidelines. Widespread demonstrations against anti-COVID-19 public health measures in many mature democracies, although often orchestrated for political objectives, underline the fragility of this trust, especially among those prone to conspiracy theories (Pavela Banai et al. 2020).

Moreover, this trust is based on a number of factors, such as whether people already trust government (Dohle et al. 2020: 4); whether measures are backed by evidence and science (ibid.); where people live, with Oksanen et al. (2020) finding, for example, that Northern Europeans were more likely to trust their governments than those in the South and East, potentially influencing mortality rates; whether someone is female, older and more educated or has relatives or close friends affected by the virus (Amat et al. 2020: 3); and whether the media supports public health measures and the level of infections and mortality are low (Reiger / Wang 2020: 21). Finally, partisan divisions can influence information comprehension and compliance response, especially in the United States (Goldstein / Wiedermann 2020), but also in Spain (Nielsen et al. 2020), although this factor was negligible elsewhere, at least at the beginning of the pandemic (Greer et al. 2020: 3).

These observations and findings, therefore, although they are mostly preliminary and sometimes untested (Devine et al. 2020), contribute additional observations to the discussion on trust in democracies. Specifically, de-democratising tendencies, such as reduced trust in democracies and reduced state capacity, can impact negatively on the outcomes of a shock like a pandemic. Hence, while the COVID19 pandemic seems to have initially strengthened trust in democratic regimes, previous de-democratisation processes may have undermined the effectiveness of their responses, leaving them vulnerable to increasing frustration and blame from citizens as the pandemic developed.

As explained earlier, Tilly (2007: 23) argues that for democratisation processes to take place, public politics must become insulated from categorical inequalities while the absence or contradiction of this process "can precipitate de-democratisation" (ibid.: 118). To test this proposition, here we identify class, race/ethnicity and gender as the most salient inequalities for contemporary developed democracies, using income inequalities, immigration and the gender pay gap as their respective proxies. In terms of income inequality, Przeworski (2019: 103) finds that in the OECD in around the year 2000, with the onset of globalisation and neoliberalisation in the 1980s in particular, economic growth by GDP halved, income inequality for individuals and families grew (with labour accounting for a declining share of manufacturing income) and low-paying services sector jobs increased at the expense of better-paid industrial positions. These changes have had two effects: average lower and median income has been rising more slowly in more recent decades (and indeed stagnating in the United States) than in the preceding, post-WW2 period, and there has been a collapse in the popular "belief in material progress" (ibid.: 106), with Przeworski (ibid.: 107) viewing this latter effect as "a phenomenon at a civilisational scale" which "can have profound cultural and political consequences".

A further, and related, phenomenon stemming from these global changes is immigration. Streeck (2016: 26) recounts how not only did manufacturing jobs migrate to China from OECD countries as a result of globalisation, but also migrants moved from peripheral to core countries, providing "employers in [the latter] with an unlimited labour supply, thereby destabilizing protective labour regimes" (ibid.: 26). This has provoked a backlash among affected workers in those core countries, which has been instrumentalised by the far right for political purposes. Moreover, gender inequalities, despite many advances in recent decades and significant institutional and official support, continue to remain stubbornly entrenched in mature democracies. While female participation rates in the labour force have increased dramatically in these countries, and the gender wage gap has narrowed significantly, women continue to remain in lower-paid jobs, resulting in a persistent gender wage gap in the EU of 16% (EIGE 2020). Taken from a wider perspective, the EU's Gender Inequality Index, including areas such as work, money, knowledge, time, power and health, has improved at a "snail's pace" since 2005, with one of the lowest ratings being in the area of political power (ibid.). Overall, then, we find increases in inequalities in class and race/ethnicity, and slow

and uneven improvements in gender, indicating that public policies in these areas do not remain impervious to such inequalities, except perhaps, to some extent, in the case of gender.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2010; 2020), have provided ample evidence that more unequal societies have worse health outcomes for more people regardless of their class position than more equal ones. COVID-19 has underlined this, with Sachs (2020), for example, arguing that more unequal societies have had a higher incidence of mortality due to COVID-19 than more equal ones. Oronce et al. (2020) and Brown and Ravillion (2020) both provide some empirical evidence to support this, at least in the United States. Historical studies of epidemics in both the 20th century (Galleta / Giommoni 2020) and the current one (Furceri et al. 2020) also find both that inequality creates the context for those on lower incomes to have higher incidences of infection than the better off, and that the epidemic itself can cause lasting inequality stretching many years into the future. In the present coronavirus context, Bergamini (2020) finds that low-income groups are exposed to "greater risk of financial exposure […] greater health risks, and worse housing conditions […] potentially exacerbating inequalities". Those working in many of the essential services, such as care, logistics, food retail and distribution, and city sanitation, have precarious working conditions, are more prone to unemployment, and have less savings to act as a cushion against shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic (Burström / Tao 2020).

Moreover, such sectors have a disproportionate number of workers from ethnic minorities, leaving them more exposed to the virus (Haque 2020; Bertocchi / Dimico 2020). Sharma et al. (2020) find that while COVID-19 infection rates are higher among men than women, existing gender inequalities ensure that in lockdown, women continue to be more involved in care and household duties than men (Fortier 2020; Oreffice / Quintana-Domeque 2020). The negative impact on the most marginalised – migrants, prisoners and homeless people – also deserves acknowledgement, as for them "stay at home orders can be lethal" (Corporate Watch 2020). In general, the poorer health and living conditions of those who live at the sharp end of class, race and gender inequalities lead Bambra et al. (2020: 2) to refer to COVID-19 as a syndemic, i.e. "a cooccurring, synergistic pandemic that interacts with and exacerbates" vulnerable groups' existing non-communicable diseases and social conditions.

The widely acknowledged role of such inequalities in the pandemic led to calls for "resource and funding allocation decisions […] to reduce inequities rather

than exacerbate them" (Ahmed et al. 2020), with even the *Financial Times* calling on the UK government in an editorial (Financial Times 2020) to abandon the "prevailing policy direction of the last four decades" (i.e. neoliberalism). Governments did act in a fairly comprehensive manner, introducing a wide variety of measures to ensure that citizens and employers suffered as little as possible, at least economically. Baldwin and Weder de Mauro (2020: 16) note that such measures included "income subsidies for affected workers, tax deferrals, social security deferrals on subsidies, debt repayment holidays, and state loans or credit guarantees for companies". According to Anderson et al. (2020), in total, the measures implemented, including state credit guarantees, amounted to almost 40% of GDP in Germany (by August 2020); 27.3% in France (by mid-June); 25.7% in the UK (by mid-July); and 14.3% in the United States (by late April). The EU, after a clumsy initial reaction, responded with the ECB launching a €750 billion Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme, to provide liquidity to businesses; the European Commission suspending restrictions on debt issuance and state spending in the Stability and Growth Pact; providing €540 billion to help companies develop treatments and vaccines and finance employment and healthcare costs; and most emblematically, agreeing a €750 billion package of grants and loans, dubbed Next Generation EU (NGEU), some of it financed by (more or less) common debt issuance for the first time in the history of the bloc (Janse / Tsanova 2020).

It remains to be seen though if these historic levels of spending will have the required positive impact on inequality. While these measures have tempered the severity of the COVID-19 downturn, early analysis and research suggests that the most vulnerable remain so despite such largesse. For example, the aforementioned *Financial Times* editorial (Financial Times 2020) notes that UK government support failed to help casual workers in the so-called 'gig economy', and did not make up for the years of underfunding and austerity which public services had suffered in the previous decade. Galasso (2020) found in his study of Italy under lockdown that overall, "low income individuals faced worse labour market outcomes and suffered higher psychological costs" than their better-off compatriots. Chislett (2020) reports that income inequality increased in Spain as a result of the pandemic, hitting the poor, women and children the hardest. A European Anti-Poverty Network report (Malgesini 2020: 3) based on EU-wide research carried out in May 2020 considers the measures introduced as "good and rapid […] but] not sufficient to prevent poverty, nor were the most excluded groups reached by those measures. There was also concern regarding

the perceived temporary nature of the measures." Among the report's recommendations are that austerity be ended, that the measures be continued and strengthened as rights, and that health systems be improved and made equally accessible to all, regardless of social or citizenship status (ibid.: 4f.). With the shadow of unemployment growing longer in most mature democracies, and with businesses shutting down, especially in the services sector, the issue of continuing and improving the support that has been introduced will become absolutely crucial, along with how to finance this.

AUTONOMY OF MAJOR POWER CENTRES

The third area that Tilly (2007: 76) identifies as essential for democratisation processes is the integration of major private power centres into the democratic state. De-democratisation, he warns, can increase when such groups achieve "special regimes" from the state (ibid.: 141), especially, but not exclusively, in the field of taxation. Streeck (2016: 28) calls such special regimes "oligarchic inequality" or "neo-feudalism", whereby inequality has gone so far "that the rich may rightly consider their fate and that of their families to become independent from the fates of the societies from which they extract their wealth" (ibid.). The super-rich of the United States, Streeck (ibid.: 30) argues, are the most systematically important at a global level, regardless of who may govern or "with what ambitions in France or Germany".[2] This is because their "material power" (ibid.) is of such magnitude that they can buy "both political majorities and social legitimacy, the former through campaign contributions […] the latter by acts of philanthropy" (ibid.: 29), hence leaving intact their wealth and power and the structural means by which they obtain it. This power is, of course, amplified extraordinarily by many of these oligarchs owning and/or leading powerful tech companies which regularly and systematically extract intimate and detailed data from billions of users worldwide, using it to, among other things, send tailored political information, including political campaigning, directly to their individual screens. Their power over the democratic process has increased enormously as a result (Runciman 2018; Morozov 2019).

Winters (2011a: 21) identifies oligarchy as the "politics of wealth defense" and while democracy has many benefits for the wealthy, a major drawback for them is the modern state's commitment to progressive taxation. Undermining
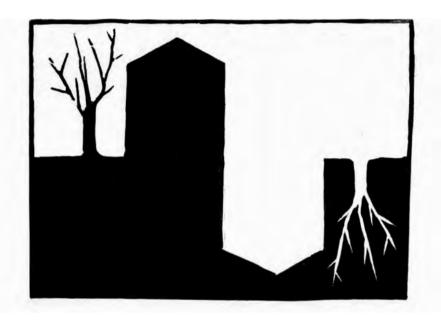
2   However, Winters (2011b: 279) points out that despite much lower levels of inequality in Europe, "even Scandinavian countries […] have thriving oligarchs".

and destroying progressive taxation is therefore one of oligarchy's main objectives, and to this end, they have deployed a vast "income defence industry […] comprised of lawyers, accountants, wealth management consultants, revolving-door lobbyists, think-tank debate framers and even key segments of the insurance industry" (ibid.: 26). The immense power of oligarchs, combined with weakened collective institutions for ordinary people, among them trade unions, makes American oligarchs, according to Winters (ibid.: 27), "more powerful today than during the robber baron era at the turn of the 19th century". The result is, as D'Eramo (2013: 25) points out, a global oligarchic regime whereby elites "are not subject to the same legal regime as the rest of the population", developing their own educational institutes, "norms, ethos, and identity", damaging social mobility and even economic growth in the process (Brezis 2010: 16). This special regime allows the super-rich to live in "self-imposed isolation", allowing them "to disengage […] not only physically, but also emotionally and practically, from the less salubrious dimensions of 21st century capitalism – a system in which many of them are key players" (Hay / Muller 2012: 77).

COVID-19 has underlined how the oligarchic rich have created this parallel reality for themselves in three ways. First, a number of media stories from early on in the pandemic reported how parties in Connecticut and at Donald Trump's Los Angeles National Golf Club, people holidaying in ski resorts in Austria and Colorado, and a jet-setting Uruguayan woman returning to her country from Spain all became sources for widespread infection across the United States and other continents (Knewz 2020). More recent reports complain of rich "covidiots", partying with disdain for social distancing measures (Froelich 2020), many of these living in luxury villas in warmer climates, castles in remote, mountainous areas, such as Scotland, or even luxury underground bunkers (BBC Stories 2020). Additionally, and unsurprisingly, the super-rich tech oligarchs became significantly more wealthy as a result of lockdown measures, as people became more reliant on digital platforms for purchasing goods, entertainment and work (Tsoneva 2022). Collins et al. (2020) report that the (mostly tech-based) super-rich made an extra USD 1 billion between 1 January and 10 April 2020, with the wealth of Jeff Bezos, the head of online retail giant Amazon, increasing by USD 25 billion. Again, unsurprisingly, social media platforms owned by such tech oligarchs became one of the chief sources of conspiracy theories and anti-pandemic containment messaging, in what came to be called the "(mis)infodemic" (Smith et al. 2020).

Ironically, rather than governments, initially at least, calling for more taxes on the rich to fund the extra costs created by the pandemic, some of the rich themselves called for this. A group of 83 millionaires, from across seven countries, calling themselves Millionaires for Humanity, published an open letter on 13 July 2020 (Millionaires for Humanity 2020), addressed to the then upcoming meetings of the G20 finance ministers and central bank governors and of the Special European Council, asking, in their words, "our governments to raise taxes on people like us. Immediately. Substantially. Permanently", in order to help fund the emergency effort to tackle COVID-19 and more generally, reduce inequality. Yet reports suggest that COVID-19 financial measures, in the United States at least (Kampf-Lassin 2020; Politi et al. 2020), and Central Bank quantitative easing actually "help the asset rich" (Financial Times 2020), while critics argue that the EU's 'historic' NGEU fund agreement in July was too little too late, especially for already debt-laden countries, was too politically compromised and could not possibly provide recompense for past and future EU-enforced austerity (Varoufakis 2020; Buiter 2020), as the Stability and Growth Pact is only suspended, and "will also likely be a big burden on the budgets of the future" (Deutsche Welle 2020b). The July 2021 agreements at a global level, led by the incoming US Democratic President Joe Biden, to set a globally agreed 15% minimum corporation tax appears to be, as liberal[3] US economist Paul Krugman (2021) put it, "an important step toward a fairer world". Yet others argue that 15% is still too low and the agreement is hedged with so many caveats and exceptions that it may do little to ensure that the rich pay more (Stiglitz 2021; Blyth 2021). All the same, Biden's equally historic March 2021 $1.9 trillion stimulus package addressing the COVID-19 crisis, providing direct payments to ordinary Americans, and assistance for the unemployed, the hungry, the uninsured and those at risk of losing their homes, does send a strong signal that social spending is back on the agenda (Tooze 2021).

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3   Krugman refers to himself as 'liberal' in the US sense, pointing out that this should be considered to be more or less equivalent to 'social democratic' in Europe (Krugman 2008).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS: DEMOCRATISATION AND DE-DEMOCRATISATION IN MATURE DEMOCRACIES IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

The processes outlined above bring to the fore the three additional factors identified by Tilly as important for democratisation: state capacity, struggle and shock. COVID-19, as mentioned previously, is one of those shocks, not only as a health emergency, but also as an economic shock of historic proportions. The state's capacity to deal with the pandemic and its various impacts has been shown to be significantly wanting, especially in some Southern European countries, most notably Spain and Italy, which saw the greatest levels of austerity in the post-GFC years, but also in the UK and the United States. The 'negative' powers identified by D'Eramo (2013), however, have played a more positive role in this crisis than in the GFC, restoring some level of national state capacity in key areas, but it is still an open question if it will be enough, certainly in terms of reducing inequalities, and the fear remains that the few advances made might eventually be reversed.

How might the crisis in democracy develop in the future? We can envisage four possible scenarios: a return to the *status quo ante,* accelerated de-democratisation, re-democratisation, or a mix of some or all of these. In the first case, during lockdowns many leaders voiced their desire to open up the economy and return to normal as quickly as possible, suggesting that little will change, particularly in relation to the inequalities discussed here and despite what resulted in accurate warnings of a second wave of infection (Cher 2020). On the other hand, state interventions in the economy have been so wide-ranging that they may be "much more difficult to unravel, not least because they are more visible to occupants of 'the real economy'" (Berry et al. 2020: 5). With regard to the second possibility, Rodrik (2020) points out that many countries became "exaggerated versions of themselves" in their reactions to the pandemic. While this points to continuity of existing national behavioural patterns for the post-COVID-19 future, it also suggests that de-democratisation trends identified here could intensify and become entrenched. This means, for example, that societies could become more subject to digital surveillance (Han 2020; D'Eramo 2020: 28), further enriching tech oligarchs; right-wing populists, having lost their footing at the onset of the crisis, may regain it by exploiting disaffection with virus containment measures (Müller 2020); authoritarian government, Chinese-style or otherwise, may become more popularly attractive (Han 2020); and, inequalities, of course, will remain untouched and possibly deepen further if there is a return to austerity once the 'recovery' takes off, if it ever does (D'Eramo 2020: 28).

What are the chances, then, of *re*-democratisation? Ramonet (2020: 31f.) points out that some leaders did indicate their desire to achieve a "more ecological, more feminist, more democratic, more social, less unequal"[4] society, but he admits that this is unlikely to happen. Yet in all probability a mix of these three possibilities might make a re-democratising, post-COVID-19 future possible, as state failures to address the inequalities made manifest by the pandemic, and a possibly authoritarian turn as this continues, could lead to democratising struggles. To date, little evidence of left-led struggle has been seen during the current crisis, a situation compounded by the draconian nature of many of the measures put in place, including the concept of "social distancing"

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4   The translation is the author's own.

itself (Han 2020).[5] Yet this may depend, as Harvey (2020) and Moschonas (2020) suggest, on how long the crisis lasts and/or on the possible return of austerity (D'Eramo 2020: 28). Ultimately, this struggle will depend on the left articulating a coherent, cohesive and convincing popularly based response to neoliberal capitalism – in other words, a new anti-capitalist programme for the post-COVID-19 future. Badiou (2020) sees such a programme as a new communism, grounded in the everyday concerns of ordinary people, the importance of which have been thrust back into the spotlight by the corona-virus crisis: "hospitals and public health, schools and egalitarian education, the care of the elderly, and other questions of this kind". This, however, seems like an unlikely prospect for the time being, with the left unable to reconcile what Piketty (2018) has identified as its cleavage between "globalists" (high-education, high-income) and "nativists" (low-education, low-income). Streeck (2019), for example, attributes the radical left's precipitous losses in the 2019 European Parliament elections to its inability to depart sufficiently from the centrist Panglossian narrative on the European Union, which specifically attracts young "globalists" (Streeck 2019).

The inability of the radical left to critically engage with the centrist consensus on the EU has also been evident during the coronavirus crisis, with the left-wing parties largely accepting the consensus on containment measures recommended by scientific experts and the major political players. Yet much of "the science" is derived from modelling exercises based on often unproven assumptions (McCoy 2020; Sample 2020), which in their time directly helped to fuel the GFC (Dyer 2020). Urbinati (2020) is right, then, to point out that the coronavirus crisis "has shown that the theories and results of the biomedical sciences are provisional and far from indisputable", and that such "hyper-scientism […] and the simultaneous evacuation of democracy only feeds populist grievances". Ultimately, as Merkel (2020) points out, "[s]cience has epistemic, but not democratic legitimacy" and the combination of technocrats (in this case from the medical sphere) and government imposing, often in secret and with little warning, increasingly severe public health measures is in a sense reminiscent of the top-down approach used to tackle the GFC.

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5   The *Black Lives Matter* demonstrations against police assassinations of black citizens, chiefly in the United States, are a notable exception, but these were not directly related to the COVID-19 emergency.

Popular discontent as expressed by marches to protest against public health measures, often led by the far right, underlines Merkel's point. These demonstrations, frequently portrayed by the media and even members of the left as irresponsible gatherings of "covidiots" led by "toxic white males", in fact often raise legitimate, critical questions about evident contradictions within measures that have been introduced and their negative effects on working people and the vulnerable.[6] Rather than simply criticising them, the left could acknowledge the more empirically based concerns expressed at these marches and seek new more democratic means to handle them. This does not, as Dyer (2020) points out, need to be 'anti-science', but rather, if managed well, could strengthen the level of trust in science and the state. One mechanism to achieve this which has been suggested by some leading left-leaning intellectuals, is to set up workers' councils in the workplace to help manage the pandemic and also the increased conflicts emerging between capital and labour (Democratizing Work 2020). Another possibility would be to adopt the suggestion of della Porta (2012), discussing the GFC, to institutionalise spaces for what she calls "critical trust" to develop. By this she means (ibid.: 36), quoting historian and sociologist Pierre Rosanvallon, "institutionalizing distrust in a positive way, so as to serve as a kind of protective barrier, a guarantee of the interests of society". Her suggestion (ibid.: 42) of creating such spaces within a participative-deliberative model of democracy, could be not only an effective bottom-up approach to managing the pandemic, but also a tool to help to (re-)democratise democracy itself.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, then, on examining Tilly's three necessary processes for democratisation/de-democratisation, we find a clear de-democratisation dynamic in each, with COVID-19 adding to this in at least two of the areas he identifies. First, trust networks, both private and public, have been undermined, with political parties losing their representative and mediation function between the grassroots and the state, and popularly based civil society movements, such as trade unions now being a pale shadow of their former selves, both in terms of membership and in terms of political power. The result has been a sharp reduction in public trust in democracy, democratic institutions, and politi-

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6   See, for example, Deutsche Welle's report about a demonstration against COVID-19 measures in Berlin, Germany in late July 2020 (Deutsche Welle 2020a).

cians. COVID-19 to some extent has brought an increase in trust in democratic leaders, but this effect may be short-lived.

Second, and concurrently, public politics is still not insulated from categorical inequalities of class, race and gender: socio-economic inequality has in fact increased, as has ethnic and racial discrimination especially in terms of attitudes to immigration. On the other hand, there have been important advances in gender equalisation, although these have stalled in recent years, while still remaining quite far from full gender parity in most areas of importance. Here, COVID-19 has underlined how such inequalities are translated into health inequalities, making poorer workers, including members of ethnic minority groups, more susceptible to both infection and the economic consequences of the pandemic, while women remain the main caregivers even while they continue to work.

Finally, and again interlinked with the previous two processes, the increasing ranks of the super-rich have become even more autonomous from public politics, zealously protecting their interests through what Winters (2011a; 2011b) calls the "wealth defence industry", buying up politicians, political party policies, the media, and people's hearts and minds, while inhabiting an increasingly rarefied world far removed from the everyday realities of ordinary people, the very source of their wealth. COVID-19 has once again only served to underline these differences, and while there seems to be something of a shift towards correcting the more glaring inequalities brought about by the pandemic, it remains to be seen whether this will result in a coherent and convincing strategy to reduce inequality and curtail the autonomy of the super-rich.

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If these de-democratising tendencies are to be curbed, progressive movements should press not only for greater equalisation measures for ordinary people, but also for a reinvention of democracy itself. One way to do this, as suggested here, would be to demand a new participative and deliberative institutionality, not only for wider policy, but also in more specific settings such as the workplace or in pandemic management. This would allow a more bottom-up decision-making culture to grow and could help to positively counteract the de-democratising patterns identified here.

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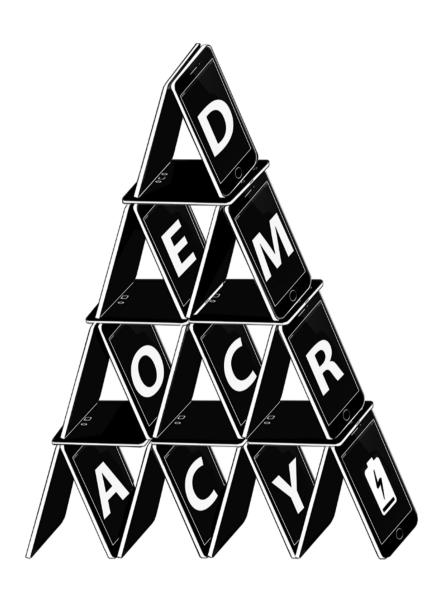Winters, J. A. (2011b). *Oligarchy*. Cambridge / New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

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IV

CITIZENS
IN DEMOCRACY

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY IN POST-INDIGNADOS SPAIN: A BROKEN PROMISE

PABLO COTARELO

SERGI CUTILLAS

9

Optimists about information and communication technologies (ICT) among progressive political forces used to view these as potentially contributing to the inclusion of the subaltern classes in the process of political deliberation and decision-making. In their view, improvements in ICT could break pre-existing communication hierarchies that underpinned the ideological dominance of the bourgeoisie.

While it is clear that the development of new ICT solutions has made organising protests easier, it is less clear that the relevant technologies have helped to generate the multidimensional conditions required to forge new transformative identities that would promote democracy; instead, they may well have contributed to re-entrenching existing identities, fostering divisiveness and authoritarianism.

In Spain, the financial crisis presented a political opportunity for the pro-democracy social movements, who were pioneers in the use of digital tools for political purposes. This chapter assesses whether ICT played a role in bringing about the conditions for the subaltern classes to seize this opportunity to consolidate democracy in a progressive direction in the cases of the Spanish left-wing party Podemos (We Can), the citizen and leftist-party platform Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona in Common) and the Catalan independence movement, which are briefly described and analysed here.

In the three cases studied, deliberation and decision-making did not improve significantly. Both Podemos and Barcelona en Comú suffered from shortcomings of the digital tools in terms of simplifying and increasing efficiency in political participation, especially in deliberative tasks. However, in all three cases, and especially in the case of the pro-independence Catalan movement, digitalisation appears to have been conducive to political action and adherence to authority.

Nothing leads us to believe that the use of digital tools allows radical progress to be made in terms of democratic quality if this is understood as meaning greater representation and internal democracy within the parties. However, while digitalisation does not guarantee the success of reformist strategies of horizontal democracy, based on a more conservative conceptualisation of democracy it can be a highly effective tool in disruptive political processes controlled by the bourgeoisie.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s, expectations among progressive political forces about democratisation associated with digitalisation were related to the political changes that information and communication technologies (ICT) would promote (Morozov 2011). Optimists about ICT viewed them as essentially contributing to the inclusion of the subaltern classes in the process of political deliberation and decision-making. In their view, improvement in ICT could break pre-existing communication hierarchies that underpinned the ideological dominance of the bourgeoisie.

Despite ICT contributing to political revolts in Europe and North Africa in the 2010s, it is by no means clear that they have helped to consolidate democracy. In fact, while ICT might have improved communication within well-identified groups, sometimes these technologies might also have harmed dialogue and deliberation among groups with different identities, creating polarisation and division.

This chapter will discuss the positive aspects and limitations of digitalisation in relation to democracy, focusing on Spain since the emergence of the anti-austerity *Indignados* (Indignant Ones) movement in 2011 and the Catalan pro-independence movement in 2012. In broad terms, the *Indignados* have aspired to improve representation by incorporating the voice of the subaltern classes, thereby aiming to widen democracy horizontally. They aimed to use digital tools to increase transparency, deliberate in a more agile way and participate in decision-making processes. In contrast, in the case of the Catalan pro-independence movement, which has been characterised as a movement with mass popular support across Catalonia that has attempted to increase the level of self-governance of Catalan institutions, ICT solutions have been used to improve communication within the movement, concentrating on political action but not so much on participation and deliberation, and so have been focused on vertical democracy.

The chapter is divided into several parts. First, there is a brief discussion of the factors determining class consciousness in relation to information and communication. Second, we provide a description and analysis of the role of digital technologies in the cases of the Spanish left-wing party *Podemos* (We Can), the citizen and leftist-party platform *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona in Common) and the Catalan pro-independence movement. Finally, the concluding section goes back over our findings and summarises the main aspects of the analysis.

BRIEF DISCUSSION OF THE IMPACT OF ICT ON CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

From a progressive perspective, there are two concepts that can help us to understand the focus of the discussion, namely political opportunity and the conditions that determine whether ordinary people can participate in politics.

Political opportunity refers to a political environment that provides incentives for people to engage in collective action by affecting their expectations of success (Tarrow 1994). For instance, in a cycle of intensification of protests, movements benefit from a favourable environment that makes this success more likely.

However, as well as a favourable climate, in order for political participation to collectively increase, a population must be able to operate in appropriate conditions. Poor material conditions and cultural and psychological domination of the subaltern classes by the bourgeoisie both deter political participation. Among the material factors that determine the level of political participation is time. The time devoted to political participation belongs to the reproductive sphere – the sphere unrelated to productive work (Institute of Women n.d.) – which means that the more time that is dedicated to work, the less possibility there is to set aside time for politics. Usually, the cycles of intensification of protests are also determined by the time that activists can dedicate to these, neglecting other reproductive tasks in their daily lives. However, improving the material conditions of the subaltern classes is necessary but not sufficient to facilitate political participation. Cultural and psychological domination also has to be overcome to secure appropriate conditions.

Historical materialism has engaged extensively in this discussion. For Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the consciousness of the working class as a self-emancipatory subject would emerge when material development was far enough advanced (Marx / Engels 1848).[1] However, by the early 20th century, history had shown that this relationship was by no means straightforward. Antonio Gramsci criticised this linearity between material development and the formation of class consciousness in his article *The Revolution against Das Kapital*, in which he wrote that the October Revolution in Russia had invalidated the idea that socialist revolution had to wait for the full development of capitalist forces of production (Sassoon 1991). In trying to resolve this conundrum he came up with the theory of hegemony according to which the bourgeoisie dominated the working class not only through the control of the repressive apparatus of the state but also through ideology and culture by imposing its bourgeois values, which he called "common sense".

Increased transparency and more agile deliberation facilitated by ICT could theoretically increase the number of people who participate in democratic processes and improve the quality of the information with which they engage in politics. It would also improve the process in which different groups deliberate, helping to bring about majoritarian compromises (Kelsen 2013) and discouraging authoritarianism among and within political groups. This would help the subaltern classes to overcome the cultural domination of the bourgeoisie theorised by Gramsci, allowing the emergence of a genuine popular consciousness.

However, others like Marxist psychologist Wilhelm Reich, following the psychoanalytical tradition, theorised that emotions are more important than ideas. For Reich, class domination not only arises through productive relationships but also through biopolitical exploitation in the form of emotional and physical conditioning, especially within the family (Reich 1970; 1980). According to this approach, achieving consciousness at a cognitive level would not be enough to overcome deep emotional conditioning, which supposedly makes people filter information

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1   Marx and Engels expressed such a linear relationship between material development and consciousness in The Communist Manifesto: Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views, and conception, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.

that conforms the most to their defensive identities and makes them reject the information that questions it, as this causes deep emotional distress. In fact, a high level of political commitment is very often related to familiar motives rather than to the availability of new communication methods and ideas.[2]

While it is clear that new ICT has made it easier to organise protests and protest movements, it is less clear whether these technologies have helped to generate the multidimensional conditions to forge new transformative identities that promote democracy in progressive terms or instead have contributed to increasing bourgeoisie domination by re-entrenching existing defensive identities, thus promoting divisiveness and authoritarianism. In the case of Spain, the 2008 crisis created a political opportunity for the pro-democracy social movements, who have been pioneers in the use of digital tools for political purposes. It is thus worth assessing whether ICT helped to bring about the conditions for the subaltern classes to seize this opportunity to consolidate democracy in a progressive direction. For this reason, there follows a brief description and analysis of the cases of *Podemos*, *Barcelona en Comú* and the Catalan independence movement, which the authors have experienced first-hand.

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2   For examples of movements in which close ties have played a very important role, see an article by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker* (Gladwell 2010).

PODEMOS

On 15 May 2011, demonstrations with the slogan *No somos mercancía en manos de políticos ni de banqueros* (roughly translated as "We aren't the playthings of politicians and bankers") were organised in Spain's major cities (El País 2011b). These demonstrations formed part of a series of protests and responses to the austerity policies inflicted on Spain as a result of the Troika directives that arose during the 2010 financial crisis. Without warning, from the night of 15 May 2011 onwards, a camp began to grow on the main square in Madrid, with this steadily becoming a burgeoning centre of protest and political debate that brought together thousands of demonstrators during the day, and hundreds at night. The country's other major cities quickly followed suit, with such protests also being held in Barcelona's Plaza de Cataluña, Valencia, Seville, and so on (ibid.).

In the months that followed (the camps remained in place until early August 2011), during which the protesters came to be known as the *Indignados*, there were debates about the main problems facing Spanish democracy, and iconic slogans were coined like *No nos representan* (They don't represent us) – a statement referring not only to the representatives of public institutions or the majority of political parties with their taking of turns in power, but also to the rest of the country's socio-political organisations, which had failed to represent the interests of the population. These included leftist political parties with institutional representation such as *Izquierda Unida* (United Left, or IU), a political coalition that included the *Partido Comunista de España* (Communist Party of Spain, or PCE). Despite the difficulty of ideologically qualifying such a numerous and spontaneous movement, which appealed to the public's indignation for the individual and collective situation of so many people, it can be confidently asserted that a majoritarian perception was that it was about making changes to the whole; at least, some of the transformative left that was more involved in the development of the movement considered it to be so (Acampadabcn 2011a; Acampadabcn 2011b; Democracia Real YA 2011a; Democracia Real YA 2011b; Democracia Real YA 2011c).

The *Indignados* movement had an impact on Spanish society whose like had not been seen for 30 years. Generations had not experienced anything of this kind, and it offered them a quick and handy course in politics and radical

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democracy. By early July 2011, around 8 million people were saying they had been involved in *Indignados* activities (EFE 2011). And that is not all: a survey in October 2011 found that 73% of Spain's population believed that the *Indignados* were right (El País 2011a). This level of popular support for a clearly transformative social mobilisation was also unprecedented in the recent past.

Between 2011 and 2012, the mobilisations became more decentralised, shifting their focus to individual neighbourhoods of towns and cities, although on the first anniversary of the start of the movement (12 May 2012) the *Indignados* reconvened in the squares to continue pushing for the proposals (Valor y Precio 2012).

THE CREATION OF A PARTY BY THE INDIGNADOS

This mobilisation was particularly welcomed by a group of political scientists from the Complutense University of Madrid who hosted or participated in a TV political debate programme called *La Tuerka* in Vallecas, a proletarian Madrid neighbourhood. In the period from May 2011 to early 2014 this programme devoted many hours of broadcasting to analysing – and expressing support for – some of the main activities of the *Indignados* movement (La Tuerka CMI 2011). Indeed, the political scientists were so engaged that they even switched to live reporting from some of the protests (Urbán 2015).

One of the main conclusions they reached was that the mobilisations in the squares – and later in the neighbourhoods – generated huge political capital (La Tuerka 2011) that should not be wasted in institutional terms. They thought that Spanish society did not deserve another disappointment and this was one of the reasons they cited when they announced the establishment of a new political party, called *Podemos*, in Madrid on 16 January 2014 with representatives of various political and social organisations, and appealing to the spirit of the *Indignados* and the squares (Podemos 2014c).

The European Parliament elections in May 2014 were the first electoral test for the new party. *Podemos*'s results in this ballot were as unexpected as they were encouraging for the transformative left, with the newcomer to the political scene garnering more than 1.25 million votes (Directorate General for Domestic Policy 2014) and five seats (Official State Gazette Agency 2014) (of Spain's total allocation of 54 (European Parliament 2013)), making it the country's third largest party in this poll. *Podemos*'s programme for these elections included such ambitious measures as citizen audits of debt, reorientation of the financial system, public control of the strategic sectors of the economy, a

fair tax policy aimed at the redistribution of wealth, the right to a basic income for all, the opening of a democratic constituent process,[3] and a radical plan for the elimination of gender inequality in the workplace (elDiario.es 2014).

A comparison between this programme and the proposals arising from the *Indignados* movement reveals considerable similarities, and so Pablo Iglesias's claim that *Podemos* was the direct successor of the 15-M or *Indignados* movement (La Sexta Noticias 2015b) was justified in terms of the content of his programme. This identification was what voters perceived in those elections and, in fact, in 2014 *Podemos* had considerable support from the upper and upper middle classes, yet relatively little from the traditional middle class. It was popular with skilled workers (28%), the unemployed (26%), employed professionals (25%), administrative and service workers (25%), students (23%), businesspeople or executives (21%), merchants (20%) and unskilled workers (19%), while it was unattractive for domestic workers (10%), retired people (9%) and farmers (8%). This partially coincided with the profile of the participants in the 2011–2012 protests described above, who identified themselves as those who had lost out because of the crisis, or those who had ended up in precarious situations (Llaneras 2014).

Although certain aspects of *Podemos*'s manifesto for the European elections in May 2014 could be considered disruptive, some analysts argue that, in general terms, the party's manifestoes for subsequent elections steadily dropped the proposals, and in some cases the rhetoric, which enabled it to be deemed a disruptive force in the first place. Over time, *Podemos* has consolidated its position to become a radical reformist party to the left of the social-democratic *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, or PSOE), drawing on a message of social mobilisation (Europa Press 2017).

While the party was initially a platform run by the party *Izquierda Anticapitalista* (Anti-Capitalist Left), the success it achieved in the 2014 European Parliament elections was built on a decision by *Podemos*'s leaders to organise groups or 'circles' of its followers or activists across Spain. However, to start with, *Podemos* said of these groups, "they are not support groups for any political party, as they have total freedom of action and to make proposals" (Podemos

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3   This has been defined as "the founding process of a democratic state that creates a new Constitution according to the will and needs of the citizens" (Hordago 2014 (translation from second.wiki n.d.)).

2014b). The first task these groups were given was to engage in dialogue to "find out first-hand what the needs and demands of citizens were" (ibid.). You can see a similarity here between the *Indignados* and their squares, and the new *Podemos* circles. You can also see the trend of *Podemos* innovating and using digital tools in the fact that it made this announcement on its YouTube platform.

The party's founders decided to provide a series of tools to move this dialogue forward. This involved electing 25 people on 12 and13 June 2014 to form its first 'great citizens' assembly' in the autumn to work out the future of the movement. The vote was carried out electronically – just like the primaries process that determined the list for the European Parliament elections – with the assistance of a technology company (Precedo 2014b). Just after this assembly, tensions began to emerge between some of the circles and the party's leaders in Madrid. Juan Carlos Monedero said after this first conflict that "some want to turn *Podemos* into a party of delegates [put forward by the representatives of the circles] and into a traditional party [...] If we continue down that path, the same may happen as with 15-M. We were radically democratic, but radically inoperative". This saw the beginnings of suspicions and accusations of a lack of democratic legitimacy, driving a division between some 'circles' and some of the leaders in Madrid (Precedo 2014a), which spread as time passed.

Although it soon became publicly apparent that the political leadership realised and considered unavoidable the conflict between seizing power "by assault" (La Sexta Noticias 2015a) and building a solid organisation at the same time because the tools used did not seem compatible, in the subsequent period they did not find effective ways of redesigning their digital tools to avoid the consequences of this incompatibility (Morales 2014). It was at this time that the phrase "we are running while trying to tie our shoe laces" arose (Podemos 2017), which was frequently used by some of its leaders to symbolise the contradiction between having to win now and having to grow and consolidate as a party with above-average levels of internal democracy.

RESULTS OF THE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: FROM A PARLIAMENTARIAN TO A PLEBISCITARIAN MODEL

Podemos, in addition to introducing a new way of understanding politics, open to the entire population, utilised new tools to make that participation possible. These were ICT and digital resources, which had first been used on a mass basis during the *Indignados* protests in previous years. Some of the

people who had developed these tools were also responsible for managing the new party, although there were also others who were introduced around the country. Their task was to coordinate the circles and to develop proposals and programmes and validate them, as well as organising consultative votes on specific issues and selecting candidates for various elections, via the *Particpate* platform. Anyone in Spain was able to register, using only their ID card, and could also choose the region of the country they wanted to be linked up to. In this way they could participate and vote in their respective regional processes and consultations, besides more general ones. Anyone could also start a discussion group about any subject that interested them, although these discussions were not formally taken into account when drawing up *Podemos*'s programme. The formal processes involved here were decided on by party bodies using established methods.

This digital platform has been used as the vehicle to select the *Podemos* candidates for every election since 2015 and was also pressed into service for the consultations ahead of choosing a General Secretary for the party and members of its governing bodies in 2015 and 2017 (both with a turnout of 34%). It was also utilised for consultations on whether *Podemos* should use its electoral brand for the 2015 municipal elections or team up with other political and social forces; whether a coalition government with the PSOE should be formed in 2016 (turnout of 38%); whether it should forge an alliance with *Izquierda Unida* (United Left) for the 2016 general election (turnout of 35%) and on whether Pablo Iglesias should continue as General Secretary despite having bought a villa worth €615,000 in 2018 (turnout of 38.5%). It was also how members of the municipal and autonomous party bodies were elected in 2015 (turnouts of 26% and 20%, respectively), and the 2015 election manifesto was voted on (4%) (Marcos 2018), and numerous discussion groups were created and proposals drafted on matters directly related to the processes of drawing up manifestoes, as well as many other matters besides. In a short time, the number and complexity of open discussion groups and threads grew to amazing levels that were almost inconceivable for a newly created political organisation. The initial consultations received a lot of attention in the media. Participation levels, in particular, were public knowledge and much pored over, but did decline over time. Some of the consultations were rather controversial – e.g. the one relating to the scandal surrounding *Podemos* leader Pablo Iglesias's villa – as the platforms blurred the professional and the personal, with this perhaps even involving a bid by Iglesias to shore up his position in a heterodox way. This can also be regarded as indica-

tive of the substantial influence of the media in internal debate within *Podemos* and how they determined its agenda.

The very low turnouts for votes on manifestoes, despite the large number of open or active discussion groups, began to cause consternation about the usefulness of digital platforms in expanding and deepening participation in complex political undertakings like these. This dysfunctionality flew directly in the face of the importance of these political proposals and so after these initial experiments, the party stopped running consultations on these online in favour of the more traditional, face-to-face approach. In this way, those responsible for the internal organisation gradually decided to give digital platforms less and less weight when drawing up election manifestoes.

However, *Podemos* has been a pioneer in terms of the utilisation of digital tools for political activities and has made the broadest use of these among Spain's political parties, both geographically and in terms of the number of partici-pants, as well as having the most digital resources and the widest range of these. Furthermore, politically, in its early years *Podemos* raised expectations to an incredibly high level that the balance of power could be radically altered not only in Spain but also across Europe and so attracted a lot of political and academic interest (Gerbaudo 2019). This attention from progressive forces that was focused on the party in its infancy has made it an example to follow, or at the very least, to consider. For this reason, both the underlying strategic reasoning and the tools used to deepen the socialisation of the mechanisms of European liberal democracy have served as a point of reference for numerous and diverse actors who, in many cases, have recognised or tried to replicate *Podemos*'s success elsewhere. Some of the most extreme examples include Álvaro Uribe – the former right-wing President of Colombia – being concerned about *Podemos*'s influence of in Latin America; a political party with the same name being set up in Brazil, albeit one that was not at all similar to the original in its outlook; and finally, the Chairman of the banking group *Banco Sabadell* publicly suggesting establishing a "right-wing Podemos" (Román 2020; Mariño 2018; La Sexta Noticias 2014).

BARCELONA EN COMÚ
SOCIAL BASE: THE LEFTIST SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN BARCELONA

Barcelona en Comú emerged soon after *Podemos* and its success in the European Parliament elections in June 2014 in the city of Barcelona, bringing together as it did the *Guanyem Barcelona* (Let's Win Back Barcelona) citizen initiative (Guanyem Barcelona 2014a); *Procés Constituent* (Constituent Process), a socio-political movement promoting a constituent process in Catalonia; *Podem Barcelona* (We Can, Barcelona), *Podemos*'s Barcelona branch; *Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds* (Initiative for Catalonia Greens), the successor to the largest communist party in Catalonia; *Esquerra Unida i Alternativa* (United Left and Alternative), the Catalan branch of the Communist Party of Spain; and *Red Ciudadana Partido X* (Citizen Network Party X) (Guanyem Barcelona 2014b; Público 2014). *Guanyem Barcelona*, like *Podemos*, views itself as the direct heir to the 15-M or *Indignados* movement because, among other things, some of its leaders, such as Ada Colau and Gala Pin, were very much involved in that period of mobilisation. In fact, Colau acquired national prominence for what she said, as a representative of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, or Platform for People Affected by Mortgages), in the Economic Committee of the Congress of Deputies, the lower house of the Spanish Parliament, in 2013, when she called the representative of the bank who was appearing there a criminal, as shown in the video extensively broadcast on television by *La Tuerka* (La Tuerka 2013), a channel which prominently featured various individuals who would later become leading figures in *Podemos*.

PAH played a seminal role historically role in making part of public debate, and fighting for, solutions to the mass wave of evictions of families who could not pay their mortgages during the real-estate crisis of 2008, helping to foster a social consensus that there was a need to resolve this situation (De Weerdt / Garcia 2016). This movement, which was publicly considered to be inspired by the new political organisation, was a 'realist' movement, as Mayo Fuster Morell and Joan Subirats[4] (2012) described it, in the sense that it focused on objectives that were specific and arguably achievable, namely generating a consensus opposed to home evictions in Spain and changing housing legislation so that once a mort-

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4   Joan Subirats, a professor of political science at the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* (Autonomous University of Barcelona, or UAB) and an expert in public policy, public management and public government, was a key player in the establishment of *Barcelona en Comú.*

gage has been executed and the house taken on by the bank, all debts would be settled, eliminating all further claims by the bank against the debtors.

GOAL OF WINNING THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN BARCELONA

Barcelona en Comú ran for the municipal elections of May 2015 as a *municipalist* party (Barcelona en Comú 2014) with the goal of winning. It met with success here (achieving more than 25% of the vote, giving it 11 councillors out of 41), going on to hold power as a minority administration until 2019 by garnering support from different parties who would back their plans. To this end, it had been organised into thematic work priorities and groups by neighbourhood. This election campaign was very vigorous, with numerous, well-attended forums being set up in city squares, with even some *Podemos* leaders from Madrid showing up there (Podemos 2015).

Barcelona en Comú achieved its best results in the district of Nou Barris, namely in the neighbourhoods of Vallbona (40.3%), La Trinitat Nova (39.6%), Torre Baró (38.9%) and Can Peguera (37.9%). In contrast, they only received minority support in Barcelona's 'upper zone', picking up around 10% or less in the neighbourhoods of Sarrià (10.8%), Sant Gervasi-Galvany (9.0%), Sant Gervasi-la Bonanova (8.7%), Pedralbes (5.4%) and Les Tres Torres (5.3%), all of them in the district of Sarrià-Sant Gervasi (García Campos 2015). This share of the vote is quite similar to the distribution of per-capita income by city neighbourhood, with those averaging the lowest income being most likely to opt for the new party (Blanchar 2019).

Like *Podemos*, *Barcelona en Comú* could be described as a radical reformist party ideologically positioned to the left of the *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (Socialist Party of Catalonia, or PSC-PSOE) and the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (Republican Left of Catalonia, or ERC). The new party was focused on a few key issues such as the right to housing, and on processes of deepening democracy and the creation of new, more community-based institutions, but without threatening the established order in its economic, territorial or institutional aspects. In fact, in the subsequent Spanish general election which was held at the end of 2015, the Catalan political structure associated with *Barcelona en Comú*, *En Comú Podem* (In Common We Can) were included in *Podemos*'s slate of candidates in the constituency of Catalonia (Piñol 2015).

In the new municipalist party, communication, coordination and the development of substantive proposals used a combination of analogue (meetings) and the more widespread digital sphere (email, instant messages, etc.). The importance of the meetings in the initial articulation of the party can be seen in the process of preparing the 2015 election manifesto, which was largely and fundamentally drawn from the thematic priorities, organisational committees and the groups from the city's neighbourhoods. This process also involved the submission of new proposals and the validation and sorting of all the proposals electronically (Barcelona en Comú 2015b).

Numerous meetings of these groups allowed a series of discussions to be arranged in a more or less consistent way to produce structured proposals that would serve as an example for remote participation. In-situ participation in the groups initially managed to foster an organisation that brought together members from diverse social and political backgrounds. Levels of participation in these types of meetings in the period before the 2015 municipal elections were very high, and many people set aside some of their usual tasks to take part. The times of these meetings, although they were intended to be outside typical business hours, often interfered with ordinary jobs. Often the meetings (especially those of the organisational groups) began before 6 p.m., which prevented adequate participation of people with this type of work. The involvement of many people for several months on end meant that the political project that *Barcelona en Comú* was supporting was articulated and appropriately publicised. After the elections, the volumes of work and the number of people and groups involved steadily decreased, and the organisation has been unable to reproduce it later, not even in the 2019 municipal elections, which the party lost, although it did eventually manage to hang on to the reins of power in the city government (El País 2015).

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RESULTS OF THE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: FROM CENTRALITY TO COMPLEMENTARITY

From the beginning, *Barcelona en Comú* embraced digital technologies. Some of the founders were experts in digital and communication tools and so they were introduced in the early stages. After the party won the 2015 elections and took power, a digital platform was developed by Barcelona City Council's new Participation Department so that the population could submit and select projects the City Council should carry out. This platform was called *Decidim* (We Decide) (Decidim Barcelona 2021). Consistent with its 2015 manifesto and

drawing on one of its hallmark features, *Barcelona en Comú* in its governance of the city needed to broaden citizen participation when fleshing out various proposals and to increase transparency and monitoring of municipal projects. This political commitment arose from the analysis that municipal politics was far removed from the day-to-day life of citizens, and the city authorities should lend "a voice to collective intelligence in decision-making, [and *Barcelona en Comú* must] put an end to bad practices, use more common sense and create less bureaucratic and more effective institutions to resolve the specific problems facing Barcelona's residents" (Barcelona en Comú 2015a).

In running the City Council, *Barcelona en Comú* was committed to receiving proposals directly from the public, securing approval for some of its projects and reporting on the action taken by the municipal authorities. This was its political pledge to democratising the city, while also serving the purpose of meeting its need to legitimise what it was doing in what was very much a minority administration.

The *Decidim* platform describes itself in these terms (Decidim Barcelona n.d.b): decidim.barcelona is Barcelona City Council's digital participation platform for building a more democratic city. [It is a] reference space for building an open, transparent, collaborative city that gives pride of place to its residents. […] [It] is an open-source participation platform. Any citizen can see how it is built, reuse it or improve it. […] It emerged at the time of the Municipal Plan 2015–2019: *73 neighbourhoods, one Barcelona. Towards a city of rights and opportunities*, which involved the participation of almost 40,000 people.

The platform was used as a digital space to convene meetings of citizen participation bodies (Decidim Barcelona n.d.a), to instigate participatory initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Plan (Decidim Barcelona n.d.c), to receive citizens' initiatives (a vehicle for citizens, by collecting signatures, to call for the City Council to take a particular measure that is of collective interest) and to ensure the accountability of municipal actions (instruments for citizens to monitor and audit the City Council's decisions, commitments and performance). According to the platform, from 2015 to 2020, for example, more than 24,800 proposals were received, of which over 10,100 were accepted. For some flagship projects, such as the complete remodelling of Las Ramblas, the digital platform was used to complement face-to-face discussions, which were the main form of participation (Barcelona City Council 2017a; 2017b; 2020).

Probably as a result of winning the elections only a few months after its creation and going on to govern the city, *Barcelona en Comú* has not developed its internal participation-related tools as extensively as it has those of the City Council. Its own web platform for encouraging participation by its members (Barcelona en Comú 2020) is much less known about and less active than *Decidim* and offers less chance of constant and complex participation from the digital sphere. It provides digital information via various channels (newsletters, instant messaging, Twitter and an Instagram photo platform), and it features a form that has to be completed so that those interested can participate. Proposals cannot be submitted by the public through the digital platform, but via submission of the form it is possible to join one of the more or less fixed organised groups whose activities largely revolve around face-to-face meetings.

THE CATALAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT: THE *PROCÉS*[5]
SOCIAL BASE: AN INTERCLASS MOVEMENT DOMINATED BY THE BOURGEOISIE

The *Procés* shares many of the concerns and motivations that led many young people to take to the squares in spring 2011. Specifically, it has in its ranks the political party *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (Popular Unity Candidacy, or CUP), a leftist organisation that from the early stages of the crisis was characterised as the Catalan party of the *Indignados*. In 2012, when it achieved representation in the Catalan Parliament for the first time, CUP was the only party advocating a radical break from Spain, unlike the rest of the Catalan nationalist parties, which were not yet clearly pro-independence.

However, the social base for the *Procés* is made up of other political parties and civil society organisations. Remarkably, the movement includes the liberal party *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia, or CDC), which has been in power in Catalonia's regional government for most of the time that Spain has been under democratic

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5   *Procés*, literally meaning 'process', is the name given to the multiannual strategy for achieving independence, for which no time limit was set in the early days. The name has over the years become an alternative name for the independence movement, sometimes being used pejoratively to accuse those who claim to support independence but are opposed to setting particular deadlines and prescribing certain actions for confronting the Spanish state.

rule in coalition with the smaller Christian-democratic *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* (Democratic Union of Catalonia, or UDC), together forming *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union, or CiU).[6] Catalan governments led by CiU had traditionally pursued a strategy of wielding influence over their Spanish counterparts by providing crucial support in the Spanish Parliament. This strategy fell apart in the year 2000, when the conservative/Christian-democratic *Partido Popular* (People's Party, or PP) won the general election with an absolute majority and so no longer needed CiU's backing to govern. At this point, the PP government led by Jose María Aznar took a demagogical turn against the Catalans. However, the most extreme anti-Catalan manifestation of the PP would only arise after its defeat at the polls in March 2004.[7] Soon afterwards, in 2006, it would challenge the new Statute of Catalonia[8] (the recently devised regional constitution of Catalonia) in the Spanish Constitutional Court, which four years later, in 2010, deemed that large parts of it were unconstitutional. This judicial ruling sparked a wave of indignation in Catalonia, which CiU capitalised on to return to power with nearly an absolute majority in the elections of December 2010, after seven years of left-wing governments.

CiU had promised to reach an agreement with Spain to create an independent tax system for Catalonia, similar to the one for the Basque Country. While trying, in vain, to negotiate this agreement, CiU put in place swingeing austerity measures. This, along the widespread corruption of its top brass that came to light in the early 2010s (Oleary 2014), which later prompted it to

6 This coalition split in 2015, when CDC decided to adopt a confrontational strategy in its relations with the Spanish state in the 2015 Catalan parliamentary elections, a course that was rejected by UDC members.

7 The main reason for this defeat was its attempt days before the election to hide the connection between the bombing of trains in Atocha in Madrid and the Aznar government's leading role in the invasion of Iraq.
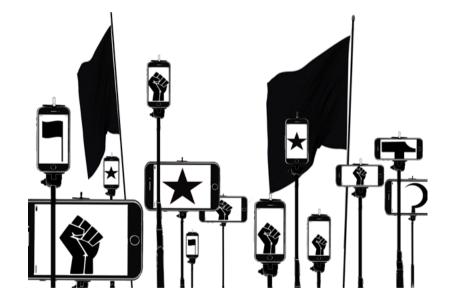
8 The Statute, an attempt to grant Catalonia more self-government within a Spanish federal framework, had been ratified by almost 90% of members of the Catalan Parliament (the People's Party of Catalonia was the only party that voted against it) and was backed by 73% of Catalonia's voters in an official referendum, with a 49% turnout, in 2006.

morph into new electoral brands, parties and coalitions,[9] led some *Indignados* to believe that this coalition was part of the Spanish regime established in 1978 and not its alternative.[10] The movement also included the social-democratic ERC, which had historically taken more radical stances on Catalonia's self-government vis-à-vis Spain.[11] In a context of taking on the Spanish state, ERC's history put ERC in a credible position to lead such a confrontation, thus posing a threat to CiU's hegemonic power.

This, in fact, led to what was tantamount to a game of 'chicken'[12] between CiU and ERC to demonstrate who was the party best suited to lead the clash with the state, and this has been a key driving force for the movement but has also been behind some poor decision-making.

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9 After splitting from the UDC, CDC forged an alliance with *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (Republican Left of Catalonia, or ERC) called *Junts pel Sí* (Together for a Yes) for the elections of September 2015. Meanwhile, CDC fought the Spanish general election of December 2015 under the name Democràcia i Llibertat (Democracy and Freedom), but reverted to calling itself 'CDC' in the Spanish general election in June the next year. In May 2016, the members of CDC voted for the establishment of a new party, which would come into being in July 2016 and be called the Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català (European Catalan Democratic Party, or PDeCAT). In 2017, a new electoral brand was registered by CDC and PDeCAT, called Junts per Catalunya (Together for Catalonia). It was used by the two parties when they ran in the Catalan elections of December 2017, and the Spanish parliamentary, municipal and European elections of 2019. In 2018, CDC, which still existed officially but by then was only minimally active, was sentenced by a court to pay €6 million for illegal financing.

10 This has been a cause of division within both the Catalan and the Spanish left between those arguing for the inclusion of CDC's social base as vital to ensuring a successful confrontation with the Spanish state, and those who have made the point that CDC was engaged in an operation worthy of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard,* and would end up betraying the other members. As Tancredi, one of the characters in that work, says, "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" (Lampedusa 1966: 26).

11 For instance, President Francesc Macià and President Lluís Companys had proclaimed a Catalan Republic in 1931 and 1934, respectively, in a bid to show support for the Spanish Republic and to assert Catalonia's desire for self-government within Spain. When the dictatorship started, the exiled President Companys was handed over by the Gestapo to the Spanish Francoist regime, which had him killed by firing squad at Montjuïc Castle on 15 October 1940, becoming the only democratically elected president in Europe to be executed.

12 Chicken is a game theory setup that typically describes two players heading towards each other. If the players continue on the same path, they bump into each other; if one swerves out of the way and the other does not, the swerver 'loses' and is labelled the chicken, while the second, implicitly the braver player, wins.

If we look to civil society, we find two especially strong organisations with hundreds of thousands of affiliates, *Òmnium Cultural* and the *Assemblea Nacional de Catalunya* (Catalan National Assembly, or ANC). *Omnium Cultural* is an NGO dating back around 60 years that was established to defend the cultural rights of Catalonia during Francoism. Meanwhile, the ANC is an NGO that was created in 2012 as a social vehicle to support the demands for Catalan self-government. Both organisations have been key instigators of the bottom-up impulse of the movement in recent years, which has shown its strength at the annual demonstrations on 11 September and the other demonstrations and strikes that have taken place since 2012. In fact, one remarkable aspect of the movement has been its discipline in responding to the calls by the leader-ship of these organisations.

GOAL OF MOBILISATION POSING THE THREAT OF UNILATERAL SECESSION
The pro-independence movement has radicalised its demands over the years in response to the repeated refusal of the Spanish government to negotiate increased self-government and, later on, to organise an official referendum on self-determination (Hedgecoe 2017).

In September 2012, the Catalan government, with the support of an overwhelming majority in the Catalan Parliament, unsuccessfully tried to open negotiations with the Spanish government on creating an independent tax system for Catalonia (Piñol 2012). In parallel, the recently created ANC called for a demonstration on the National Day of Catalonia, 11 September, that would show the world the Catalan people's desire for self-government (El Punt Avui 2012). The demonstration was a big success, drawing more than a million protesters (BBC 2012). The following day, for the first time ever the then President of Catalonia, Artur Mas, publicly stated that a Catalan government's goal was independence from Spain.

After that, the movement drew up a strategy based on the threat of non-negotiated secession. The movement devised a multiannual timetable involving certain milestones on the road to independence. If the Spanish state had not agreed to organise a legal referendum by the time this preparatory process was over, Catalonia would move to a rationale of unilateral self-determination. Thus, the whole strategy was based on the belief that, at a certain critical point, the Catalan government, the Catalan parliament and a majority of civil society in the region would come together to break with the Spanish legal system and create an independent state. This made the process potentially illegal. For this reason, the organisers, especially the Catalan government, had to make credible assurances that preparations going beyond the framework of Spanish law were actually taking place.

This is an important difference from the experiences of *Podemos* and *Barcelona en Comú*, which were movements focused on deepening democracy through a reform of political representation and party democracy. They sought improved deliberation mechanisms and tried to open up political representation to society to break down various ossified majorities. This could be compared with a Kelsenian concept of democracy, since these parties worked to give a political voice to the subaltern classes, enabling them to enter into negotiations with existing represented interests to achieve new majoritarian compromises, thereby increasing overall plurality (Kelsen 2013: 40). The digital tools they used, which mostly focused on deliberation and voting, were in line with these goals.

However, the analysis of the pro-independence movement was different. A majority of its social base, which was closely aligned to CDC, the political party that at the time of writing in 2020 had been in government for 32 of the

last 40 years, agreed that the democratic deficit faced by Catalans was mostly caused by the Spanish state. In a similar way to the *Indignados*, the Catalan movement claimed that the Spanish state was made up of institutions and networks of power that were the direct legacy of the Francoist regime. The movement considered this apparatus beyond reform, leaving secession as the only option. In this light, it was able to place its full trust in Catalan institutions, under the control of Catalan nationalist parties, to engage in a strategy of confrontation that required unity and so relegated class-related conflicts in Catalonia to the background, postponing them until the conflict with the state was resolved.

In the context of this confrontation, unity and disciplined mobilisation were prioritised over deliberation. Paradoxically, the mass grassroots expressions of support by pro-independence civil society did not expand plurality and representation and instead liberated the political leadership to limit its focus on the demands of its own base. Whereas many in *Podemos* and *Barcelona en Comú* placed their emphasis in plurality, the pro-independence movement considered itself a well-defined 'people', along the lines of Carl Schmitt's *Volk*.[13] In fact, whereas Hans Kelsen's view of democracy is interesting in terms of understanding the *Indignados*'s main objectives, Schmitt's work is useful for analysing how the Catalan pro-independence movement has prioritised popular action over political representation. Partly for strategic reasons and partly for ideological ones, the movement has operated with a Schmittian 'acclamative' dynamic[14] where the social base has alternately supported or pressured the leadership in terms of its decisions, which were not generally debated in advance by its base, and certainly not by the whole Catalan people. In this way, the social base of the movement has given enormous sovereign power to its government to make exceptional decisions to move beyond the existing constitutional order (Schmitt 1970).

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13 See, for instance, Schmitt's affirmation that "a people" is independent of the state or other institutional constraints: "As long as a people have the will to political existence, the people are superior to every formation and normative framework" (Schmitt 2008: 131).

14 Schmitt regards acclamation as the only mode in which "the people" (*das Volk*) can act politically: "The genuinely assembled people are first a people, and only the genuinely assembled people can do that which pertains distinctly to the activity of this people. They can acclaim in that they express their consent or disapproval by a simple calling out, calling higher or lower, celebrating a leader or a suggestion, honoring the king or some other person, or denying the acclamation by silence or […] complaining" (Schmitt 2008: 273).

RESULTS OF THE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: SUCCESSFUL MOBILISATION STRETCHED TO CULMINATE IN A STRATEGIC DEAD END

The *Procés* can be divided into three stages: first, the process of patiently building up the movement before September 2017; second, the critical period between 6 September and 27 October 2017, characterised by state repression and a strong momentum by the movement; and third, the period following these events, marked by a loss of power and strategic disorientation and division. The digital tools used in each of these three stages responded to the needs and dynamics of each one.

In the first stage, the patient and disciplined mobilisation promoted by civil society organisations to pressure the Spanish government and the international community to sanction and recognise the organisation of a referendum would have been impossible without the use of online tools. For instance, the Catalan organisation ANC's website was a key tool in coordinating choreographed mobilisations like the one on 11 September 2013, when people held hands, forming chains stretching 400 kilometres across Catalonia from its southern border with Valencia to the northern border in the Pyrenees. This demonstration's success would have been inconceivable without the ANC's website, where people could sign up and buy colourful merchandise evoking the protest, and without email and other messaging technologies that communicated to each participant where exactly they had to stand in the chain. In this first stage, the movement made use of websites, email and social networks like Facebook and Twitter to establish common narratives, publicise grievances and call for meetings and demonstrations (Anderson 2019).

In a second stage, the organisers decided to make preparations for independence and hold a referendum on this matter without the authorisation of the Spanish state. Legislation was passed on 6 and 7 September 2017 to move in this direction. These events were considered illegal by the Spanish institutions, leading to action in the courts and by the police. On 20 September, the Spanish *Guardia Civil* (Civil Guard) gendarmerie force raided the Catalan Ministry of Economy in a bid to stop the referendum. News of this operation spread through mobile-phone messages and social networks and within minutes a crowd of thousands had blocked the exit to the building, not allowing the police to get out for hours. Strikingly, the presidents of *Òmnium Cultural* and the ANC, Jordi Cuixart and Jordi Sánchez, respectively, stood on a *Guardia Civil* vehicle, which had been damaged by the crowd, to calm down the situ-

ation, and they eventually dispersed those who had gathered there, yet days later both of them were jailed without trial for these events, accused of plotting to subvert the constitutional order through violent revolt, and were later sentenced to nine years in jail.

On 1 October 2017, the referendum was held successfully, surpassing all the expectations of the organisers.[15] While the Spanish police tried to scare voters with a heavy-handed early-morning operation, this badly backfired with people going to vote *en masse*. Messaging apps and social networks played a vital role in turning the frightening images around, and 2.26 million citizens cast their ballot (Russell et al. 2017). For obvious reasons, the referendum was run by a small group of people working in the utmost secrecy, especially in terms of organisational matters such as the details of the electronic census that was used as something like an electoral roll (see below) and the arrangements concerning the collection and so on of the voting urns. The vote passed off smoothly thanks in part to the sophisticated and cautious use of secure mobile messaging apps like Signal and Telegram. The referendum was also made possible by the unofficial electronic census that was the basis for the digital voting system. This was created and coordinated by 'hacker' activists, who managed to resist the Spanish police's attempts to foil them (Partal 2017).

Probably the most relevant example of the perverse outcomes of the use of social networks in this process came on 26 October, when ERC member of the Spanish Parliament Gabriel Rufián implicitly accused Carlos Puigdemont, the then President (or head) of the Government of Catalonia, of treason on Twitter for not declaring independence by preparing to call elections to avoid the Spanish state intervening in the Catalan institutions.[16] After this accusation, Puigdemont backtracked, and independence was declared the following day.

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15 For example, the day before the referendum, ANC President Jordi Sánchez said that this plebiscite would only be a success if there were long queues in the streets in front of the polling stations as the world would then see Catalans' will to vote.

16 Rufián tweeted "155 pieces of silver", referring to Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, which allows Spain's government to intervene in regions that act against the Constitution. The idea was that this was supposedly the price that had made Puigdemont change his mind in abandoning the objective of declaring independence. Obviously, Rufián was also alluding here to Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus of Nazareth in the Bible in exchange for 30 pieces of silver.

The third stage, which started on 27 October, saw the arrest of some leaders and others going into exile. This stage was characterised by frustration among the grassroots and division among the leadership. In this context, an innovative development was the emergence of a platform called *Tsunami Democràtic* (Democratic Tsunami), which operated via a mobile application and would call unexpected boycotts and blockades to pose a threat to the normal functioning of the economy. Nobody has ever confirmed who actually ran the platform, although some sources have argued that it was either the Catalan government itself or some of its former members. Others have claimed that it followed similar patterns to uprisings in other countries, pointing to foreign interference in destabilising the Spanish state. Whatever the truth about who was behind it, *Tsunami Democràtic* was incredibly successful in terms of its mobilising capacity. However, the fact that this organisation, which represented a desperate and arguably dangerous manifestation of the acclamative methods of the pro-independence movement, was led by anonymous figures, meant that it was soon abandoned.

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSIONS

The political situation at any given time determined how decisions on using digital tools were made. At certain times, every political actor saw the need to utilise them to increase their chances of achieving their goals. The position on the ground, the environment and the decisions of third parties were decisive in this period, and so other courses of action would have potentially led to other decisions regarding these digital resources: events played a huge role in how, when and to what extent they were used.

In the three cases studied here, the political actors used digital technologies as tools that could help them to achieve their objectives, but serious doubts remain about whether digitalisation actually enhances political participation and deliberation.

The new parties that emerged from the *Indignados* movement made a crucial attempt to make their demonstrations more inclusive with their attractive proposals for radical reform. Initially they presented themselves as open forums where citizens could intensively engage, thanks in particular to new technological means of participation. However, these projects became more vertical in light of their course of actions as they gained political relevance and participation gave way to a stronger leadership. These technological mech-

anisms to encourage participation have gone from being central aspects in radical proposals to open up and democratise political parties to being complementary and malleable tools serving the relevant party leaderships, which even mainstream parties have dared to imitate.

In this process, a large part of the social base that was initially willing to participate began to lose interest as they realised that the efforts and time they had devoted to these parties were not being compensated by a strong representation within them. In fact, nowadays decision-making in these parties is taken care of by their executive bodies with no fluid exchange with the representative bodies and sometimes, given the lack of tradition and consolidated structures, even with a lesser degree of consensus than in more established parties of the left. Therefore, although these new parties have tried to lend a voice to the lower classes, after five years – judging by their current electoral base, which is similar in sociological and quantitative terms to that of the left-wing parties before the crisis – it is unclear that the new ICT tools have done anything to substantially create a new consciousness beyond the bourgeois 'common sense' defined by Gramsci. This, at least in part, can be explained by the difficulties presented by the participation-related proposals based on digitalisation for the subaltern classes to which these parties intended to give a voice.

On the other hand, when we look at the case of the *Procés*, digitalisation has been more effective in achieving the objectives related to communication within the movement. This has facilitated agile and vertical communication between a social base with a clear sense of identity and its leaders, in which directives were more important than debates. In addition, the period between 2012 and 2017 gave the social base of the *Procés* the time to acquire skills relating to communication technologies and awareness of their tactical potential. That the *Procés* has not achieved independence is not due to the limitations of digital communication in the movement, but to other factors, including the lack of a real resolve on the part of the leadership of the movement to break away from the Spanish state when the Spanish government refused to negotiate self-determination and responded with strong repressive measures.

As for the types of activities which digitalisation is most suited to among the most routine or straightforward and the most complex in the democratic political process, the three cases studied here that efficiency increases in the most routine tasks while in the complex ones, such as debate, deliberation

and decision-making, it does not improve significantly. We have observed this particularly in the two parties where this type of task had more weight, namely *Podemos* and *Barcelona en Comú*. In both cases the digital tools used had enormous difficulties in simplifying these tasks and reducing the time dedicated to them.

However, digitalisation does seem to promote political action and adherence to authority, especially in groups where the bourgeoisie has hegemonic power. These processes, despite generating a formidable capacity for political action, do not guarantee greater democratisation, understood in terms of participation in deliberation and decision-making, and could even facilitate discriminatory and authoritarian dynamics.

Maybe the greatest impact that digital tools helped to bring about was the normalisation of organising primaries to choose electoral lists among the Spanish parties. They also contributed to making internal consultations quick and agile. Maybe one of the principal lessons to be learned for the future is that the political parties (and public institutions) have to invest resources – financial, human and technological – to fully tap into the potential of these kind of tools to gradually increase democratisation. Reducing participation time, improving discussion processes and accountability, as well as avoiding being overly influenced by the course of actions, should be prioritised in the future in any effort to gain political momentum.

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There is no reason to conclude that the use of digital tools results in any radical leap forward in terms of democratic quality if this is understood as meaning greater representation and internal democracy within parties. While digitalisation does not guarantee success in reforming horizontal democracy, it can be a highly effective tool in disruptive political processes controlled by the bourgeoisie and based on a more conservative conception of democracy. We find that horizontal issues prevail for *Podemos* and *Barcelona en Comú*, while vertical ones do so for the Catalan pro-independence movement.

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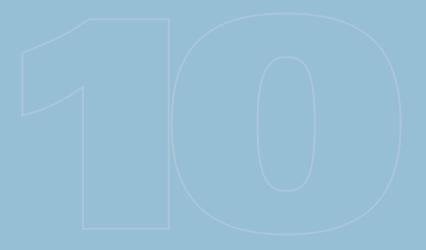
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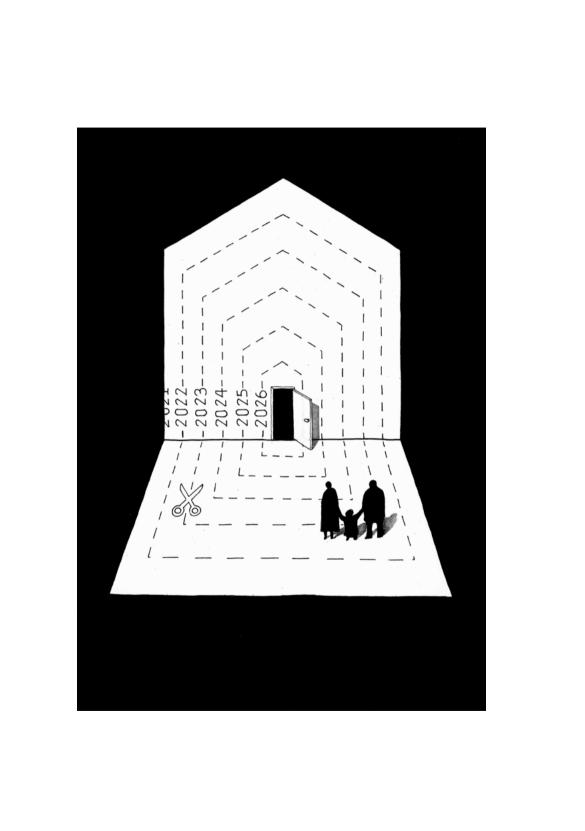
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ALLIED AGAINST AUSTERITY:
NEW TRANSNATIONAL COALITIONS OF THE EUROPEAN ANTI-AUSTERITY MOVEMENT

BERND BONFERT

10

Social movements have become increasingly transnational in recent decades, not least due to the globalised nature of neoliberal capitalism that many of them are struggling against. In Europe, this development has been significantly advanced in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The anti-austerity movement, which rose to prominence in 2011 when people across Europe occupied public squares and called for 'real democracy now', is generally regarded as being mainly domestic in scope, but it actually led to the creation of new and remarkably long-lived transnational coalitions. Rejecting the EU's economic governance and oftentimes questioning the legitimacy of institutional representation altogether, activists in these coalitions developed new approaches to transnational collaboration in order to bring the fight for 'real democracy' and against neoliberal hegemony to the European level.

This chapter shines a light on these new coalitions. Drawing on the qualitative findings of a recently finished doctoral project, as well as on concepts from Gramscian hegemony theory, it characterises the distinct political strategies of three transnational activist coalitions (Blockupy; Change Finance; and the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City) and discusses their relative strengths and limitations in providing integrative counter-hegemonic leadership. As the chapter goes on to show, Blockupy was a protest-oriented coalition that managed to organise large symbolic protest events and gain public attention, but was relatively unsuccessful at democratically integrating participants from across Europe in a cohesive organisational framework. Change Finance represents an advocacy-oriented coalition that is capable of organising transnational campaigns for EU reform, but lacks a substantial embeddedness in local grassroots activism as well, albeit for different reasons from Blockupy. The European Action Coalition, finally, is primarily dedicated to mutual solidarity in support of decentralised local struggles, which has allowed it to gradually develop a more counter-hegemonic and democratically inclusive organisational platform than the other two, but at the cost of political momentum and reach.

Based on these observations, the chapter concludes by discussing how the diverse strengths and weaknesses of the three coalitions measure up with one another and what strategic lessons activists can draw from their experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Nothing has expressed the current crisis of parliamentary democracy in Europe as forcefully as the eruption of the anti-austerity movement in 2011. As governments across the continent enforced widespread austerity to cope with the 2008 crisis and financial bailouts, people became increasingly disillusioned by their political leaders' obedience to business interests and lack of democratic accountability. After activists in Spain started occupying their public squares on 15 May to demand 'Real Democracy Now', a wave of similar mobilisations spread across Europe, gaining a particularly strong momentum in other Southern European countries in which austerity had ravaged the public sector and affected the lives of millions of people. Much has been written by scholars and activists alike about the development of this anti-austerity movement, its reliance on horizontal democratic practices, and its eventual institutionalisation (and demobilisation) in the form of far-left parties like Podemos and Syriza (Maeckelbergh 2012; Daphi / Zamponi 2014; Oikonomakis / Roos 2014; Carty 2015; della Porta / Parks 2016; Bailey et al. 2017; García 2017; Huke 2017; Zelik 2018). What has been less prominent is the fact that the movement also brought forth a wide range of transnational coalitions in order to consolidate the struggle against austerity at the European level.

The Blockupy coalition for instance, though initially German, began including activists from across Europe to mobilise against the European Central Bank (ECB) in Frankfurt (Blockupy 2013b). The Alter Summit brought together activist organisations, unions and think tanks to oppose European neoliberal governance collectively (Alter Summit 2013). With the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing and to the City (EAC), activists took up the task of struggling against the commodification and deterioration of living space (EAC 2019c). Even as mobilisations were already depleting, new coalitions like Change Finance and DiEM25 were created to reignite the movement's momentum (DiEM25 2017; Change Finance 2020a). Not only did these coalitions coordinate actions at a transnational scale, but they all created their own political infrastructures and decision-making processes and developed distinct relations to the EU's institutional terrain. For the most part, these coalitions renounced any reformist approach to parliamentary politics, although the extent to which they were able to apply prefigurative democratic practices at the transnational level differed substantially between them.

Academic literature acknowledges the anti-austerity movement's transnational character but primarily discusses how activists developed the same political demands and tactics across countries (della Porta / Mattoni 2014; Flesher Fominaya / Jimenéz 2014; Oikonomakis / Roos 2014; McCurdy et al. 2016; Romanos 2016). Only a handful of authors study the formation of new transnational coalitions (Chatzopoulou / Bourne 2016; Agustín 2017; Mullis 2017; Lahusen et al. 2018) and their insights indicate that the anti-austerity movement has not only continued but also innovated strategies of transnational activism, in particular by making them more horizontal and inclusive. This makes it all the more necessary to pay closer attention to how these coalitions work.

This chapter does just that. It examines three European anti-austerity coalitions (Change Finance, Blockupy and the EAC), explains how they aim to challenge the neoliberal status quo and to what extent they facilitate democratic participation, and discusses whether their strategies offer new avenues for transnational counter-hegemony. To first provide a theoretical foundation, the chapter introduces concepts from the historical materialist literature on social movements, especially approaches drawing on Gramscian hegemony theory (Barker et al. 2013; Humphrys 2013; Cox / Nilsen 2014), as well as from studies of previous transnational activist coalitions (Keck / Sikkink 1998; Bandy / Smith 2005; Tarrow 2005; Daphi et al. 2019). Based on this foundation, it suggests that we need to understand transnational activism as a potential form of organic intellectual leadership that can generate solidarity and facilitate democratic participation across borders for the purpose of developing counter-hegemonic strategies. The literature on previous movement generations also serves to characterise historical trends in coalition building, which helps evaluate how innovative transnational cooperation across the anti-austerity movement has been.

The chapter draws on the findings of a three-year research project (2017–2020), based on a social network analysis of transnational anti-austerity events, qualitative analyses of hundreds of activist documents, nine expert interviews with coalition activists, and participant observation at five of their transnational meetings. It demonstrates that each coalition follows a distinct historical tradition and represents a specific strategy, with Change Finance being a reform-oriented 'advocacy coalition', Blockupy being a protest-focused 'event coalition' and the EAC representing a horizontal solidarity-oriented

'federation'. At the same time, it also shows that all three of them are (or in Blockupy's case 'were') consciously trying to expand their strategic scope by adopting far-reaching transformative perspectives and decentralised tactics in line with the anti-austerity movement. In their efforts to innovate, the three coalitions found only limited success and the chapter discusses the causes and implications of their respective challenges. To conclude, the chapter provides overarching reflections about the nature of transnational activism and democratic participation in the anti-austerity movement and discusses what lessons current activists can draw from its experiences.

Keywords:
transnational activism
transnational mobilisation
transnational coalitions
austerity
social movements

TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM AS COUNTER-HEGEMONIC DEMOCRATIC PRAXIS

Examining emancipatory social movements from a historical materialist perspective means viewing them as embedded in capitalist relations of power and exploitation. As people try to defend against the contradictions of capitalist production, social reproduction, dispossession and disenfranchisement, their collective struggles manifest as temporally and spatially contingent movements that develop a political agency and collective identity. Movements are not entirely cohesive but represent an interactive terrain for individual and collective actors to engage with one another, thereby shaping the development of the larger whole (Barker 2010). Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Gramsci 1992) allows us to appreciate that social movements engage not only in physical conflicts against oppressors or economic struggles

for material redistribution, but also in an ideological and political battle for societal influence. As such, they articulate claims, spread narratives and promote alternatives that challenge the ideological status quo ('common sense') by politicising the public and generating broader support for their cause. Creating their own vision for a counter-hegemonic alternative also helps shape a movement's collective identity, which activists can draw on to develop long-term political strategies (Cox / Nilsen 2014). In many cases, they establish 'prefigurative' organisational structures and practices, such as horizontal democracy or collectivised economic and social reproduction, to put their counter-hegemonic visions into practice (Yates 2015).

All of this requires the agency of dedicated activists, some of whom take the role of political and intellectual leaders. As Gramsci (1992: 334) says, a movement "does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself; and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders". People may spontaneously resist their immediate oppressors, but they require 'conscious leadership' to develop a radical transformative consciousness capable of challenging hegemony as a whole (ibid.: 196ff.). This leadership is provided by 'organic intellectuals': politically influential individuals who take part in hegemony struggles by developing ideological narratives and strategies for a particular cause, educating (potential) supporters and forging political alliances (ibid.: 5–14). Dominant and dominated social classes alike develop their own organic intellectuals, who become crucial figures in reproducing or challenging systems of hegemony, according to Morton (2007: 97). On a collective level, organic intellectuals are organised within political parties, which provide political leadership and educate followers to become organic intellectuals themselves, as indicated by Gramsci (1992: 15). As more recent authors have noted, activists and their organisations can take on the role of organic or collective intellectuals as well, insofar as they are able to transcend the more narrow scope of single-issue mobilisations by expanding their movement's strategies towards a more overarching counter-hegemonic struggle (Gill 2000; Carroll 2013; Humphrys 2013). A key requirement of this is the ability to forge coalitions among different political actors on the basis of a shared alternative vision, as well as through mutual solidarity across different geographical spaces, social communities and political sectors.

To be truly counter-hegemonic, political leadership also needs to be based on a foundation of democratic centralism and the prefigurative dissolution of hierarchies. Taking the Turin workers' council movement as his main inspiration, Gramsci (1992: 418) envisaged the relationship between the intellectual leaders and followers of a movement as one of "organic cohesion", in which non-hierarchical organisation was, in the words of Gramsci (2011: 50f.), "precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes, insofar as it is mass politics and not a mere adventure by groups that appeal to the masses". In this vision, a counter-hegemonic political party (a 'modern prince') needs to not only integrate potential allies but also actively dispel the division between leaders and followers through radical democratic praxis, according to Gramsci (1992: 10, 130f., 181f.). Although this conception is more prescriptive than analytical, it provides an important distinction between leadership that reproduces uneven power relations and leadership that seeks to dissolve power relations altogether (Morton 2007; Anderson 2017). Applied to activist organisations, this conception highlights that a counter-hegemonic strategy and consciousness cannot be developed in a vacuum by an enlightened elite, but requires prefigurative democratic spaces that facilitate collective exchange and learning among activists and their political allies (Cox / Nilsen 2014: 89f.).

TRANSNATIONAL COALITION BUILDING

How does this dynamic work at the transnational level? While historical materialists regard social movements as inherently transnationally connected through their shared struggle against capitalist power relations, the practical work of cross-border exchange, cooperation and coalition building requires concerted efforts to extend a movement across scales. To begin with, activists need to recognise and address the underlying transnational dimension of their struggle. This allows them to 'externalise' their targets, such as by addressing international institutions, 'domesticate' international issues by integrating them into their own local work, or contribute to the 'diffusion' of mobilisations by adopting demands and practices from other countries (McAdam et al. 2004; Tarrow / McAdam 2005). The latter in particular hinges on the development of mutual empathy or even interpersonal exchange between activists, which provides a crucial foundation for their eventual collaboration on collective actions and coalitions (Seifert 2017).

Transnational coalitions differ from their domestic counterparts through their more expansive scope and composition, which requires them to reconcile differences across a larger variety of socio-economic backgrounds, political cultures and tactical specialisations, including potentially steep asymmetries in material resources (Daphi / Anderl 2016). Striking a balance between inclusivity and political cohesion is therefore particularly challenging, as a transnational coalition needs to cultivate a 'flexible identity' that can accommodate differences between members (della Porta / Tarrow 2005), while also developing a sufficiently strong strategic consensus to make their resource-intensive involvement worthwhile (Smith / Bandy 2005; McCammon / Moon 2015). As on the domestic level, the creation and maintenance of a counter-hegemonic coalition requires the leadership of organic intellectuals, whose tasks also differ from their domestic comrades. Transnational organic intellectuals have to manoeuvre the terrain of transnational civil society in order to maintain connections, coordinate actions and generate solidarity across borders, while also developing claims and strategies that can be applied in different politico-economic contexts. This requires specialised political knowledge, language skills, and the time and resources to engage in regular travel. Transnational activists, whether organic intellectuals or not, therefore tend to be more financially secure and educated than domestic activists (Tarrow 2005). This can create tensions between their ability to remain accountable to their original domestic context and their commitment to the wider transnational counter-hegemonic struggle (Tarrow / McAdam 2005). It also carries a risk of them becoming detached from grassroots activism and co-opted into the terrain of international institutions, for instance as official policy advisers (often referred to as 'NGO-isation') (Rootes 2005).

Hence, to create truly counter-hegemonic coalitions, transnational activists need to perform their leadership function in a particularly integrative fashion. They need to help develop a shared political consciousness that connects the struggles of different domestic movements around a common contestation of capitalist hegemony, while reconciling politico-economic differences among multiple countries and social groups by generating mutual solidarity and facilitating democratic participation across borders and organisational layers. Unsurprisingly, many transnational coalitions do not achieve this level of convergence, nor do they intend to, but instead work towards a more narrow tactical purpose.
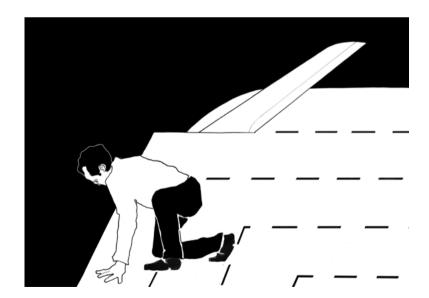
TYPES OF TRANSNATIONAL COALITIONS

There is no universal typology of transnational activist coalitions, but authors tend to differentiate them in either functional or strategic terms. Sidney Tarrow (2005: 167) provides a functional categorisation that identifies coalitions based on their duration and degree of involvement. This results in four different archetypes: 'Instrumental coalitions' are short-lived and require little involvement, such as in cases where different activist organisations draft a petition together. 'Event coalitions' are also short-lived but require high levels of involvement, for instance for the purpose of organising an international protest. 'Federations' are the inverse case, in which members remain connected for a long time but do not invest much work, as in the case of information-sharing networks. Lastly, 'campaign coalitions' have a long duration and require high involvement from members, as they often entail ongoing advocacy work and regular coordinated actions for the purpose of achieving a more ambitious goal.

Other authors highlight the political and strategic differences between different types (and generations) of transnational coalitions. They identify early coalitions of environmental NGOs in the 1970s as 'advocacy coalitions' due to their focus on campaigning to influence international institutions (Keck / Sikkink 1998). Such coalitions were characterised as relatively centralised and structurally homogenous, being primarily composed of transnational NGOs from the global North (Wood 2005), as well as vulnerable to NGO-isation due to their close institutional ties (Rootes 2005). The later generation of Global Justice Movement (GJM) coalitions in the 1990s consciously avoided replicating this praxis as activists were much more critical of the neoliberal hegemonic order of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or G7 (Bennett 2005). Instead of targeting the institutional level through 'vertical' advocacy, they engaged in 'horizontal' politics by coordinating local protest actions and developing counter-hegemonic models of globalisation, exemplified by the work of the World Social Forum (Buckley 2018). Consequently, this type of coalition tended to be more decentralised, heterogeneous and focused on local activism, which made it relatively resistant to co-optation but also increased the risk of internal divisions over goals, cultural differences and questions of resource allocation (Bandy / Smith 2005; Daphi 2014; Daphi et al. 2019). Coalitions in the global North and South developed different characteristics too, with Northern activists cultivating a stronger focus on summit protests and campaigning (as embodied by 'Attac'), while Southern activists built interregional (and often translocal) federations for

information and resource exchange, such as 'La Via Campesina' or indigenous community networks (Kolb 2005; Smith 2005; Smith 2020).

After the international financial crisis of 2008, parts of the GJM continued mobilising in the context of the anti-austerity movement, resulting in a notable continuity of actors and political claims between the two generations (Daphi / Zamponi 2014). However, when the new movement erupted around 2011 in the form of mass mobilisations and public-square occupations, especially in Southern Europe, activists displayed a distinctly domestic focus, challenging the neoliberal austerity regimes of their national governments by building new forms of 'real democracy' from the ground up. The movement's transnational scope was evident in the diffusion of demands and tactics between countries, but less so through practical collaboration (della Porta 2014; Bourne / Chatzo-poulou 2015). This only changed gradually over the following years as activists began founding transnational coalitions like Blockupy and Alter Summit (Alter Summit 2013; Blockupy 2013b), which sought to raise the struggle against neoliberal hegemony to the European level. Considering the movement's interconnection with the GJM, it was reasonable to expect these coalitions to develop along similar lines to the previous movement.

And while some studies suggest that this was the case (Chatzopoulou / Bourne 2016), others highlight the unique qualities of the new coalitions, such as Blockupy's initial attempt to emulate 'Occupy Wall Street' in Germany (Mullis 2017), or the increasing transnational activity of prefigurative solidarity initiatives (Lahusen et al. 2018).

Evidently, transnational coalitions of the European anti-austerity movement have developed their own characteristics and strategies, building on the experiences of older generations but also adjusting to the needs of contemporary hegemonic struggle. The rest of this chapter will therefore characterise and discuss these new coalitions in detail. It examines the cases of Blockupy, Change Finance and the EAC, each of which represents a distinct type of transnational coalition that pursues its own political strategy and approach to democratic participation and exhibits unique strengths and limitations.

BLOCKUPY – AGAINST THE "HEART OF THE EUROPEAN CRISIS REGIME"

Blockupy started in 2012 as an attempt to emulate the Occupy movement in Germany,[1] but eventually expanded into a transnational coalition against the EU's crisis management. It closely resembled GJM event coalitions due to its primary focus on organising large protest events. However, in contrast to the short-lived cooperation of international summit protests, Blockupy existed for several years and attempted to facilitate a degree of horizontal exchange beyond individual actions.

AGAINST THE HEGEMONY OF AUSTERITY

Blockupy was small in scale but broad in scope. It included anti-capitalist activist networks like the Interventionist Left (IL) and …*umsGanze!* (uG (rough English translation: 'All or Nothing')), anti-neoliberal social movement organisations (SMOs) like *Attac*, solidarity initiatives, as well as more traditional organisations such as far-left parties and trade union youth movements, many of which had already cooperated in the GJM (Blockupy 2013b). The coalition sought to challenge the hegemony of EU austerity and forge lasting trans-

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1   There were already a number of German Occupy camps prior to this, but their reception was minimal (Mullis 2017).

national bonds of solidarity across the anti-austerity movement that could provide a basis for more far-reaching counter-hegemonic struggle.

Blockupy's initial calls for mobilisation were not explicitly anti-capitalist but appealed to a broad leftist audience opposed to EU austerity and financial capital. When this failed to garner mass support, the coalition embraced a more openly anti-capitalist stance, proclaiming: "They want capitalism without democracy – we want democracy without capitalism" (Blockupy 2013d). Blockupy thus began championing the idea of radical class struggle against the "rehabilitation of capitalism on the backs of employees as well as the unemployed, retirees, migrants and the youth" (Blockupy 2013b). It also expressed an intersectional notion of counter-hegemony, combining struggles against racism, sexism and militarisation (Blockupy 2013a). Due to its radical stance, Blockupy rejected the EU's democratic legitimacy and did not develop any claims for institutional reform.

Instead, the coalition aimed to shift civil society's common sense by raising awareness of the devastating effects of austerity in Southern Europe (Mayer 2016). This approach was strongly tailored to the German context, which was considered to be both the "Heart of the European Crisis Regime" (Blockupy 2013b) but also a relatively quiet eye of the storm (Blockupy 2015) in terms of crisis impact and mobilisations. As uG (2013) explained it:

[T]hese mobilisations concentrate on the goal of breaking the ideological domination of the current state-and-nation propaganda. [...] To break the consensus in society, to at least to [sic] send a message of solidarity to other struggles and to show that at least some people, some thousands, in the heart of the beast, have a problem with the status quo.

Moreover, rupturing the hegemony of austerity in Germany was seen as a way to shift the balance of power in Europe in the activists' favour. To that end, Blockupy shifted from a domestic to a transnational project in 2013, hoping to offset its lack of reception in Germany by expanding its targets and membership. Activists believed that to support the anti-austerity mobilisations in Southern Europe, austerity had to be contested at the source (Blockupy 2013b). As an IL activist put it (Interventionist Left 2018[2]):

2   Translation of the quoted passage by the author

There was a very clear transnational consciousness: 'We have to have a crisis intervention in the centre of Europe'. Because the conflicts are fought in the periphery, but the real power and central control lie in Berlin, Brussels and Frankfurt.

To disrupt the German discourse, Blockupy organised annual protests and blockades around the ECB headquarters in Frankfurt (...umsGanze! 2013), which in 2014 were combined with decentralised protests across Europe (Blockupy 2014b). In 2015, the protests were additionally intended to pressure the ECB and German government into easing their hostility towards the Greek SYRIZA government over its refusal to implement austerity (Mayer 2016). Activists had no illusions that Blockupy could achieve swift political change, but hoped that they were contributing to a gradual shift in public consciousness (Interventionist Left 2018[3]):

It's clear that with Blockupy you don't expect there to be an insurrectionist situation, where you can change things in one day, but that it's embedded in hegemony struggles – a discursive intervention, a symbolic action.

To what extent this strategy was successful in the long run is debatable, as media coverage of Blockupy consistently focused on violent clashes between police and protesters and largely ignored the political message (D'Inka 2015). At least within the German left, Blockupy managed to make hitherto controversial activist tactics like blockades and occupations more widely accessible, as evident in the large-scale radical mobilisations around the G20 summit in Hamburg in 2017 (Bonfert 2017).

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TRANSNATIONAL 'DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW'?
In addition to challenging neoliberal hegemony, Blockupy also sought to build a transnational democratic infrastructure that could connect activists in the long term. Drawing explicit inspiration from the GJM, members envisaged Blockupy as a "transnational social movement coalition (or even a coalition of coalitions)" (Blockupy 2013c: 3) capable of "building democracy from below" (Blockupy 2014c). They only achieved limited success in this regard, as the coalition did not become strongly embedded within non-German activist communities, whose democratic integration thus remained minimal. Blockupy did incorporate a number of groups from abroad but was driven predominantly

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3   Translation of the quoted passage by the author

by German organisations overall. Most international members were smaller activist networks from Italy, Greece and France, while large anti-austerity movements like the Spanish 15-M movement were only involved tangentially in the beginning (ESC 2019).

International representatives participated in meetings of Blockupy's coordinating group ('KoKreis') by phone to deliberate on the coalition's strategy and plan actions. Initially, the coalition organised open democratic assemblies comparable to 15-M, but the smaller KoKreis increasingly took over as Blockupy's political leadership as it became larger and more transnationalised (Mullis 2017). While this was a more centralised arrangement than the prefigurative democratic praxis the anti-austerity movement was known for, it also allowed non-German members to be more involved without having to engage in travel. It also resulted in a division of labour between German activists who prepared protest actions in Frankfurt and international members who organised decentralised actions and arranged travel to Germany (ESC 2019). Additionally, Blockupy organised a large festival in 2014 for the purpose of political debate and cultural exchange (Blockupy 2014a).

These efforts proved to be insufficient to expand Blockupy significantly beyond its German activist core. As an Italian member explains, being involved in Blockupy required a level of transnational specialisation that alienated her from her local context (ESC 2019):

I was the one in charge of doing the European stuff. And this meant that I was only doing that. I wasn't following other issues on the local level. [...] So you had a sort of, I wouldn't say professionalisation, but a sort of group that was following these kinds of things and that knew each other and so on, but with a sort of distance to what was going on at the local and national level.

This distance was partially a result of limited resources, as Blockupy's members were financially ill-equipped for sustained transnational cooperation and regular travel. But even organising decentralised protests was relatively unsuccessful, as activists struggled to apply the Blockupy framework locally (ESC 2019):

When we tried to organise transnationally it was always like a step that meant to lose something at the local level, at the national level, in the organisation of real people, real workers, real struggles. That I think was a problem.

In that sense, Blockupy's lack of transnational expansion reflects an inability to integrate and reconcile its members' diverse struggles and priorities. The coalition also had only a niche appeal among anti-austerity activists to begin with. Italian activists were relatively committed because they lacked a large domestic anti-austerity movement and hoped to invigorate their own struggles through transnational cooperation. By contrast, movements in Spain and Greece had gained considerable political momentum domestically and were therefore less inclined to divert time and resources to mobilise to Germany (ibid.).

Given these limitations, it is fair to say that Blockupy's characterisation as a counter-hegemonic project and a collective intellectual leader was largely aspirational, as it lacked the organic cohesion and scope to make its ambitions a reality. Whether the coalition could have overcome these shortcomings is difficult to say, since it was entirely exhausted by around 2016. After Greece's acceptance of a third Troika memorandum in 2015 resulted in widespread disillusionment across much of the European left, Blockupy lost most of its mobilising potential. A last-ditch effort to protest against German labour and migration policies in 2016 drew only a small following and further reduced the coalition's international appeal, resulting in its dissolution soon afterwards (Interventionist Left 2018). Due to the systemic nature of Blockupy's problems, it seems unlikely that it could have successfully become a more counter-hegemonic force even given more time; rather, it needed to be more grounded in decentralised activist struggles to begin with.

CHANGE FINANCE – A COALITION FOR EU REFORM

Change Finance was founded in 2017 with the aim of creating political momentum for regulating and democratising the European financial system. It follows the tradition of advocacy coalitions but also attempts to expand their tactical horizon and attract a wider audience by mobilising decentralised protests.

REFORM, NOT REVOLUTION

Change Finance is dedicated to transforming the European financial system, by arguing for EU legislation to restrict the influence of financial actors. The coalition's demands revolve around three major themes. First, finance should serve 'people and planet' by increasing social equality and ecological sustainability. Second, the financial system should be 'democratically governed' through

citizen participation as opposed to lobbyism. Third, financial institutions should operate on a 'stable' scale, as opposed to being 'too big to fail' (Change Finance 2020a). Change Finance also highlights the broader implications of these claims for overarching societal issues like ecological sustainability and social equality, but it does not formulate separate demands for these issues (Change Finance 2020b). Hence, although the coalition pursues a far-reaching democratic transformation of the neoliberal financial system, it does not seek a radical break with capitalism, nor with the EU's institutional system.

This stance is reflective of Change Finance's composition, which includes over 50 organisations – predominantly NGOs, SMOs and think tanks – such as Attac, SOMO, Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO) and the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung. Some of these actors express an openly anti-capitalist position, but the majority are dedicated to social reform. While Change Finance does not have a formal leadership, the coalition's founding organisation Finance Watch exerts a strong structural and political influence, hosting all meetings in its Brussels office and running the coalition's online infrastructure. Since Finance Watch is in part funded by the EU (Finance Watch 2019a), this influence steers the coalition firmly towards a strategy of reformist advocacy.

As a consequence, Change Finance's political position represents a loose common denominator between its members rather than a cohesive counter-hegemonic identity. As such, the coalition often seeks to strike a balance between presenting its claims as radical enough to warrant the support of grassroots activists but not so radical as to alienate moderate sympathisers and financial backers. While coalition members speak of neoliberalism as a 'failed economic system', any suggestion of proclaiming explicitly socialist ambitions is quickly shut down at meetings (Bonfert 2019). Rather than Marx or Gramsci, Change Finance's publications draw inspiration from Keynes (Change Finance 2019a). And although the coalition's intention is to reach a moderate middle-class audience without resorting to populist rhetoric (Finance Watch 2019b), it regularly tries to make its message more broadly appealing by adopting the Occupy movement's narrative of the 'one percent' (Change Finance 2019b) or making references to pop culture (Change Finance 2019c). This somewhat eclectic positioning has implications for Change Finance's praxis as well.

A MISMATCH OF STRUCTURE AND PRAXIS

Change Finance's reform-oriented political stance is reflected by a specialisation around advocacy campaigns, as well as internal organisational processes and decision-making driven by efficiency rather than democratic integration. Work is divided between a small coordinating group, which plans the overarching direction of campaigns, and specialised working groups that prepare practical actions and manage public outreach. Although decision-making in Change Finance is based on consensus, this division of labour results in relatively few and brief coalition meetings that leave little room for debate and reduce voting to acclamation (Bonfert 2018a). Due to this praxis, disagreements remain largely unresolved, which incentivises coalition members to (temporarily) opt out of the coalition rather than try to influence its trajectory (CEO 2019).

At the same time, Change Finance also transcends the tradition of older advocacy coalitions by coordinating decentralised protest actions to emulate the more disruptive praxis of the anti-austerity movement. On 15 September 2018 (the 10th anniversary of the financial crisis), the coalition organised over 100 symbolic protests in 18 countries, mostly in front of banks (Finance Watch 2018a). Although this turnout could be considered quite impressive, coalition members were rather disappointed since most actions were restricted to France and garnered little media attention (Bonfert 2019). Some activists felt that Change Finance failed to reach a sufficiently large audience by being exclusive towards non-members (CEO 2019): "There were no mechanisms through which the groups that were not from the Change Finance coalition could be directly involved."

Others believed that the coalition's message was too radical for the financially secure middle-class constituents it was targeting and that attempting to emulate the discourse and strategies of the anti-austerity movement was inherently misguided (Finance Watch 2019b):

[There was a] manifesto saying something like 'We lost our houses. We lost this and we lost that' [...] but in my world I don't know anybody that lost a house. [...] The people that we want to reach, they are mostly, let's say, white, well-educated, middle class, in the suburbs. They have a house and with a very cheap mortgage. And so I think in terms of target and audience there is here a mismatch.
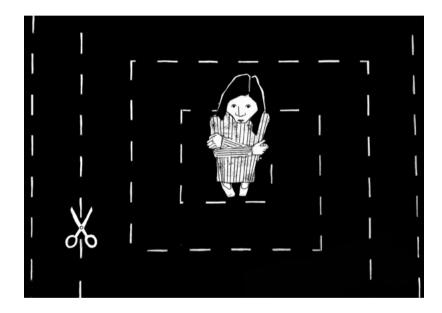
Both assessments indicate that Change Finance's attempt to coordinate decentralised protests exceeded its members' practical capacities and comfort zone. The coalition consequently readjusted its strategy to a more moderate institutional approach a year later, when it asked prospective MEPs to restrict the interaction between financial lobbyists and the European Parliament (Change Finance 2019d). This pledge campaign was more typical of an advocacy coalition, relying on targeted parliamentary influence, and thus represented a 'return to form' after the previous year's experimentation with decentralised protests. Perhaps unsurprisingly, members also considered it to be more successful after it garnered over 500 signatures (Haar 2019).

However, Change Finance has not completely abandoned its ambition to expand beyond a purely institutional approach. Coalition members are very aware of the risk of NGO-isation and the limitations of parliamentary democracy at the EU level (CEO 2019):

> There is a tendency for groups that are based in Brussels to become part of a very particular political environment. You talk to European parliamentarians and EU level representatives of civil society organisations and that tends to narrow your political vision and your horizon a bit. […] We have to refine the ability to phrase political demands and make them an issue. And I mean not just at meetings with parliamentarians and the Commission, but more broadly in society.

Consequently, while preparing its second campaign, Change Finance also organised a large forum in Brussels in late 2018, in which activists from within and outside the coalition engaged in several days of in-depth political debate about the state of financial capitalism and the possibilities for radical change (Finance Watch 2018b). While this forum did not shift Change Finance's organisational structure, it did showcase the coalition's willingness and ability to facilitate a more open-ended political discourse, which may make it more politically inclusive in the long run.

On the whole, Change Finance operates like a traditional advocacy coalition, displaying high levels of organisational professionalism and supranational institutional access yet lacking an organic embeddedness in grassroots activism and a counter-hegemonic stance. However, its members are clearly inspired by the radical democratic momentum of the anti-austerity movement and aware of their own structural limitations, making it entirely possible that the coalition will experiment with more decentralised and unconventional tactics in the future.

THE EUROPEAN ACTION COALITION FOR THE RIGHT TO HOUSING AND TO THE CITY (EAC) – MUTUAL SOLIDARITY AGAINST THE NEOLIBERALISATION OF LIVING SPACE

The EAC was founded in 2013 with the aim of opposing the commodification of housing in Europe. It operated as a low-involvement federation for years before recently developing more ambitious campaigns and counter-hegemonic claims. Its focus on horizontal exchange and mutual solidarity is more reminiscent of translocal alterglobalisation networks of the global South than any European predecessors and represents an important asset in facilitating democratic participation.

COUNTER-HEGEMONY ROOTED IN TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

The EAC identifies as a "convergence process between movements [who] felt the need to gather in order to strengthen this fight to take common action and common positions on European Housing issues" (EAC 2019c). It is relatively homogeneous, consisting almost exclusively of housing activist organisations, such as right-to-the-city networks, anti-eviction groups and tenants unions (EAC 2019d). But while most of the coalition's demands focus on housing issues like rent increases, home evictions and touristification, it also demonstrates a level of counter-hegemonic leadership by explicitly opposing the influence of financial investors, "contemporary global capitalism", "market fundamentalism" (EAC 2019b) and any "society that organises itself solely around profits" (EAC 2020). The EAC thus seeks not only to make housing more affordable but also to fight the capitalist conditions that affect the living situations of precarianised and vulnerable social groups (EAC 2019b).

This counter-hegemonic stance reflects the EAC's ability to guide members towards a more unified political struggle, which it achieves through a praxis of horizontal exchange and collective learning, aiming to 'create solidarity bonds between movements which would enable each to strengthen itself' (EAC 2015). This praxis is notably more decentralised and integrative than in the other two coalitions, as the EAC lacks any central headquarters, holds biannual meetings in rotating locations and multiple languages, and includes activists from across Europe in relatively equal measure. Indeed, activists from Southern Europe hold most of the coalition's organisational responsibilities, thus implicitly giving greater weight to struggles from countries most

severely hit by austerity. Not coincidentally, the EAC was in part founded by large anti-austerity networks from Southern Europe like the Spanish *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, or Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) and Greek Solidarity4All, whose emphasis on local activism and democratic prefiguration shine through in the coalition's strategy.

In practice, various internal working groups are tasked with facilitating communication, skill exchange, research and direct actions (Bonfert 2018b). Through skill exchange, members share their experiences and tactical abilities, such as stopping evictions, organising tenants or creating alternative media (Bond Precaire Woonvormen 2018; Living Rent 2018). By conducting research, they pool knowledge about their different struggles and create a more overarching understanding of the European housing situation (CADTM 2018), which they also publish in the form of political brochures, often in cooperation with the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (EAC 2016b; 2019a). These activities allow coalition members to identify common social and political grievances, expand their tactical repertoires and conceive of their struggles as inherently connected. A PAH activist recalls (PAH 2018):

I have learned things which I would not otherwise have learned, about what is happening in other countries and can be applied to the situation in Spain. There's an interchange that's very important. The coalition achieves that and also it bonds us because we are all from different nationalities and different situations but nevertheless we have a common viewpoint and a common aim.

Members also use their rotating meetings to provide tours through local neigh-bourhoods and introduce each other to the struggles of their respective constituencies (Bonfert 2018b). Often, this also involves organising direct actions together, such as a public discussion in Belgrade, the delivery of political demands to parliament in Cyprus, or the mobilisation of a large demonstration in Lisbon (EAC 2017a; 2017c; 2018). Members have begun integrating this translocal solidarity into their everyday praxis, for example by organising symbolic actions in protest against evictions happening in other countries (Stop Evictions Berlin 2019).

Many activists explicitly view this interchange as a way to develop a collective class consciousness, based on the shared material grievances of homeowners and tenants (Stop Auctions 2018):

The small owner in Greece and the tenant in Germany have almost the same problems. […] The problem is the cost of living, of housing. […] So it's not a matter of where exactly you are in this picture, but that all of the people from the middle and lower classes are facing now a big pressure in the context of housing.

Hence, through its horizontal praxis the EAC is able to generate transnational solidarity among different activist communities and develop a more explicitly anti-capitalist consciousness that transcends individual struggles, thereby performing the collective intellectual function of building counter-hegemony from below.

TOWARDS EUROPEAN REFORM?

While its earlier actions were relatively small and thematically fragmented (EAC 2014a; 2014b; 2016a), the EAC has begun organising collective actions and campaigns and formulating common claims more frequently in recent years. The coalition's 'Hands Off Our Homes' campaign in 2017 revolved around challenging financial investors and culminated in the delivery of political demands to EU officials in Milan (EAC 2017b; Common Space 2018). During the European Parliament elections in 2019, it demanded various EU reforms, including a universal right to housing and an end to austerity (EAC 2019b). However, in spite of such reform efforts the EAC is internally divided about the EU. Only some members supported the European Citizens' Initiative 'Housing For All' (Housing For All 2019) while the coalition as a whole did not promote it. Some activists are very clear about their rejection of the EU: "We are not reformist. We don't think that the ECB or European Commission or EU institutions in general can or want to change their orientation" (CADTM 2018). Others are generally in favour of EU reforms but doubt their short-term feasibility: "Personally, I would like to see a European law, a housing law. […] But this is looking into the future a long way" (PAH 2018). In the end, formulating reform demands was a pragmatic choice intended to further consolidate the EAC's political identity rather than actually achieve institutional change: "I have got no faith in the European institutions to deliver those demands, but I think the process of uniting around a manifesto could be quite unifying and

constructive for the organisation" (Living Rent 2018). Hence, the EAC is by no means adopting a centralised institutional strategy like Change Finance, but is gradually expanding its tactical repertoire in a way that allows it to refine and promote its political message, while still prioritising the local level. As one activist summarises it (PAH 2018):

I think we have to work on an institutional level, that is to say try and get some politicians or political institutes to react. But also I think the real power must be in the base. If we have a really powerful movement in the base, then things will change.

Due to this prioritisation of the activist 'base', the most decisive struggles and collective actions of EAC members occur at the domestic level and often outside the coalition's framework, such as the PAH's legal battle against Spain's housing laws (PAH 2018), or the wave of rent strikes during the coronavirus pandemic (Yaa 2020). In that sense, the EAC may provide an important collective intellectual function by acting as a common infrastructure for its members to develop a more unified counter-hegemonic perspective and coordinate their actions, but it does not (yet) function as a unified political leader in its own right. Hence, while there is a drive towards further structural consolidation and political convergence, the EAC's prospective development is still entirely undetermined. It is already evident, however, that its bottom-up approach to transnational cooperation is more capable than those of Blockupy or Change Finance of transcending previous coalition archetypes and developing a more integrative democratic foundation for European counter-hegemony.

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LESSONS –
TRANSNATIONAL COUNTER-HEGEMONY
AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Each of the three coalitions pursued a different strategy for expanding the anti-austerity movement's struggles to the European level and displayed a distinct approach to facilitating democratic integration across multiple scales. All of them drew on previous traditions of transnational coalition building while also trying to integrate more horizontal and inclusive tactics in line with the anti-austerity movement's prefigurative democratic nature – with very uneven results.

All three coalitions condemned the EU's neoliberal crisis management and articulated far-reaching claims for political alternatives. To do so, they relied on specialised transnational activists, who possessed the material and educational capacities to travel across Europe and communicate in multiple languages. Despite the widespread use of social media, email and phone conferences, these activists also regularly met face-to-face to engage in mutual exchange and democratic decision-making, as well as organised collective actions in physical spaces. This put significant financial and operational strain on the coalitions, forcing them to cut corners and specialise around specific strategies. The overall scope of these strategies varied considerably, as evidenced by the vastly different political content, institutional targets and practices they adopted. By taking different stances on neoliberal capitalism, the three coalitions also implicitly addressed different social constituencies.

Blockupy expressed a radical rejection of both the content and legitimacy of EU governance and developed an alternative counter-hegemonic vision that was broad in scope but light on specifics. Without articulating any concrete demands for reform, the coalition's political profile contained a wide range of perspectives on anti-capitalist working class struggle and intersectional oppression, reminiscent of the pluralism of the GJM. By contrast, Change Finance struck a careful balance between seeking a substantial transformation of EU governance, while not framing its political message too radically to upset its institutional ties. While the coalition discussed far-reaching implications of its political struggle, it did not veer away from a single-issue focus on EU financial regulation. This ambivalence led to contradictions between the coalition's transformative message and its economically secure middle-class constituency. The EAC can be seen as a hybrid of the two, as it initially developed around the single-issue struggle against housing commodification, but gradually expanded its perspective towards a more multidimensional opposition to neoliberal capitalism. Politicising the social deprivation and exploitation of tenants, indebted homeowners and disenfranchised communities, it also grounded its cooperation increasingly on a foundation of class struggle.

These different political perspectives were mirrored by equally diverse approaches to collective action and to the question of EU reform. Blockupy followed in the footsteps of the GJM's summit protests by organising disruptive events in order to raise public awareness of the impact of austerity in

Southern Europe. Similar to the anti-IMF protests of previous generations, the coalition viewed the EU and its institutions as inherently hostile and directed its actions towards confronting them. It also sought to go beyond previous traditions by trying to establish a common organisational framework for European activists to support future mobilisations. But while Blockupy managed to gain public attention and diffuse radical tactics especially among German activists, it lacked the integrative capacity to expand far across other countries. Change Finance displayed some close parallels to this, despite pursuing a very different strategy. It also harked back to older generations of transnational activism by aiming towards supranational reform, while at the same time trying to expand traditional approaches by coordinating decentralised protests. Although it was efficient at planning transnational campaigns, its focus on EU legislation and financial ties to EU institutions hampered its attraction among local activist communities as well as its ability to experiment with new tactics. The EAC provided a stark contrast to both coalitions by primarily engaging in mutual exchange and capacity building. Instead of trying to mobilise major protests or campaigns out of the gate, it focused on supporting each member's local activism, which allowed it to gradually build a counter-hegemonic identity and horizontal infrastructure comparable to what Blockupy had in mind. The EAC also adopted a more opportunistic approach to EU institutions that neither fully endorsed nor condemned them but instead regarded legislative demands as a tool to strengthen its own profile.

In terms of political effectiveness, both Blockupy and Change Finance lagged behind their own ambitions and did not manage to channel the political momentum of anti-austerity struggles into an effective common strategy for changing the public common sense or transforming the European financial system. Although the EAC's campaigns and protests were less impactful still, the coalition also set more modest objectives for itself, so its comparatively slow political convergence and tactical expansion were more in line with what members expected. On the whole, the three coalitions developed too unevenly to apply any universal measure of success, yet it has become clear that many of the challenges encountered by Blockupy and Change Finance resulted from their lack of transnational integration and embeddedness among Southern European activists – both of which the EAC excelled at, at least in part due to its ability to facilitate decentralised democratic participation.

TRANSNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Since all three coalitions sprang from the anti-austerity movement, they attempted to replicate its signature prefigurative democratic praxis at the transnational level. Their efforts in that regard were again very uneven, mirroring their different political strategies and limitations.

Blockupy's goal of facilitating transnational 'democracy from below' had only minimal success. The coalition managed to organise open democratic assemblies in Germany but had to rely on more specialised representatives for transnational coordination. This resulted in a political detachment between transnational representatives and local activists, preventing Blockupy from developing strong organic links to the communities it sought to integrate. The dominant influence of German members thus continued to reproduce itself and the interests and priorities of non-German participants remained relatively marginalised. Change Finance also suffered from a lack of pan-European integration, albeit for different reasons. Despite being less centralised than its NGO-driven predecessors, it still consisted largely of professionalised and Brussels-centric organisations. Hence, while the coalition did not share the same financial difficulties as Blockupy, it still lacked an organic embeddedness among local activist communities, which hurt its mobilising capacity. Change Finance also never sought to build 'democracy from below' in the first place, which combined with its output-oriented organisational processes made the coalition relatively exclusive to both potential allies and alternative political approaches, ultimately solidifying its detachment from local activism. The EAC did not express an explicit commitment to democratic prefiguration either, but nonetheless managed to develop the most democratically inclusive praxis of all three coalitions. This was in part enabled by the already more pan-European and locally embedded nature of its founders, but the coalition's political praxis played an important role in continuing to facilitate democratic participation. Through regular decentralised and multilingual meetings it was able to closely integrate transnational representatives and local groups and establish a dynamic of horizontal political exchange.

The different experiences of these coalitions show that democratic participation, in addition to the obvious normative significance, has important strategic implications in regard to generating political leverage. Highly active coalitions like Change Finance and Blockupy can certainly achieve discursive victories by influencing (already progressive) political officials and garnering media attention in the European centre, but their lack of integration among European activist communities limits their ability to push for political change or diffuse counter-hegemonic views beyond already politicised constituencies. This demonstrates both the fundamental difficulty of mobilising large-scale protests or campaigns outside the societies they are mainly intended to benefit, as well as the inherent contradiction of developing a centralised strategy for a decentralised social movement. Moreover, Blockupy and Change Finance show us that simply adopting individual prefigurative democratic tactics such as public assemblies and consensus-based decision-making in an otherwise centralised or detached context is not sufficient to extend democratic participation to the transnational level.

The EAC, by contrast, was able to develop a more democratically participatory praxis precisely because it not only replicated the anti-austerity movement's prefigurative tactics but also developed a more decentralised and grassroots-based organisational approach overall. In doing so, it based its transnational praxis directly on the needs and participation of local activist communities, giving it a stronger material and infrastructural foundation. On the other hand, the trade-off for this horizontal approach can be found in the EAC's relative lack of political output and growth, as its scale and tactical repertoire expanded rather slowly and it continues to stay under the public radar. Since these shortcomings are also quite detrimental for exerting political leverage, the EAC's more integrative approach cannot exactly be considered a 'best practice' either. Nevertheless, being able to connect local communities in a way that simultaneously enhances each one's strategic capacities while also contributing to a more unified political vision represents a crucial strategic skill that any progressive coalition – whether between movements, unions or parties – should take inspiration from.

FINAL REFLECTIONS ON TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM

The three coalitions examined in this chapter were not self-contained entities but rather embedded within a larger context of transnational social struggles that is constantly evolving. All of them displayed strong parallels to previous generations of transnational activism, particularly the GJM, not least due to the significant continuity of actors. At the same time, the distinctly European scope of these contemporary cases allowed them to avoid many of the problems encountered by previous, more international coalitions, such as internal socio-cultural divisions and power asymmetries born out of global structural inequalities, according to Bandy and Smith (2005: 232). Being embedded within the same regional social and political context – and being born out of the same movement against austerity – their differences merely reflected divergent political strategies rather than deep ideological or socio-cultural fault-lines. Although there was no direct collaboration between the three coalitions, there was certainly political overlap, not least in the form of critical research institutes like the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, which was attached to all three. Given that the three coalitions' strategies also displayed distinct strengths and weaknesses, this raises the question whether their approaches could be combined in a complementary fashion.

In fact, coalition members themselves often expressed the desire to see a more holistic organisational framework at the European level that could integrate different forms of struggle into an overarching counter-hegemonic strategy (Interventionist Left 2018; ESC 2019). Thus far, however, practical attempts at developing such integrative projects have fallen well short of their ambitions. The Alter Summit of 2013 was intended to forge a European coalition capable of combining strategies for institutional reform, public disruption and mutual solidarity (Alter Summit 2013), but like Blockupy and Change Finance it never managed to develop a critical mass of grassroots supporters and eventually resigned itself to organising occasional public debates in Brussels (Alter Summit 2018). The transnational movement organisation DiEM25, founded in 2016, pursued a similar goal and has been more successful at mobilising large numbers of supporters through decentralised local activism (DiEM25 2019). However, its transition into an electoral project during the 2019 European elections did not meet with any political success outside Greece (Varoufakis 2019), raising doubts about its ability to attract the support of wider activist communities.

These experiences suggest that activists who attempt to pursue different strategies at the European level simultaneously are faced with even more overwhelming capacity requirements than Change Finance, Blockupy and the EAC, which were able to partially avoid such difficulties by being more specialised. The task of expanding a transnational coalition into a more holistic counter-hegemonic project evidently requires both a much more expansive resource foundation and a democratically integrative approach to transnational organising that can incorporate the struggles of subaltern groups on their own terms. The EAC's horizontal and decentralised approach can give us some ideas about how to initiate such a counter-hegemonic process in a way that ensures a stronger degree of democratic participation, but this alone is not enough to actually exert a significant political impact. Large-scale collective action and institutional leverage are needed to expand and consolidate counter-hegemonic gains. To what extent such an all-encompassing strategy can be directly pursued through transnational collaboration, or has to build on cumulative struggles of domestic movements, will depend on the specific situation at hand.

In the case of the anti-austerity movement, most of the struggles were fought domestically against the national fiscal and economic governance measures that were affecting people's material existence. This made the mobilisation of effective transnational action especially difficult, as the members of any of the above coalitions can attest to. However, this is not necessarily the case for other types of activism, which may be less dependent on national governance and country-specific strategies. This raises the possibility that transnational counter-hegemony could find its roots more easily in other social struggles. Indeed, the more recent surge of climate justice activism appears to move more freely across different geographical and institutional scales, as well as shift between tactics of mass mobilisation and parliamentary reform(Bruhns et al., 2019). While the future development of social movement struggles in Europe can only be speculated on, this at least demonstrates that activists continue to seek out new and innovative strategies for transnational cooperation beyond the limitations of their predecessors. If they are able to draw the right conclusions from the experiences of anti-austerity coalitions, we may eventually see new transnational coalitions that bring us a bit closer to the democratic counter-hegemonic project we need.

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NEW GENERATIONS GAINING A VOICE:
ITALIAN AND GERMAN NEW GENERATIONS AGAINST RIGHT-WING POPULIST RHETORIC

VERONICA PASTORINO

11

This chapter focuses on two umbrella organisations representing new Italians and new Germans: *Coordinamento Nazionale Nuove Generazioni Italiane* (CoNNGI, or National Coordination of New Italian Generations) and *Neue Deutsche Organisationen* (ndo, or New German Organisations). The new generations are people with a migratory background who refuse to be seen as outsiders in the national community where they consider themselves indigenous. Starting from an analysis of the reasons why these two similar organisations emerged in two European countries in the same period, I argue that their identity-building process is related to the right-wing populist rhetoric against migrants in general, and in particular the non-acknowledgement of 'second/third generations of migrants' as part of society. One of the main goals of CoNNGI and ndo actors is therefore demonstrating their belonging to the country where they live. To illustrate the dynamics beyond the organisations' identity-building process, I draw on Louis Althusser's interpellation theory, framed within Judith Butler's subjection theory.

*"You might do your utmost to entrap us in your worst past,
but we #are the #future, already #present"*

SiMohamed Kaabour[1]

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to describe the political and social dynamics surrounding the establishment of *Coordinamento Nazionale Nuove Generazioni Italiane* (CoNNGI, or National Coordination of New Italian Generations) and *Neue Deutsche Organisationen* (ndo, or New German Organisations). Both are umbrella organisations: CoNNGI comprises around 30 associations across Italy representing people with a migratory background while ndo is made up of more than 100 German associations of diverse backgrounds united in the battle against racism for the social and political acknowledgement of a diverse and multi-faceted German society.[2]

It should be noted that I use the term 'new generations' to refer not only to people who immigrated as children or young adults but also to those who were born in the country but are still considered outsiders by the anti-immigration rhetoric of the right-wing populist movements and parties because of their name, religion or skin colour. Given that the term 'second generations of migrants' has often been criticised by the people who are the focus of this work, I generally avoid it too (unless quoting). When I refer to the individuals concerned, I use the same terminology they do: 'new generations', 'people with a migratory background', 'people of colour', 'post-migrants', 'new Italians', 'new Germans', and so on.[3]

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1 SiMohamed Kaabour is currently president of CoNNGI and a founding member of Genoa-based association *Nuovi Profili* (New Profiles). This quote (originally in Italian) is from a Facebook post dated 25 September 2018.

2 For a full list of associations, see CoNNGI (2020a) (under "Le Associazioni") and Neue Deutsche Organisationen (2020b).

3 While the principle of self-determination in naming applies to all CoNNGI and ndo actors, the choice of terms is context-dependent and, especially for the ndo network, may vary according to the specific subgroup.

CoNNGI and ndo are innovative not only because of their demands[4] but also because, as national networks of associations, they are able to unite many organisations from different regions of Italy/Germany, thereby bringing the new generations' demands to the attention of multiple local communities. Moreover, by organising online and offline events, CoNNGI and ndo players have the opportunity to engage in discussions with different social actors, including political institutions.

A historical analysis of the context in which CoNNGI and ndo were established is key to understanding the entire theoretical framework of this chapter. Indeed, I argue that the birth of their demands is related to the spread of radical right-wing movements and parties in Italy and Germany and the increase in anti-immigration and anti-minority rhetoric in the media.

The questions I will try to answer here are: What role has Italian and German right-wing rhetoric played in the organisations' identity-building process? Would the groups concerned – who are highly diverse in sociological and cultural terms – have been united under the definition of 'new Italians' or 'new Germans' if they had not been negatively addressed by right-wing anti-immigration rhetoric?

In the first section, I illustrate the political and social contexts in which the Italian and German umbrella organisations are embedded. I analyse how quantitative and qualitative changes in anti-immigration rhetoric enacted by right-wing parties in Italy and Germany played a key role in shaping the reaction of a specific section of the population and in creating the input for the new generations' demands. The second section provides an overview of the historical establishment of the two organisations in order to better frame the differences and similarities between the two, which are then illustrated in the third section. The fourth section focuses on the main goals pursued by CoNNGI and ndo, while the fifth section discusses the importance that the process of naming had in shaping the new generations' demands put forward by CoNNGI and ndo. I frame this process within the Louis Althusser's interpellation theory, itself framed within Judith Butler's perspective on the phenomenon of "subjection". I apply this theoretical framework to the birth of the new generations' demands, illustrating how right-wing anti-immigration

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4   In Germany, for instance, other movements have mobilised to protest against the "white-man ideology", including the Afro-German movements – see Krueger and Sandberg (2018).

rhetoric contributed significantly to shaping the identity-building process of the two networks. I therefore explain why CoNNGI and ndo members felt the need, among other goals, for a re-evaluation of the social name they were given in order to forge a revised social recognition.

I conclude with a discussion on how the spaces created by CoNNGI and ndo can contribute to generating democratic dynamics through their online and offline activities in the public space.

Keywords:
new Italians
new Germans
activism
anti-immigration rhetoric
interpellation theory

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THE POLITICAL CONTEXT
ITALY

Since the year 2000, there has been a significant rise in far-right populist political parties in Europe (Davis / Deole 2017; Lazaridis et al. 2016). In Italy, 2013 proved pivotal in shaping the development of the political scene over the years ahead. In December of that year, Matteo Salvini was elected leader of the *Lega Nord* (Northern League), a right-wing party founded in 1991 combining elements of populism with a regionalist ideology through its demand for the independence of Northern Italy (Albertazzi et al. 2018).

As Laclau (2007) and Mudde (2004) point out, populism is based on the establishment of a frontier that divides society into two opposing groups, inciting those with little status to rebel against those in power.[5] In the case of the *Lega*

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5   This analysis concerns the definition of populism as a style only and not as an ideology (Lazaridis et al. 2016).

Nord, whose leader and spokesperson until 2013 was Umberto Bossi, the elite was identified with Rome, which it blamed for facilitating the growth of southern Italy at the expense of the north. However, after Salvini's election, there was a shift in the party's ideology and regionalism was dropped in favour of nationalist politics (Albertazzi et al. 2018). A new set of "enemies" were therefore identified, namely the European Union – viewed as the new powerful elite to be combated – and migrants (ibid.: 657). While anti-immigration rhetoric was present in the *Lega Nord* during the last years of Bossi's leadership, Salvini's politics radicalised the issue (ibid.: 648) by viewing migrants as a threat to a – presumed – Italian national identity.

In recent years, the dissemination of anti-immigration rhetoric in the media has changed not only qualitatively but, more importantly, quantitatively (Alvares / Dahlgren 2016; Ekman 2019). In Italy, this has been driven not only by a rise in support for the *Lega Nord* outside the northern regions – reflected by the growing use of just the word *Lega* (League) as the party's moniker – as a result of the new nationalist politics promoted by Salvini, but also by an increase in permanent campaigning on social media (Cepernich 2017), via the accounts of both the party and Salvini, whose content has been constantly relayed and discussed by the press and television news (Albertazzi et al. 2018: 651; Combei et al. 2020).
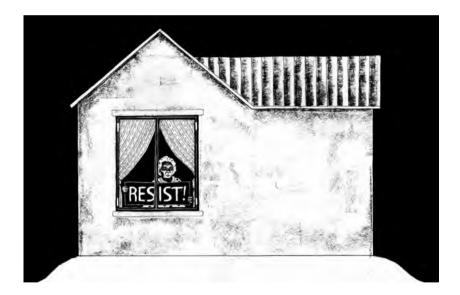
GERMANY

Meanwhile, in Germany, 2010 saw the landmark publication of Thilo Sarrazin's *Deutschland schafft sich ab. Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen* (Germany Abolishes Itself: How We're Putting Our Country in Jeopardy), which garnered a lot of attention from the media[6] and sparked a debate about anti-immigration rhetoric in the public sphere. However, it was not until late 2014 that the xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric found concrete expression in a movement, *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA, or Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident), whose first demonstration took place in Dresden on 20 October of that year.

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6   According to Media Control, Sarrazin's work was Germany's bestselling non-fiction book of 2010 – see GfK Entertainment (2010).

As with Salvini's *Lega*, the media[7] played a central role in the organisation of PEGIDA's demonstrations and in the spread of its anti-minority and xenophobic views (Hagen 2016; Alvares / Dahlgren 2016). In this case too, the reference ideology has populist and nationalist roots in which immigration and the religion of Islam are seen as a threat to a presumed German identity (Halfmann 2016). The othering rhetoric directed specifically towards migrants (Kriesi 2014) led to this group being seen as a "potential threat" to the preservation of an imagined German identity (Anderson 1983) and, consequently, to the fear of "invasion" and "contamination" (Ticktin 2017). However, this rhetoric is challenged when the "others" can no longer be identified outside the community – both physically (outside the national borders) and ideologically (not belonging to the citizens' group). This refers to the children of migrants who are born in their parents' host country or who came to the new country as children or young people.

SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND NON-RECOGNITION

Moreover, although discrimination and structural inequality persist, the so-called 'second and third generations' represent a particular challenge for right-wing populist movements since an increasing number of them have the know-how and often the social positions to make their voices heard. The awareness of having a role that entails a greater opportunity to speak compared with the 'first generations' was a recurrent theme among the CoNNGI and ndo interviewees:[8,9,10] "[…] I really believe this is [a question of] self-understanding. They [i.e. new Germans] can – maybe thanks to one or another position – just be more insolent, more critical, more direct." (Susanna Steinbach,[11] 13 October 2020)

However, the non-acknowledgement of people who, according to the discriminatory claims of the right-wing movements and parties, do not look like 'real' Germans or Italians – even if their families have been living in the country for generations – and the consequent refusal to treat them as an integral

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8   This chapter is based on an ethnography carried out among CoNNGI and ndo members. Given the large number of people operating in the two organisations, I decided to focus mainly on members of CoNNGI's Board and ndo's lead associations. There were two main reasons for this: firstly, those belonging to these entities play a major role in deciding the concrete steps the umbrella organisation should take, and secondly, in the very unstable environment in which associations operate, Board members tend to be those who have been most fully engaged for the longest period, which I thought would be likely to ensure greater continuity and reliability in the data collection.

9   Although the recurrent themes raised by the interviewees helped to identify the major points at stake in the new generations' demands, this research also focused on content from the two organisations' official websites and social media platforms. Clearly, given their large membership, it is important to underline that the views and demands officially promoted by CoNNGI and ndo may not be fully shared by all members of the networks and that demands and/or strategies will inevitably change over time according to changes in the external context as well as in the agenda of members of the Board or lead associations. The aim of this chapter is not to portray CoNNGI and ndo as unitary and homogeneous groups, ignoring the different perspectives within the two networks, but rather to extrapolate and analyse the main points of the rhetoric promoted by CoNNGI and ndo through a thematic analysis of the interviews and of the organisations' official communications in order to identify the common dynamics of their identity-building processes.

10   The semi-structured interviews quoted in this chapter were carried out between December 2017 and April 2021 (interview dates are stated in each case). The interviewees' real names are given unless otherwise specified. The quotes have been translated from the original German or Italian.

11   Susanna Steinbach has been a member of *Türkische Gemeinde in Deutschland* (Turkish Community in Germany, or TGD) – one of ndo's lead associations – since 2015.

part of society were often cited by CoNNGI and ndo interviewees as one of the reasons for the feeling of exclusion experienced by the Italian and German new generations:

[T]he fact that I constantly had to think about being part of the immigration world – a world of police stations and residence permits, and so on – while I felt completely Italian was for me a kind of discrimination […]. For example, if I went out and entered a bar and the bartender asked me 'Where are you from?' and I said 'Bologna', I'd see her look at me sceptically and I perceived this as a form of discrimination. (Ali Tanveer,[12] 28 January 2018)

The same feeling was expressed by a German interviewee: "Our generation shares this feeling of being German but not belonging [...]. You know the language [and] you've been through the whole German school system but you're always confronted with the fact that, basically, a large swathe of society doesn't regard us as German." (Andrea Baum,[13] 6 December 2017)

Despite the ever-increasing presence of people with a migratory background over recent decades, in both Italy and Germany the representation of this group in the public space[14] has remained limited to their role as negative stereotypes (Arghavan et al. 2019; Sniderman et al. 2000) and/or powerless victims (Malkki 1996). The overwhelming presence in the public debate of this limited and distorted role not only helps to perpetuate stereotypes attached to people with migratory backgrounds but also silences the voices of those who detach themselves from the stereotyped roles.

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As Ferda Ataman[15] highlights:

[A]nother goal [is] that we [want to achieve] more visibility for ndo representatives and people of colour. And I say more visibility because there's a lot

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12 Ali Tanveer grew up in Bologna and has been CoNNGI's treasurer since September 2017. He is also a member of Bologna-based association Next Generation Italy.

13 Andrea Baum (not her real name) is a member of one of ndo's lead associations.

14 Public space refers here to social locations (offline and online) whose access is (theoretically) free for all components of society, but whose exact definition changes according to the times and cultural backgrounds (Low / Smith 2006).

15 Ferda Ataman is a journalist, writer, political expert and ndo spokesperson. She was instrumental in establishing the ndo network and remains one of its leading players. In 2009, she also co-founded the NGO *Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen* (New German Media Makers), which aims to represent the plurality of German society through the media.

of talk at the moment about refugees and immigration [...] but it's almost always white Germans who speak about and discuss refugees and diversity in Germany. And that's something we want to make clear: we're here, we want to speak and we have plenty of experts [...], [so] use us! (Ferda Ataman, 20 January 2018)

As will be illustrated here, redefining the social roles of people with a migratory background is central to the existence and activities of both CoNNGI and ndo.

THE HISTORY OF CONNGI AND NDO
CONNGI

The history of CoNNGI began in 2014 when the Directorate General for Immigration and Integration Policy (part of the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (*Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali*) under Matteo Renzi's government[16]) launched a public call through the official ministry web page dedicated to "second generations". The goal of this initiative – called *Filo diretto con le seconde generazioni* (Direct Line with Second Generations) – was to create a space of mutual collaboration between political institutions and Italian associations representing young people with a migratory background. More than 30 associations answered this call and started a period of co-projecting during which they carried out several territorial analyses and shared their needs and experiences at four meetings in Rome[17] and through the creation of a web community. The result was the draft of the first manifesto in 2014 (divided into five main areas of interest: school; work; culture and sport; political participation; and active citizenship). The manifesto was disseminated to all Italian institutions and associations in the field of immigration and integration via social media and at a number of gatherings, including *The Actors of Integration* (*Gli attori dell'integrazione*), a convention attended by the then Minister of Labour and Social Policies, Giuliano Poletti.

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16 Matteo Renzi was at that time Italian Prime Minister and leader of the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, or PD). His government (from February 2014 to December 2016) was part of Italy's 17th legislature.

17 The Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies financed the meetings.

In 2016, 20[18] of the associations that took part in this initiative agreed to go further in building up a stable national network of associations representing young people with a migratory background. Under these circumstances, CoNNGI was established in October 2016 based on a renewed vision of the manifesto. According to the official ministry web page, CoNNGI aimed to "promote a new approach to the politics of inclusion and participation which takes more account of the real needs of the new generations and to forge and consolidate collaboration with institutions and organisations in order to promote a productive exchange between the associations of young people with a migratory background and to represent them unitedly at a national and international level" (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2020). On 13 October 2017, CoNNGI's Board at that time[19] decided to convert CoNNGI from a network of associations into an umbrella organisation.

NDO

The history of ndo's establishment is different from that of CoNNGI, although the substance of their demands and the timing of their creation are similar. Amid the spread of anti-immigration sentiment in the German public debate following the publication of Sarrazin's book in 2010 and the PEGIDA demon-

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18 *Association Maison d'Enfant pour la Culture et l'Education* (A.M.E.C.E.: Children's Home Association for Culture and Education); *Associazione Nuova Generazione Italo-Cinese* (ANGI: Italian-Chinese New Generation Association); *ANOLF Nazionale – Giovani di Seconda Generazione* (National Antenna of the National Association Beyond Borders (ANOLF) – Second-Generation Young People); Arising Africans; *Associazione Multietnica per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo Umano* (Multi-Ethnic Association for Human Development Cooperation); *Associazione Seconde Generazioni Cinesi* (Associna: Association of Second-Generation Chinese); *Cooperativa Sociale Dedalus* (Dedalus Social Cooperative); *El Ihsan*; *Fondazione Mondinsieme* (Mondinsieme (= 'World' + 'Together') Foundation); IParticipate; Isquare: Italian-Ivorian Young Leaders Generation; *L'arca di Noè* (Noah's Ark); *Rete nazionale contro ogni forma di discriminazione* (NEAR: National Network Against Every Form of Discrimination); Next Generation Italy; *Nuovi Profili* (New Profiles); *Porte Aperte* (Open Doors); *QuestaèRoma* (This Is Rome); *Rete Regionale TogethER* (TogethER Regional Network); *Sindacato Emigrati Immigrati UGL* (SEI UGL: Trade Union for Emigrants and Immigrants – General Union of Labour (UGL)); *Unica Terra* (One Earth).

19 Comprising president SiMohamed Kaabour, vice-president Ireneo Spencer, secretary Marwa Mahmoud, vice-secretary Ada Abara, treasurer Ali Tanveer, and two advisers, Assita Krone and Hilda Ramiréz.

strations, a number of associations and activists[20] began to mobilise, and in February 2015 the first ndo congress, entitled *Rethinking Germany* (*Deutschland neu denken*), was organised. From this event, the idea of building a network capable of uniting all the organisations of new Germans and people of colour and presenting an image of Germany opposed to that portrayed by the right-wing rhetoric began to take shape. This is described in an article written by ndo activists themselves (Ataman et al. 2017: 109):

In early 2015, at the height of the PEGIDA debate, 80 organisations from right across Germany came together under the umbrella of [ndo] to exchange ideas. The second national congress in 2016 was attended by 100 organisations, united by experiences of racism and discrimination. Most know the feeling of always being marked as "different" and being a projection of stereotypical ideas. It ranges from the ubiquitous question "Where do you really come from?", through everyday racism that subtly marks migrants as not "belonging", to structural discrimination in the labour and housing markets and in the education system.

Moreover, at this congress a list of 13 points was drafted (Neue Deutsche Organisationen 2020d) and the participants asserted their will to decide for themselves how they wished to be named (people with a migrant background, new Germans, Afro-Germans, etc.) and to be more present in the German public space, which according to them is mainly 'white' and therefore conveys a misleading perception of German society by trying to hide its 'diverse' elements. On this occasion, they also agreed that they needed to organise themselves and to engage in a direct dialogue with political institutions, making them aware of the needs of *all* components of German society – not

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20 The network was largely the brainchild of Ferda Ataman who, with the help of activists such as Karim El-Halaifi, managed to bring together different organisations by drawing on their personal contacts. Today, ndo's lead associations are: *Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen e.V.* (New German Media Makers); *korientation. Netzwerk für Asiatisch-Deutsche Perspektiven e.V.* (korientation. Network for Asian-German Perspectives); *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland e.V.* (Initiative of Black People in Germany); *Schülerpaten Deutschland* (Pupil Mentors Germany); *Each One Teach One (EOTO) e.V.*; Salaam-Schalom Initiative; *DeutschPlus e.V.* (GermanPlus); *Türkische Gemeinde in Deutschland* (TGD: Turkish Community in Germany); and *Deutscher.Soldat e.V.* (German.Soldier).

only the privileged ones. In 2018, the ndo network was officially established as an umbrella organisation.[21]

CONNGI AND NDO: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The first – immediately obvious – similarity between CoNNGI and ndo is the adoption of the word for 'new' in the full names of both groups, which can be translated as National Coordination of *New* Italian Generations, and *New* German Organisations, respectively.[22] The interviews identified some of the main meanings that the term 'new Italians' or 'new Germans' had for members of the boards and lead associations.[23] Indeed, the term is not always used as a synonym of 'second generations': it can sometimes include anybody who shares the same ideas and goals pursued by the organisations. Moreover, as Susanna Steinbach emphasises, the name does not always relate to the generations we are talking about: "This isn't necessarily a generation issue. So I think you can't say that they are the second, the third [or] the fourth [generation] […]. Because they [i.e. the new generations] would say: first of all, I'm German and then there are these issues [anti-racism and anti-discrimination] I'd like to get involved in." (Susanna Steinbach, 13 October 2020)

However, this choice does not mean that the individuals concerned are denying their connection to their parents' culture or language. On the contrary, they often underline their dual cultural background, highlighting it as something that enriches their being Italians/Germans and not as something that prevents them from being wholly part of the Italian/German community.

The second element that CoNNGI and ndo have in common is their structure as national umbrella organisations. The decision to come together in a network of associations operating at a national level was not only significant for the social acknowledgement of the two groups by the Italian/German community

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21 Until March 2019, ndo's activities were formally handled by the organisation *Neue deutsche Medienmacher*innen e.V.* – see Neue Deutsche Organisationen (2020c).

22 The italicisation here has been added for emphasis.

23 Especially among the wider ndo network, some want to preserve the term 'second generation' because they feel that by abandoning it they also abandon the bond that they have with their parents' culture and homeland. Moreover, since one of the goals of ndo is to be as inclusive as possible in order to build a network where all discriminated groups can find a place, the emphasis on the self-definition as 'new Germans' or 'post-migrants' was left looser than in CoNNGI.

but, as will be shown later, it also helped to strengthen the development of the new generations' demands within the groups themselves.

The interviewees broadly identified three key reasons for the decision to become a national network of associations. Firstly, the nationwide reach of CoNNGI and ndo is consistent with the political message they promote, namely that Italian/German people with migratory backgrounds are present in – and part of – the national community as a whole. Secondly, CoNNGI and ndo act as a funnel by channelling the needs, statements and requests of their membership and bringing them to the attention of political institutions. And thirdly, they can bring together a broader range of expertise and lend more strength to the entire 'new generations' rhetoric. As Ali Tanveer from CoNNGI points out:

Through CoNNGI I've realised how much potential we really have and also that we have to make the most of it, not hide it! That's the reason why I wanted to take part in this experience, which I consider formative from a personal perspective as well, in that it has put me in contact with so many people, institutions [and] realities... and to think that [...] I've had all this experience is a source of pride for me, mainly because I've made the most of my difference. (Ali Tanveer, 28 January 2018)

Finally, another reason why the interviewees consider a network of associations to be a suitable format is the fact that the member associations can bring CoNNGI and ndo's demands to the regions, cities and neighbourhoods in which these organisations operate, allowing the new generations' voice to reach a wide audience. This aspect was particularly apparent in the interviews with CoNNGI Board members, such as Ali Tanveer:

We've always said we have two goals: one, which we could call political […], is to go in and speak about the new generations in person in all institutions where we are invited by 'insiders', but – [and this is] the other goal – we have to do a lot of work on the ground and to do a lot of work in those situations where this encounter happens and to facilitate it.

Despite the similarities, the two networks operate differently in how they manage their voice within the virtual and physical public space. From the outset, CoNNGI's structure and focus has been more on redefining the identity-building process among new generations. Conversely, ndo, especially at the beginning, was mostly geared towards uniting as many people as possible in order to make the different minorities' groups heard. For this reason, they

decided to keep the more flexible form of a network of associations for longer than CoNNGI. This aspect can be partially explained as a consequence of the historical background of the two umbrella organisations: while ndo was born as a movement organised by individuals outside of Germany's high-level political institutions, CoNNGI was established out of direct dialogue with certain Italian political institutions and therefore felt the need – and had the opportunity – for a more defined official structure from the start.

THE GOALS OF CONNGI AND NDO

The principal goal of CoNNGI and ndo is to give new Italians and Germans a louder voice and ensure that they can be heard by the community they are living in but also be acknowledged by it with the role and identity they have chosen for themselves: "CoNNGI's aim [is] to represent [and] be an intermediary for the new generations [and] also to act as a sounding board for their local, regional and national demands." (SiMohamed Kaabour, 30 April 2021)

To achieve this goal, CoNNGI and ndo seek to forge relationships outside the group: "[W]e actually try [to make contacts], and our office also engages extensively with members of the *Bundestag* [i.e. the German federal parliament]: we've written to all of them saying 'We are here now'."[24] (Ferda Ataman, 20 January 2018) In addition, they strengthen ties within their group by organising and participating in various online and offline meetings, including the annual congress.[25] The opportunity to gather and meet other new generations is an important empowering moment for the network itself:

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I believe that what we're trying to do is capacity building: […] we're trying to strengthen those organisations that want to participate in [the ndo network] so that they can be political actors, so that they know they aren't alone out there. I think that's such an empowerment moment. When I come to the national congress and I [see] some organisation from far away, I say […] 'There's so much potential here!' (Susanna Steinbach, 13 October 2020)

As stressed by Charles Taylor (1994: 25), identities are always socially dependent and individuals need to be recognised by other social actors in

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24 See, for example, Ataman's speech at the Integration Summit on 13 June 2018 in the presence of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and the discussion it generated (Neue Deutsche Organisationen 2018).

25 See CoNNGI (2020a), CoNNGI (2020b), Neue Deutsche Organisationen (2020a) and Neue Deutsche Organisationen (2020e).

order to give full existence to their social role: non-recognition, often perpetrated on minorities, can thus be understood as a means of oppression:[26]

> The demand for recognition in these latter cases is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being. The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

Therefore, in the creation and reconfirmation of an identity construction, social acknowledgement plays an important part. In this sense, the role of CoNNGI and ndo in bringing together different groups and associations under a single umbrella with unified goals reveals its importance in the process of recognition[27] for two reasons: firstly, because the more people they involve, the stronger the political weight they can acquire; and secondly, their structure allows them to be officially recognised by the political institutions and develop an official dialogue with them, thereby enhancing their social authority.

As noted above, CoNNGI and ndo have different connections with political institutions, CoNNGI's interface being closer and more structured than that of ndo. However, an analysis of both groups reveals a common necessity to engage in dialogue, not least because CoNNGI and ndo want their political statements to be heard and legally pursued. Also, they want their existence as a group to be acknowledged by official political institutions as much as possible, in order to be considered as reference points. When interviewees were asked if close ties with political institutions were seen more as a hindrance or an opportunity,

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26 According to the works of Laclau and Mouffe, the hegemonic construction of a predominant discourse formation in society inevitably involves some elements of repression and the "negation of alternative meanings and options and the negation of those people who identify themselves with these meanings and options. The negation of identity tends to give rise to *social antagonism*" (Torfing 1999: 120) (italics in the original).

27 Clearly this process of identity construction not only applies to acknowledgement by people outside the community but also plays a key role for people within it, in their continuously constructed and reconstructed identity process.
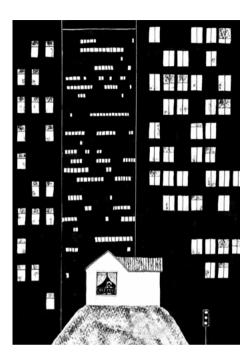
the responses varied, but can be roughly divided into two groups. On the one hand, some individuals (mostly from the CoNNGI group) considered it a positive opportunity that could help them to reach their goals:

I think that [one of] CoNNGI's strengths is [the fact that] it is legitimised so much by the political institutions. [Being] recognisable and recognised in this way by the institutions enhances [CoNNGI's] credibility […]. And we know that at national level, there's a whole ocean of entities [and] associations… that we would be lost in that ocean and never have the opportunity to enjoy, in a certain sense, privileged, direct and immediate contact with political institutions we want to reach if we'd been established entirely remote from them. Therefore, I consider it a strength, although I also realise that, viewed from outside, […] this proximity to institutions can be seen as negative. But after all, if one of our objectives is to have a say and to decide together with the institutions on policies governing various national areas, we absolutely must be in direct contact with the institutions. (Marwa Mahmoud,[28] 13 April 2018)

On the other hand, some individuals (mostly from the ndo group) stressed the risk of limitation potentially associated with a too-close relationship with political institutions, although they still considered dialogue with the institutions and being taken into consideration by them as integral to their status as a recognised group:

I think it's very important to always be an independent opposition […] because once you're inside [the political institutions], you can't criticise, provoke and so on as strongly as from the outside. And we want to provoke, to irritate and to criticise. [...] But of course [...] crucially we [i.e. ndo] already have people doing work in the ministries and crucially we try to engage a lot with everybody, inviting them to our events, sending them our reports [...]. But I think that both elements are important: [being] an opposition and at the same time establishing a lot of good contacts [with] the institutions. (Ferda Ataman, 20 January 2018)

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28 Marwa Mahmoud is a city councillor in Reggio Emilia and was secretary of CoNNGI until 2019. She is also active in the city's *Mondinsieme* intercultural centre.

THE INTERPELLATION THEORY
AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW GROUP

The main argument of this chapter is that the demands of CoNNGI and ndo arose as a reaction[29] to the growing presence on social media of right-wing racist and xenophobic rhetoric whose ideology denies recognition to a category of people – in this case, migrants and so-called 'second/third generations' – as part of Italian/German society.

While I am aware of the complex web of actors involved in anti-immigration rhetoric in recent years, I decided to focus on the growing significance of one of those actors, namely right-wing populist parties and movements in Germany and Italy, for two reasons. Firstly, over the last few decades, anti-immigration parties have played a key role in channelling anti-immigration sentiment and

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29 Although CoNNGI emerged from an initiative of the Directorate General for Immigration and Integration Policy, the substance of its demands as well as the identity-building process that led the participants to adopt the label of 'new generations' were driven by the members of CoNNGI themselves.

influencing the public debate (Ekman 2019) as well as in the positioning of other parties (Alvares / Dahlgren 2016; Han 2021). Secondly, at the physical and virtual meetings organised by CoNNGI and ndo as well as during the interviews, this particular group of parties and movements have often been cast in the role of the "others" (Remotti 2010) from whose vision they wanted to detach themselves.

Ferda Ataman, a key player in the establishment of ndo, describes the situation in Germany as follows:

And then that book *Germany Abolishes Itself* came out […] and this debate [about the book] highlighted how fertile the ground was for right-wing populism, anti-Muslim [sentiment and] racists in Germany. […] There were also other people [...] founding a host of organisations. And my idea was to organise a congress where we could all see what these NGOs had in common. […] And in 2015 there was the *Charlie Hebdo* affair and of course the anti-Islamic movements gained strength, and then there was that PEGIDA demonstration, a precursor of Alternative for Germany (AfD).[30] In that period, we[31] came together and attracted a lot of media attention because of our slogan 'We're part of the population too'. (Ferda Ataman, 20 January 2018)

The same feeling seems to have arisen among the Italian protagonists. As CoNNGI president SiMohamed Kaabour underscores: "I can continue to attest to the fact that I'm an exception to the rule… to the stereotyped rule[32] […]. But the truth is that we have to convince people not to be surprised any more. […] Those who have the right attitude and a view of Italy as a country of solidarity have to speak up […] to curb […] the shamelessness that some people[33] have increasingly made a virtue of."[34]

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30 Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, or AfD) is a far-right party established in 2013.

31 In other words, the associations of 'second/third generations of migrants' that organised the first meeting.

32 In other words, the negative stereotype of the 'foreigner' present in society.

33 Those who join right-wing parties and movements that advocate a politics of hate contrary to the fundamental human rights enshrined in the Italian Constitution.

34 From a speech given by Kaabour at the "Strange Heroes" (*Strani Eroi*) event at the International Anti-Racist Meeting (*Meeting Internazionale Antirazzista*, or MIA) in Cecina Mare, near Livorno, on 15 September 2018.

The repeated references made by CoNNGI and ndo members to the right-wing parties' claims highlights how galvanised they felt by the exclusionist discourse at the core of the right-wing populist propaganda (Mudde 2007; Muis / Immerzeel 2017). This discourse negatively addresses people with a migratory background, considering them as "others" (Remotti 2010), in its efforts to consolidate a – presumed – Italian/German identity. While the spread of anti-immigration rhetoric helped attach a negative connotation to the term 'second generations of migrants' the very use of a label that differentiates a group of people because of their own, or their families', immigration history, whether true or perceived, in order to stress *de facto* that group's non-belonging to the community, was perceived by the future members of CoNNGI and ndo as discriminatory.

Consequently, many CoNNGI or ndo members consider that the label "second generations"[35] does not fully represent their social role and hence feel the need to distance themselves from this term. This feeling often emerged in the interviews, especially among the CoNNGI actors:

We engaged in a kind of linguistic re-education, among other things […] we started asking ourselves: second to who? Second to nobody! We face a situation where we constantly have to prove that we're at the same level as other, 'native' Italians, and we always have to give more, as if to justify ourselves. But in reality we aren't second to anybody because we've been through the same schooling, had the same emotional experiences, we've spent our whole lives in Italy, so we may have a dual cultural background […] but that doesn't mean we're different. (Hilda Ramiréz,[36] 24 April 2018)

Moreover, the term highlights the need to be representative of a bigger part of society: "[…] I really believe very strongly [...] that we need a loud voice, we

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35 The terminology that distinguishes between first and second generations of migrants – originating in the Chicago school of sociology – has always been problematic within social studies because of the lack of clarity over the category it refers to. The term 'second generations' poses particular difficulty since it can include people who have immigrated as children or teenagers, or even people born in the country to immigrant parents. In his attempt to clarify this category, Rumbaut (2004) identified the different types of "second generations" according to the ages at which they migrated to the territory they live in, using the classifications G2, G1.75, G1.5 and G1.25. However, the appropriateness of this definition is still debated, and it proved to be a key trigger for discussion among CoNNGI and ndo members.

36 Hilda Ramiréz was an adviser on CoNNGI's Board until 2020, and is a member of *Associazione Multietnica* (Multi-Ethnic Association) in Genoa.

need a voice that speaks for new Germans and not only for migrant organisa-
tions." (Susanna Steinbach, 13 October 2020) This is echoed by Ferda Ataman
in her book *Ich bin von hier. Hört auf zu fragen!* (I'm From Here. Stop Asking!)
(Ataman 2019: 19):

We have called ourselves "New Germans" because we want to make
clear that (1) we are from here; (2) our associations are not associations
for foreigners – they are German associations; (3) issues like racism, equal
opportunities and education are not migrant issues, but German issues.

INTERPELLATION AND SUBJECTION

In my analysis of the process that brought many of the people involved in
CoNNGI and ndo to modify the restrictive – and often negatively perceived –
label of 'second/third generation of migrants', I would like to draw on Judith
Butler's subjection theory (Butler 1997a). According to Butler, individuals, once
they assume a certain social role, are both enabled to exist in the social context
and limited by the constraints this social role brings with it. In analysing this
process, which she terms "subjection", Butler highlights the importance of
language and terminology in shaping these constraints, making reference to
Louis Althusser's interpellation theory (Althusser 2001). "Interpellation" is
what Althusser calls the process of naming – and hence conferring a certain
identity – which an ideology[37] imposes on individuals who, consequently, find
themselves constrained by the limits of their role.[38]

Althusser's theory has been criticised for being, among other things, too
deterministic in describing the role of the ideological structure in determining
the process that leads a subject into existence (Torfing 1999). I therefore intro-
duce the works of Judith Butler (1997a; 1997b) to illustrate the process that

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37 Althusser identifies in the control of the ideological state apparatus (education system,
    mass media and legal-political authorities) the tools through which the ruling class imposes
    its ideology on minorities. His theories have been criticised for an excessive determinism
    of the role of the structure in comparison with individuals' agency (Torfing 1999).

38 It is only through the naming process that a person comes into social existence: in
    fact, as Butler underlines, every person is "already a subject", even before his/her birth
    since he/she is "already interpellated" (to use Althusser's term) by other subjects who
    create social expectations around that future individual (Butler 1997a).

led the members[39] of CoNNGI and ndo to an awareness of the limitations of being described by the term 'second generation of migrants'. Initially, many of them accepted the label 'second/third generations of migrants' as simply descriptive of their social role. However, the CoNNGI interviewees in particular often stressed how they gradually came to recognise the negative meaning attached to this term and hence started to fight for a renaming process.

Some quotes from CoNNGI actors illustrate this:

[T]he term 'new Italian generations' was adopted more as a counter-response, i.e. in the sense that we don't want to be called 'second generations' because we don't feel second to anybody and that's why the term 'new' is used. [...] I think that in the end 'second generations' is not in itself an incorrect term [...] but [...] the Italian context has loaded it with attributes and connotations that have led us to reject it. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been problematic for me. (Ada Kara,[40] 19 March 2018)

The expression 'new generations' is one I've always used to counter the term 'second generations'. [...] to get to talk about Italian citizens, to move to this next lexical level, which in turn is also an expression of a cultural level, we have to give ourselves new names that can help the society which we were born into and/or grew up in to accept this sociocultural transformation. (SiMohamed Kaabour, 9 July 2018)

Ferda Ataman (2019: 13) makes a similar point:

Simply asking somebody who is presumed to be a migrant about his or her origin obviously does not make you a racist. But if you assume that people who speak perfect German come from somewhere else just because of their name or appearance, your image of what it means to be German is defined by origin. The question points to a major distortion of perception in a country of immigration: for many people, only those who are descended from Germans are German.

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39 This refers in particular to the CoNNGI and ndo members I interviewed and observed throughout the fieldwork. While I am aware that it is not possible to speak for all the people involved in the two umbrella organisations, I still find the generalisation of this explication theory useful as a way of gaining a general understanding of this particular phenomenon.

40 Not her real name.

As I argued above, the realisation by CoNNGI and ndo members that they were being relegated to the role of 'outsiders' – even through the use of a label such as 'second generations of migrants' – and their subsequent refusal of this status was influenced by the rise of right-wing populist and anti-immigration rhetoric in recent years. The issue here is understanding the particular moment at which the individuals felt targeted by anti-immigration rhetoric to such an extent that they could not avoid recognising themselves in the (negative) role attributed to migrants and 'second-generation migrants' and questioning themselves about the implications of such a role.

PARADOXICAL EFFECT

If we translate this process in terms of Althusser's interpellation theory, the individuals, once named, cannot avoid acknowledging themselves as such (Althusser 2001). The issue here is the fact that the individuals assume not only the name but also the characteristics attached to that name. In this case, the negative connotations that the term 'second/third generations of migrants' has increasingly acquired – concurrently with the strengthening of anti-minority and anti-immigration rhetoric pedalled by right-wing movements and parties in Italy and Germany – ended up generating two knock-on effects. Firstly, by focusing on rhetoric against this category of individuals and naming them as one homogenous whole, the right-wing movements and parties helped to make this heterogeneous group feel as though they belonged to the same category. Secondly, by attaching a negative meaning to the category, the rhetoric of the right-wing movements became one of the main points underpinning the existence of CoNNGI and ndo and, *de facto*, their cohesion. The paradox here is that the extremism of these movements has been one of the main drivers empowering the very groups they sought to 'eliminate'.

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Many CoNNGI and ndo members therefore started to question the implications of this injurious naming in terms of the perception of their social role, initiating a process of reformulation through a counternarrative that involved, among other things, the development of alternative labels such as 'post-migrants', 'new generations', 'new Italians' and 'new Germans'.

Judith Butler, recalling Foucault, illustrates how the resistance to power places itself in the process of being repeatedly produced (Butler 1997a: 93) and it is this possibility of repetition – and hence re-signifying – of the process of

naming that enables a change (if only a slight one) in the power dynamics between those who name and those who are named. As highlighted in *Excitable Speech* (Butler 1997b), those who are named can do language too. Obviously, it is not possible to conceive of existence without power implications but it is possible to try to change the kind of power relationship one is directly involved in (ibid.: 14).

Through their activities and demands,[41] the members of CoNNGI and ndo are seeking to have a voice in the public debate concerning them as well as to be acknowledged in their chosen role. As has been illustrated, only by establishing national structures such as CoNNGI and ndo were they able to act as a funnel and amplify individuals' voices by securing a social recognition that the individuals themselves would have found it difficult to attain.

CONNGI AND NDO: GENERATING DEMOCRATIC SPACES

As has been underlined throughout the chapter, the quest for representation is the goal of the majority of CoNNGI and ndo's activities. Through their demands, CoNNGI and ndo members have decided to appropriate the public debate about themselves and make themselves 'visible' within the social role they consider appropriate. They therefore organise activities not only for their own members but also for the wider community, the aim being to reach out to as much of society as possible in order to have their role (and hence their existence) acknowledged (Taylor 1994).

In order to achieve this objective, CoNNGI and ndo's boards and associations engage with political institutions as well as other social organisations at a national, local and even international level and aim to be present as much as possible in the public space, organising debates and round tables both virtually (via social media) and physically (through events such as the annual congress). In this case, the virtual and non-virtual worlds are so embedded in each other (Garcia et al. 2009) that it is meaningless to analyse them separately. The former forges links in the latter, bringing together realities that otherwise would remain disconnected and hence would not have the power they acquire by joining forces. Meanwhile, the non-virtual gives concrete form to the virtual,

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41 Achieving these goals involves not only name-changing but also making their presence felt in the public realm, participating at round tables and congresses, and opening a dialogue with political institutions.

which otherwise would not have the strength to engage in a debate with political institutions nor to approach certain social groups that are hard to reach online.

Aside from the renaming process discussed above, the activities of CoNNGI and ndo can be seen as examples of the counter-speech acts that Butler (1997b) identifies as responsible for the shift from being subjected to the role definition imposed by others to reshaping the discourse in one's own terms. In this perspective, the public space, both physical and virtual (Dahlgren 2013), plays a key role since it enables CoNNGI and ndo to interact with different social groups. In describing this process, reference can usefully be made to Hannah Arendt's works on the public space (1998, 2005), which she defines not only as a means of control by the state's system of domination but also as something that can (and should) generate the possibility for spontaneous political actions. For Arendt, the diverse plurality of actors present in the public space is always a "space-making plurality" (Dikeç 2012: 671): by acting and speaking in the presence of others, people create a political realm where issues of public concern can be debated and reshaped.

Since democracy is often understood as dependent on the participation of the *demos* in the public space (Parkinson 2012), I argue that CoNNGI and ndo, by organising moments of exchange in the physical and virtual public space, are potentially able to generate participatory opportunities for encounter[42] and debate among different social groups.

As I have illustrated previously, both the umbrella organisations constantly endeavour to deconstruct the rhetoric portraying people with a migratory background as outsiders. To this end, the activities of CoNNGI and ndo are not limited to showing the presence of minorities' groups within the social and political realms, but they also engage with different social groups by explaining the reasons for their perspective, producing a space in which their narrative and presence can be acknowledged. Through these encounters, the members of CoNNGI and ndo shape and reinforce their role by making their perspective recognised and, to some extent (especially towards other

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42   For a more detailed understanding of the complexity and limits of the role of encounters in public space in redefining/challenging the conception of bodies, borders and difference, see Ahmed (2000), Callon and Law (2004) and Brown (2012).

Italian/German communities of migrants, migration researchers and some left-wing local and national institutions), taking control of the rhetoric about themselves by giving their own version. As stated in the article written by some of ndo's main actors: "A robust democracy needs civil society engagement and veto players. It needs committed actors who ruffle feathers and, if necessary, creatively disrupt within the framework of human rights principles." (Ataman et al. 2017: 109)

CONCLUSION

This chapter has aimed to analyse the establishment dynamics of two umbrella organisations, the Italian CoNNGI and the German ndo. In particular, I have focused on the role played by the anti-immigration Italian and German right wing's rhetoric in the identity-building process of the two organisations. I started with the following questions: What role has Italian and German right-wing rhetoric played in the organisations' identity-building process? Would the groups concerned – who are highly diverse in sociological and cultural terms – have been united under the definition of 'new Italians' or 'new Germans' if they had not been negatively addressed by right-wing anti-immigration rhetoric?

I highlighted how recent years have seen an increase in right-wing populist rhetoric against migrants and 'second/third generations' in the media. In both Italy and Germany, there was a seminal moment that triggered the proliferation of such language on social media, namely the rise of Matteo Salvini in Italy and the publication of Thilo Sarrazin's book in Germany. I went on to illustrate the interviewees' perspectives and feelings about this and their reactions against that part of society that does not acknowledge them as fully-fledged Italians/Germans because of their name, their religion or the colour of their skin.

In order to frame the name-changing process within CoNNGI and ndo, I drew on Louis Althusser's interpellation theory together with the subjection theory advanced by Judith Butler. I highlighted how the spread of anti-immigration rhetoric promoted by right-wing populist parties and movements and its reverberations on social media consistently contributed to making the attacked group react against it.

Finally, I described the role of both CoNNGI and ndo in creating spaces of encounter between different social groups, in which dialogue can form

possible means of democratisation. In recent years, representative democracy in Germany and Italy has often failed in managing the gap between voters and institutions, leaving space for the rise of right-wing populist movements and parties.

I would like to conclude by reflecting on whether umbrella organisations such as CoNNGI and ndo could represent a valid alternative by acting as intermediaries between political institutions and the needs of an increasingly diverse society. While it may be too soon to say whether CoNNGI and ndo have succeeded in achieving their goals, I certainly consider these two organisations as potentially able to create opportunities and spaces through which they can renegotiate their social role and initiate a process of recognition. As previously illustrated, their structure as umbrella organisations plays a key role in creating room for both local and national acknowledgement. However, this aspect could also lead to a discrepancy between the message at the level of CoNNGI and ndo's boards and that conveyed locally by their individual member associations. In this case, implementing coordinated local projects could certainly help the networks to increase their impact at a local level too.

Notwithstanding all this, I think that the activities of CoNNGI and ndo can be seen not only as enabling greater representation of the minorities in the public space but also, in their attempt to be present in an ever-increasing number of different virtual and physical public spaces, as an example of that very process of democratisation already under way.

"We're here,
we want to speak."

Ferda Ataman, 20 January 2018

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V

DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION: ROAD AHEAD

FUTURE?
WHAT FUTURE?

JENNIFER PETZEN
KORAY YILMAZ-GÜNAY
CHRISTOPHER SWEETAPPLE

12

The once limitless optimism regarding liberal democracy has waned considerably: the rule of law and citizens' expectation of order, the pluralist principles of secularism and multiculturalism, the prosperity of an efficient capitalist economy and, last but not least, impending ecological doom add to the prevailing uncertainties. It is unsurprising that with the notion of the 'political', the majority of institutional, organisational, bureaucratic entities commonly meant the left's struggle to articulate a viable vision of the future of liberal democracy. The failure of leftist politics to respond to noxious colour lines is the driving force behind this essay. We write from an activist perspective after many years engaging in intersectional anti-racist work in political parties, trade unions, NGOs and grassroots initiatives. Viewed from this angle, the 'left' is at best an insecure home and at worst a source of menace for political anti-racism. European leftists tend to consolidate white domination in their reflexive attitude to their ostensible origins, namely the Northern and Western European workers' movement and its specific reification as a cultural value to the exclusion of other histories of repression and domination, including racialised, gendered, affective and reproductive labour. Thus, we find it imperative to focus above all on these complex intersections of class relations, race, gender, sexuality and ability as racial capitalism's fundamental dynamics, yielding stark lessons for the ways in which social movements critique these dynamics as contradictions of the promises of liberal democracy. After all, anti-racism is, while liberal democracy is not, one of the key guiding frameworks for global politics.

INTRODUCTION

The reader might find it instructive to learn here of a critique by the editors of this volume before reaching the vortex of the article. (This critique was extremely important for us and so we thought that the crux of the matter should be given a prominent place here.) The question was this: why does the text start and end with a critique of the left, yet the middle is more of a critique of the mainstream? The answer has to do with the anger directed at various nodules of power and how they are related to each other. We see the problems of the left as inherently related to the problems of the centre/mainstream. It is precisely the left's tacit support for the mainstream that produces the pain and frustration that was the primary motivation for our writing. Perhaps we were not clear enough in making these connections. In the rewrite we tried to deal with this issue in terms of the structure of the paper, but we are not completely sure how effectively we managed to articulate these complex connections and how the paper will be interpreted. So let us be explicit: for us the left and the centre are clearly and inexorably related.

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1   See El Kaisy Friemuth et al. (2020: 29).

2   From one of her tracks, Anderson (2010).

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY:
IN CRISIS FROM THE VERY START

Ah, the overwrought pairing of liberal democracy and crisis! Far from mere cliché, for centuries, great minds and dogged collectivities have been animated by sincere desires to alleviate upheavals seemingly delivered and/or exacerbated by the immense political armature and bureaucracy referred to by the term 'liberal democracy'. It is all too easy for us to forget that this was the name given to a kind of ideal or horizon towards which emancipated societies were thought to inherently gravitate. This ideal or horizon was understood in the Enlightenment idiom as being prodded and delimited by the wildly successful developments in the empirical sciences, with this being demonstrated in practical domains such as medicine and engineering. And oh, how those horizons have progressed! From colony to metropole and back, as so many humans gradually became citizens and then voters, the global imaginary of freedom took on the oversaturated tint of liberal democracy, even as interminable crises crescendoed into two world wars.

Liberal democracy still held sway with a cadre of true believers well into the 20th century, especially in Old and then New Europe, but the limitless optimism fuelling its global dominance has waned considerably. Indeed, the pall of crisis has enveloped the entire conceptual family of liberal democracy: the civilian state of the fully enfranchised *demos*, the rule of law and citizens' expectation of order, the pluralist principles of secularism and multiculturalism, and the prosperity of an efficient capitalist economy. Impending ecological doom only adds velocity and torque to this flood of uncertainties.

Political leaders know that the current system is breaking down and that the next crisis inexorably hurtling toward us provides another nail in its coffin. Rather than acknowledging that late capitalism is failing, they seek short-term solutions to prop up the system that benefits them and their cronies for as long as it lasts. *Après moi, le déluge*.

With eyes focused so intently on all these related crises, it is unsurprising that the majority of institutional, organisational, bureaucratic entities commonly meant with the notion of the political 'left' – i.e. legacy political parties, foundations, NGOs, activist groups, and politicians – also struggle to articulate a viable vision of the future of liberal democracy beyond the exhausting inertia of the maintenance of the status quo and zealous faith commanded at priestly behest.

As writers and activists, we jointly share a lifetime's preoccupation with a politics which calls itself anti-racist. Thus, in the essay that follows, we home in on the theme of racism and anti-racist politics, drawing on our extensive experiences as researchers, writers, activists and, more recently, paid employees of the political-industrial complex. Viewed from the angle of our expertise in political anti-racism, the question of the current crisis of liberal democracy, baldly formulated like this, strikes us as an impertinence, almost an obscenity. The Mediterranean, for instance, has for some time now been turned into a racialised mass grave, and how do you talk about the future of a persistent grave of this type?

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THE PROBLEM OF THE LEFT

In this essay, we assess the crisis of liberal democracy from an anti-racist perspective and articulate a critique of the leftist establishment, if we can call it that, in northern Europe. As touched on at the beginning of the article, the repeated failure of leftist politics to respond to noxious colour lines drives our assessment.

Our methodology is not a comprehensive sociological survey of racism/white supremacy in leftist political institutions in Europe. Rather, it is an essay from an activist perspective, written on the basis of years of experience of doing intersectional anti-racist work in political parties or trade unions and with NGOs, grassroots initiatives, and so on. Although we write mainly based on our experiences in Germany, we know from transnational networks that our observations are not simply local aberrations but rather a striking pattern that

can be seen throughout the Global North – a perhaps unsurprising observation, as the Global North was and is the geographical fulcrum of white supremacy.

From the angle of anti-racism, the left can be uncontroversially claimed to be at best an insecure home and at worst a source of menace for political anti-racism. Racism, after all, is structural, as sociologists and journalists and street activists all insisted again during the global outcry following the murder of George Floyd, a Black man killed by the police in the United States in 2020. The left is also made up of structures: organisations, institutions, rules and norms, and parties and states. It is only out of ignorance or mendacity that one could assert that the left is somehow purified or innocent of the contagion of racism. However, even we are not immune to the hope aroused by the history of utopian and liberation politics.

DEFINING THE LEFT AND THE CONUNDRUM OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND ANTI-RACIST ACTION

In this text we use 'leftist', 'left-wing' and 'progressive' to describe organisations and grassroots initiatives, including trade unions, political parties and NGOs, that consider themselves left of centre. Our critique homes in on what we see as a defining, indeed fatal, feature of, in short, the left throughout Europe, at all scales: the whiteness of its composition, which, we hope to show, has led – and can only ever lead – to an interminable state of white domination. As a semi-coherent system of ideological and cultural practices, ongoing white supremacy by definition limits the life chances and lives of racially marginalised groups, be they indigenous, long-residing groups like Roma in many European countries, or non-white immigrants or Muslims. In our view, implicit and explicit white supremacy, which finds a safe haven in left-wing parties, NGOs, trade unions and social movements, is the key obstacle hindering the gains the left had sought to achieve. Addressing and eradicating its nefarious effects looks like being the only way towards recuperating and building leftist political meaning and force. Otherwise, present-day white leftist politics will be made irrelevant.

Anti-racism is, while liberal democracy is not, one of the cardinal guiding frameworks for global politics, no matter the old guard's dug-in heels or the myriad poisoned structures which make up the left. In the current dispensation, liberal democracy is less of a skeleton key capable of unlocking more freedom for more

people; rather, it is more an affliction not unlike an addictive compulsion. Here, queer theorist Lauren Berlant's concept "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) seems apt: following this rationale, "liberal democracy" refers to the fantasy complex which both postulates and thwarts flourishing. On the burning issue of anti-racism and the left, the "wing-and-a-prayer" investment in liberal democracy tethers us to a future which is neither liberal nor democratic.

In this chapter we hope to show a shift in perspective that provides an antidote to the kid-glove inquisition of liberal democracy which always seems to exonerate it of culpability in the very crises it purportedly faces. The widespread condition of white supremacy and white domination, as both material as well as ideological phenomena (that is, as *structural phenomena*), is quite instructive. With regard to the left as it currently stands, in its myriad components, regnant white domination is the resting state, the inhering present tense. Leftist organisations have been, and remain, constituted by liberal principles of procedure and rule, and they have not – and, we will argue, cannot – correct the ensconced myopias and reproductive efficacy of white domination. They cannot and will not be able to distinguish the forest from the trees, nor can they make good on the cultural and political diversity within their own ranks. White principles yield only white principals.

Anti-racist politics, in all its diverse varieties and histories, is firmly rooted in the left; however, as we mentioned, this is more strategic than intuitive. The vestigial white domination of the left has been overshadowed as a problem in its own right by resurgent ethno-nationalisms and continent-wide authoritarian, racist and pro-securitisation parties which continue to grow. These forces have, for some time, been racking up one electoral victory after another. Meanwhile, left-wing organisations like trade unions are losing their mobilising and collective bargaining power, leftist parties are facing a drop in their membership, and the liberal-democratic lodestar, the so-called rule of law, when countenanced at all, is regularly bent to the disadvantage of minority racialised groups and to the compromised advantage of the supposedly autochthonous population. This has led to a significant change in outlook among Black and indigenous people, as well as people of colour working within progressive and left-wing social movements. In response, European and North American progressives with a sensibility for racial injustice have increasingly doubled down on self-organisation outside traditional structures, sometimes even consciously working *against* leftist parties, unions and NGOs.

In our experience, we have seen centre-left parties develop comatose stares when millions of protest voters have run into the arms of *Rassemblement National* (RN, or National Rally) in France; the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the UK; or Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, or Alternative for Germany); or whenever a contemporary approach to demographic change, sexual and gender diversity, the phasing out of fossil fuels or nuclear energy is adopted. They seem at a loss to follow through on the progressive policies that one would expect of them and often switch their rhetoric to chime with that of right-wing populism.

The failure to follow through on progressive policies was predictable, though. Anyone who has participated in a course, workshop or panel discussion about intersectionality has likely witnessed how this body of theoretical and empirical work, which is meant to further people's understanding of (in leftist or Marxist contexts) how racism and capitalism work together, is handily defused by the seemingly naïve query 'but what about class?'. In these instances, leftists consolidate white domination in their reflexive attitude towards their ostensible origins, namely the Northern and Western European workers' movement and its specific reification as a cultural artefact to the exclusion of other histories of repression and domination, including gendered, affective and reproductive labour, and against the backdrop of ongoing colonial exploitation

being as extractive and de-humanising as ever. This reification leads to scenes such as the one at the Dangerous Conjunctures symposium in Berlin in 2018 (Haus der Kulturen der Welt 2018), where participants witnessed Antonio Negri's incoherent response to Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who had asked him to consider racial capitalism in his analysis. This is just one example of countless scholarly conferences that have failed to constructively deal with questions of race-blind analysis and/or structural racism in academic institutions. This, along with other factors, has led to massive precarity among academics of colour and has huge negative ramifications for coalition organising. At the other end of the spectrum, white-dominated groups can on a whim bring together impressive resources to orchestrate mass anti-racist protests that make it very clear to people of colour that the prioritisation of anti-racist work is always plausibly articulated even by a white leftist plurality. Later that same year in Berlin, a leftist network headed by lawyers and academics organised a large-scale demonstration called *#unteilbar* (#indivisible) in response to racist riots in Eastern German cities in 2018. The size of the demonstration was

impressive, indeed inspiring; it was attended by diverse groups, as well as a lot of individual protesters.

Although it was heartening to see such a major initiative coming together, it also raised many questions among anti-racist organisers. As mentioned above, it was astounding to see the level of resources put into the organisation of the demonstration when so many anti-racist local initiatives organised by people of colour have no budget at all. The organisation also begs the question of when to organise. The mainstream left tends to set up vocal actions when people of colour are spectacularly brutalised in pogroms, terrorist attacks or refugee camps (and of course it absolutely depends on where that camp is and who is in it), yet when reports come out about structural racism in Berlin schools, they get buried by the city's progressive government. Structural racism, admittedly not an easy thing to deconstruct, rarely brings leftists out on the streets, nor is it met with significant anti-racist resolutions or laws in federal states (*Bundesländer*) in Germany with progressive governments. This clipped sociological imagination corresponds to the anaemic employment of people of colour in numbers reflecting their percentage of the population in the existing left, its political parties and innumerable NGOs and social work institutions. Finally, the fact that the leadership of anti-racist initiatives is often co-opted by colour-blind white leftists is a longstanding issue that a not inconsiderable number of workshops on critical whiteness have apparently been unable to consign to history. That this is fundamentally disempowering for people of

The colour line in labour (Somerville 2000) is not always ignored, though. It can also be used in leftist arguments to shore up electorally useful anti-immigration sentiment while feigning to be pro-worker. For instance, in the midst of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, Sahra Wagenknecht, who was then co-leader of the German party *DIE LINKE* (The Left), took a hardline approach to migration, using the alibi that she did not want to exploit foreign labour and weaken people's rights, thus poisoning years of bottom-up organising and solidarity among workers of the Global North and Global South. Furthermore, her tough stance on migration, the trend rather than the exception among left-of-centre parties throughout Europe, failed to win any right-wing voters back from the centre or right-wing populist groups as calculated. Instead, her party lost BPoC[3] voters and party members *en masse*, costing Wagenknecht her position at the top of *DIE LINKE*, and at the same time splitting, scattering and weakening Germany's supposed party of the radical left. The left's infatuation with right-wing populism, which reaches beyond just one iconoclast and finds parties from the centre and left of centre chasing the right, seals the fate of the entire system if the left keeps repeating these mistakes: everyone and everything will end up firmly on the right and remain there.

All this double talk props up the workers' movement strand of the left, whose dinosaur discourse is similar to authoritarian-repressive populism. Here you have the good, local (white) workers who feed their family through 'decent work', there you have the mobile neoliberal elites who work here today and somewhere else tomorrow – and the asylum seekers who come to 'our' country 'only for economic reasons'. The tight regulation of geographical borders, in order to protect the frontiers of the labour market, and the questioning of payouts of social benefits have garnered leftist support, from Greece to Germany and on to Denmark. Similarly, some of the leftist discourse against the EU – declaring that it castrates national sovereignty – is indistinguishable from Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński and his right-wing populist and national-conservative party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice).

Where does the deep rift which seems for many leftists to lie between 'cosmopolitanism' and nationalism as well as between 'open borders for all' and the 'little people' come from? Our decades-long experience working within left-wing institutions and organisations corroborates the extensive scholarship

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3   Black and Person of Colour.

about racial capitalism (Robinson 1983) and its primary axes, in particular race, class, gender and ability, which have been shown to overlap in complex ways and to yield more inclusivity for some (those who are white, male, middle-class and not disabled) while also entrenching more exclusions from democracy for most (those who are not white, female or non-binary, poor and disabled). Thus, we find it imperative to focus above all on these complex intersections of class relations, race, gender and ability as racial capitalism's fundamental dynamics, with stark lessons for the ways in which social movements critique these dynamics as contradictions of the promises of liberal democracy. Since almost all forms of continental European leftism remain blithely white-dominated, they have yet to come to terms not only with the new world order, even as they are directly confronted with their atavistic colonial attitudes now that the Global South, which has always defined Europe in its role as the other, is making its demands from the centre of Europe.

Anticipating that some will inevitably dismiss our argument, we find a summary of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's thinking on the issue of the colour line in white-dominated leftist groups a helpful tonic. They note how the colour line marked leftist organisations "from the Communist Party to labor unions, which privileged whites over working-class people of color despite ideologies of equality" (Shohat / Stam 2012: 99) and castigate the cheap habit of blaming "identity politics" for the palpable divisions on the left.

Social identities are neither a luxury nor imaginary; they are shaped by history and have repercussions for who gets jobs, who owns homes, who gets racially profiled, who gets access to good healthcare, and so forth. This countenance of the causal role of identity in the realm of the political is too readily dismissed as "identity politics", especially by adherents of post-Marxist forms of leftism who should know better by now. Rather than an investment in a phantasmatic affiliation which competes with ordained worker solidarity, identities do, as a matter of fact, have plenty to do with the real-life differential relations of power, with discrepant experiences of the judicial system, the medical system, the economy and everyday social interchange. Of course, social identities are not pre-fixed essences, but emerge from a fluid set of diverse experiences, within overlapping circles of belonging. However, it is these overlapping circles of identity and identification that make possible trans-communal coalitions based on historically shaped affinities, not a dubious global propensity for proletari-anisation. Anxieties about identity are asymmetrical, contributing far more

heat than light, due to the lopsided distribution resulting from the unequal access among classes, used to express and deploy these anxieties. While the disempowered seek to affirm a precariously established right, the traditionally empowered feel relativised and diminished by having to compete with previously unheard, lowly voices. The 'identity-is-dividing-the-left' argument obscures how each division can also be an addition within a coalitionary space. Disaggregation and re-articulation can go hand in hand (ibid.).

However, when it comes to political monopolies and elite capture of political structures, disaggregation happens only after concession. A public willingness to deal with the reality of disaggregation might be an alternative definition for 'power sharing', an exponentially more significant gesture than allowing critical discourse or enabling enfranchisement. In terms of the condition of white domination across the left, we suggest a practical measure: the leading question 'what about class?' has to be rendered obsolete to clear space for a much-needed disaggregation. As long as leftists, whether motivated by bad faith or fundamentalist certainty, only pose questions about exploitation while ignoring disenfranchisement, there cannot be any of the re-articulation in larger mainstream entities that is required to build broadly-based, sustainable and successful forms of leftism.

THE PROMISES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Simply parroting the outdated 'good news' of the inherent value of liberal democracy in the face of humanity's myriad challenges is, in fact, part of the problem. There are rich traditions of feminist, anti-capitalist and ecological activism and thought which have laid bare the ruses with which liberalism and liberal democracy muddle feminist, anti-capitalist and ecological politics. In this next short section, we continue our inspection of anti-racism and the left by stepping back and taking stock of the well-defined relationship of white supremacy with the development of liberal democracies, and more importantly the utopian vision of liberty that animates the left as well as the right.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE RACIAL CONTRACT

The values of liberal democracy in Europe can be said to have crystallised in the French Revolution. However, these values (Freedom, Equality and Fraternity) can also be traced back to the first French pre-revolutionary colonial empire as well as its post-revolutionary counterpart. The same goes for the

United States, whose *Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America* (4 July 1776) was written by propertied elites, many of whom were either slaveholders or whose wealth depended on the Atlantic slave trade:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (US Congress 1776)

The existence of this apparent contradiction in the wording and the intent of the manifesto, which Shohat and Stam (2012: 29) define as "the contradiction between liberal Enlightenment principles of political democracy and social equality and the illiberal legacies of discrepant citizenship", has persisted to the present day in liberal, representative democracies. The central, open question remains whether one of these forms of democracy can be the suitable condition and social form for an equal, just and sustainable society. We would like to draw on the work of Charles Mills to help us elucidate the problem of what many people understand as Enlightenment values so that we can effectively examine the Enlightenment's impact on those who were excluded from its promises and rewards.

In his book *The Racial Contract* (Mills 1997), Mills defines both "white personhood" and "non-white subpersonhood". Here, Mills notes that the contract excludes people of colour from being subjects of the contract: instead, they are its objects, being "subpersons" to whom a "different and inferior schedule of rights and liberties" applies (ibid.: 56). In the fields of (European-dominated) moral and political philosophy, this has usually been treated as a "regrettable deviation from the ideal" (ibid.: 56). This discourse has the effect of making racial exclusion in liberal democracies seem like an accident when in fact it has been the constitutive norm.

In her reading of Charles Mills, Akwugo Emejulu emphasises the ways in which the racial contract continues to operate through an epistemology of white ignorance, which is "an agreement to misinterpret the world, a refusal to know" (Emejulu 2016). This white ignorance and refusal to understand the world could be seen as the crux of the stagnation of leftist movements. The ways in which dominant leftist movements have prioritised an anaemic concept of class as the focus of social inequality remains a primary modality used to reassert the racial order (ibid.).

While Mills indicates that this philosophical tradition seems somewhat embarrassing nowadays, the racial contract continues to be the ideal for whites. Therefore, all the exceptions to access to rights – and this applies not only to non-whites but also to women, queer people, and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses – involved an "*adherence* to the actual norm" (Mills 1997: 57). Mills' characterisation of white people's implicit or explicit entry into this contract describes the genesis of the process of white capture of liberal-democratic political structures. There was nothing natural or necessary about this; instead, the establishment of the racial contract was the purposeful integration of several lines of governance, including land ownership, access to the courts, burgeoning municipal and settlement ordinances, and prerogatives of employers, militias, lessors and lenders, all with the paranoid zeal and callous grit typical of settler colonists and residents of metropolitan centres.

Nor was there anything natural or given about how race and racism would be codified throughout Europe and its settler diaspora in the newly burgeoning publishing and scientific domains. We could dwell, for instance, on the extensive and massively influential scholarship of Immanuel Kant, one of the cornerstones – if not *the* cornerstone – of the European Enlightenment (and of democracy). It is a known, unwelcome historical fact that Kant espoused a crude geographic racism. Anyone who wants to understand contemporary philosophy as well as present-day European societies and their (progressive) movements must engage with Kant's articulation of modern thought that informed and justified Europe's colonial endeavours throughout most parts of the world. This version of the Enlightenment knowingly placed white supremacy at its core, and did not characterise it as a diversion or accident. Kant's widely studied anthropology did not cite centuries of racist prejudice (thus mindlessly following a feature of his time and/or society); rather, it creatively modernised the racial hierarchy he inherited from the Catholic inquisition, but with the imprimatur of scientific reason. Despite the centuries of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural knowledge on which his musings were based, Kant was one of the first to unequivocally declare that only whites were capable of philosophy and science. No matter that the Aristotle he revered was passed down to him through lines of transmission begun distally in the Abbasid period of Arab and Persian scholarship and pursued with feverish intensity by non-Christian, Iberian scholars. With Kant, so went the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the meticulously surveyed globe was viewed from a white perspective. Race was fabricated as a "scientific" (anthropological) category that correlates with the ability to engage in abstract thought. Kant considered whites to be at the top of the racial hierarchy, which he explicitly outlined in his lectures on physical geography (Kant 1802: 10).

Racial anthropology was ignobly carried forth in the works of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who, much more than Kant, remains a valid interlocutor for broad swathes of the academic left to this day. Susan Buck-Morss's *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Buck-Morss 2009) persuasively examined the "hiding in plain sight" influence of the Haitian revolution in particular, and the Atlantic slave plantation system more generally, in his works. His political taxonomy and metaphysical system firmly entrenched race thinking and white supremacist ideology in a discourse of hierarchical natural history and developmentalism, effects of his relentless dialectics.

In this brief survey of the Enlightenment-generation inheritance of liberal-democratic thought and politics, we could devote expository space to the renovations manifested in the Romantic movement's various countermeasures. Herder's theories of cultural and linguistic diversity represent one such milestone. So too do the works of Max Weber, who was among the most original and sober advocates of liberal democracy and state capitalism.

Weber's sociology of disenchantment and iron cages coincides with the prayerful mantra "there is no place like home" of Dorothy, the protagonist of US author L. Frank Baum's 1900 fantasy novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.[4] For all his itinerant interest, Weber's political sociology emphasised the very precarious hold of the young German state. A state's primary feature is its monopoly on violence – this power stems *pro forma* from the people but it is actually transferred to the state. State action derives its power and legitimacy from the people who authorise it. However, the definition of who is meant by the people also reveals a contradiction. In the German case, for instance, the force of the German state derives its legitimacy from the German people. The latter, however, is construed in a way that the existing peoples falling under German jurisdiction may or may not be included. The *Volk* as a biological concept is obviously not coextensive with the population (*Bevölkerung*) of Germany or of any other country. The idea of the German nation was manufactured in the second half of the 19th century and had as its object the *Kulturnation* (cultural nation, or nation defined by or seen through the prism of a shared culture) which explicitly left out groups of people within a country who would have naturally been 'German', especially Jews, Sinti/Roma and Slavs, if geography rather than cultural chauvinism were to be the defining principle. For this reason, we argue that the demarcation along race lines is not subsidiary or epiphenomenal, but rather a fundamental, constitutive difference within the population. This situation, which has held sway throughout Europe since its imperial period, deliberately and diligently converts difference into inequality. It also accounts for the widespread but utterly bizarre position today whereby across entire populated housing blocks in Europe's biggest cities there are very few people who are eligible to vote, given that asylum and refugee and immigration statuses all act as uncontroversial bars to voting in municipal, federal and European elections. Again, the German case is instructive here: despite its contested leadership role in the EU and notwithstanding

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4   See e.g. Baum (2000).

Merkel's stance towards the influx of migrants in 2015, Germany continues to operate wildly unconstitutional regimes of asylum and refugee governance, imposing travel restrictions on most refugees, who are unable to travel outside the geographical zones they are assigned to live in.[5]

Racial categories inherited from the colonial period – not simply as the result of the history of particular nation states but also of Transnational European History per se – ensure the internationalisation of these contradictions. This is what Eurocentrism looks like – a concept which Shohat and Stam (2012: 61) define as the "discursive-ideological precipitate of colonial domination". Eurocentrism enshrines and naturalises the hierarchical stratifications inherited from colonialism, rendering them inevitable and even "progressive", according to Shohat and Stam, who write that "Eurocentrism does not refer to Europe in its literal sense as a continent or a geopolitical unit but rather to the perception of Europe (and its extensions around the world) as normative" (ibid.). Thus, not only race but gender, ability, sexuality and class with their intersecting asymmetries come to have transnational purchase. Today, these axes endow whiteness in the Global North with normative valuation and co-structure (access to education, health or participation in vital areas of society, and the consequences of policing, deportation and other techniques of state repression and discipline), even for nation states which had no colonies of their own, like Switzerland, or which were long dominated by other nations, like Poland or Finland. The global success of Eurocentrism has superimposed racialised categories and their supporting axes of differentiation on areas that were colonised, such as Brazil and India. Not only in Europe but also in most other parts of the world, whiteness serves as the elementary privilege acting as a refractory mechanism for other forms of structural marginalisation. The violence of disadvantage (including queerness, poverty and disability) is articulated through positions of (often class-based or racial) privilege.[6]

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5   The restrictive laws regarding residence requirements, work permits and access to health services have been lifted for an influx of white, Ukrainian refugees, following the start of the war in their country as this chapter was being revised. A comparison here between how they and other refugees or migrants have been treated would be beyond the scope of this paper, but it deserves a mention and underpins our argument here.

6   For a discussion of kyriarchy, see Schüssler Fiorenza (2009).

Bourgeois values and norms are contradictory and have never manifested themselves as anything but tenuous, hegemonic ideals. Freedom, equality, fraternity – 'solidarity' might be a fitting contemporary synecdoche – were simply stated but had, and have, to be fought for by those locked out of the locally significant definition of the people. However, it is not only regressive forces blocking initiatives of equality, freedom, justice and sustainability. Even when emancipatory, progressive steps are set as goals, these forces try to turn back the clock. In many European countries, both inside and outside the EU, this can be seen in populist mobilisations against abortion, against 'gender ideology', 'early sexualisation' and 'gayness', and above all against immigration, bringing tens of thousands of people onto the streets, from Spain to Eastern Europe. France's largest gathering of political protesters, for instance, happened in the wake of its 2013 liberalisation of same-sex marriage rights, with demonstrations peaking only in 2016. Liberal-democratic modes of reaction that refer to the status quo as a fulfilled promise must refer to freedom of opinion and freedom of art. Moreover, even where the boundaries to criminal law are clearly crossed (as in the case of the racist murders of the National Socialist Underground in Germany or the murderous hunting-down of Roma), emphasis is placed on *the exception to the rule*: the institutions are characterised as democratic and the pogrom as a regrettable isolated case, given that the normative core of liberal democracy – freedom (for all), equality (for all), solidarity (for all) – is above all a label that is needed for human rights work in other countries, especially on other continents. Otherwise, Bosnia-Herzegovina would never have become a candidate for membership of the European Union. The European Court of Human Rights has indicated on a number of occasions that the unequal treatment of Roma, Jews and 15 other minorities, as laid down in that country's constitution, violates the rights of 12% of its citizens. No one is ready to say out loud that there is a parallel illiberal rule of law which applies to those not seen as white, Christian citizens.[7] Otherwise, imperialist wars that *pro forma* serve "women's rights" or the "rights of lesbians and gay people" could not be legitimised (Puar 2007).

At first sight, it is surprising that intellectuals and activists from progressive social movements participate in such discussions at all – and sometimes even approve of military interventions. Worryingly, German feminist Alice

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7   See Human Rights Watch (2019).

Schwarzer's "'principal contradiction' feminism" (*Hauptwiderspruchsfeminismus*) and "unease" with Islam, migrants and refugees (Schwarzer 2010; Poschardt 2016) has in recent years gained currency in the Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union*, or CDU). Furthermore, it is astonishing that in the Netherlands, a gay man, Pim Fortuyn, with his movement, the Pim Fortuyn List (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*), could become a pioneer of right-wing populism, having the same bizarre high profile as would Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, or PVV) leader Geert Wilders after him.

Such a turn to the right was also witnessed in the Germany of the early 2000s, where a certain media narrative and targeted campaigns made out Muslims and migrants to be the real perpetrators of homophobia and sexism (Petzen 2004). These developments were in line with the neoliberal shift in queer and feminist liberation politics that has happened since the 1970s (Duggan 2003; Puar 2007; Petzen 2012; Petzen 2016) and form the blueprints for the ways in which formerly radical movements get co-opted into racial and gender capitalist structures in exchange for Althusserian recognition and the ever distant promise of equality. Perhaps the most striking area of collaboration is provided by the ways in which some queer, trans and feminist groups have understood what they have to gain when they leverage their racial and gender contracts to squeeze rights and privileges for their white constituents. While working relationships with the police and the passage of hate-crime laws is touted, for example, by "progressive" queer organisations, trans and queer people of colour continue to be persecuted by these laws, which have not been shown however, to reduce crime or to contribute to improving the socio-economic or health status of queer and trans people (Spade 2015; Haritaworn / Petzen 2011; Sylvia Rivera Law Project 2009). All the same, leftists and progressive groups persist, and indeed are being increasingly successful, in helping to get these kinds of laws enacted.

It is also jarring when the political right, centre and left, when deploring "growing anti-Semitism", deliberately exaggerate the proportion of anti-Semitic criminal acts and acts of violence purportedly carried out by Muslims or migrants, even though around 90% of anti-Semitic violence is perpetrated by right-wing groups and individuals. This "funhouse" economy of misrecognition scapegoats and stigmatises Muslims while also partially hiding from the public the reality of criminal anti-Semitism and giving those responsible for it the chance to escalate their activities (Dekel / Özyürek 2020).

Children's rights, women's rights, lesbian and gay rights and the protection of Jews are only referred to when it is a matter of affirming whiteness in the covertly Christian idiom of European secularism, a liberal-democratic "we" which supposedly overcame sexism, homophobia and anti-Semitism long ago. The counterfactual historicisation of these phenomena – or the externalisation of these phenomena to the extreme right of the political spectrum – creates an innocent mainstream of society, the democratic centre, which has supposed learned the "right" lessons from the past and therefore must be protected and preserved (Yılmaz-Günay 2014).

Media-saturated liberal democracies trade heavily in these strange distortions of images, which are bent to fit the desired narrative of nationalism and moral economy. For Germany, the case of the Jews provides an illustration of this instrumentalising disfiguration whose chilling discursive silence provides subtle cover for intensifying animus and violence. The small numbers of Jews of German descent living there were a grim and obvious consequence of the Shoah. In the half-century which followed, existing German Jewish communities have been complemented by significant numbers of returning ethnic Germans, mostly Jews from the former Soviet Union, and the migration of Israeli and North American Jews to urban centres, thereby making for a fairly diverse demographic situation. The heterogeneous reality of Jews living in Germany is hardly reflected in the country's robust public sphere.

Here, the institutional voice of "the Jews" lies with a conservative and ageing minority, while strong narrative forces allow figurations of Jews as long as they fit in with the role assigned to them by the German "theatre of memory" (*Gedächtnistheater* in German). This useful term, introduced by sociologist Y. Michal Bodemann in his 1996 book on this subject (Bodemann 1996), describes a peculiarly German yearning for atonement for its Judeocidal past which calls on circumscribed figures of normative Jewishness alongside a growing cast of supporting characters and forces them to stage and restage post-Nazi German identity as foils and props (i.e. as objects). In this connection, Max Czollek clearly flags up the silencing of Jews in discussions of anti-Semitism in Germany:

The question of who a Jew is in Germany today is not decided by Jews alone. It is not about their own cultural and intellectual positioning, or about their personal relationship with religion, ethnicity or history. Rather, "the Jews" of today are characters on the stage of the German theatre of memory [...] The

theatre of memory thus generates the demand for certain Jewish characters who are supposed to confirm that German society has successfully come to terms with its murderous past. One result of this is that the public visibility of the relatively few Jews in Germany is both remarkably high and remarkably limited. Other groups, too, are at the mercy of similarly dominant pressures of expectation, such as Muslims, who are constantly forced to speak out about gender roles, terror and integration, thus serving as a counter-image to the self-image of tolerant and enlightened Germans. In both cases, the minority role is questioned from a position that remains unnamed and therefore invisible. I refer to this dominant position as – dare I say it – German (Czollek 2018: 8ff.)

That this simultaneous amnesty and amnesia has little to do with social reality is clear from the 2012 German "circumcision debate", in which the German federal parliament, the *Bundestag*, had to officially state that the circumcision (i.e. removal of the foreskin) of Jewish and Muslim boys was legal (Çetin et al. 2012). Absurdly enough, especially in left-wing contexts the debate is increasingly focusing for the most part on Israel-related forms of anti-Semitism, especially when the perpetrators are identified as Arab, Muslim or Palestinian. At the same time, most Jewish institutions in Germany still need to be protected by cameras, security gates and the police. Just how necessary this is, was demonstrated by the attempted anti-Semitic mass murder in the city of Halle an der Saale, where at Yom Kippur, the principal Jewish holiday, in October 2019, a synagogue full of worshippers was attacked with weapons and explosives. Only a strong door – and the low quality of the mostly home-made weapons used by the assailant – prevented mass casualties. The white German attacker, Stephan Balliet, murdered two people in a public space, having failed to get into the synagogue.

Where this lone-wolf attacker got the resources from for his barbarous actions was never established, and this was especially odd given that he hardly received any payments into his bank account.[8] The reasons behind the relative silence surrounding this attack, the trial and the victims remain a mystery to this day, as does a statement by the investigative authorities about another perpetrator, Tobias Rathjen, who murdered nine people in or in front of two

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8   See Lutz (2019).

shisha bars in Hanau on 19 February 2020, before killing himself and his mother. These authorities said just five weeks later:

Based on the assessment of the federal German investigative authorities, Tobias R. may have committed a racist act, but he was not a follower of right-wing extremist ideology. Instead, he had selected his victims to get as much attention as possible for his conspiracy theory surrounding surveillance by a secret service (Flade / Mascolo 2020).

THE FAILURE OF THE LEFT

In many ways, leftist groups/organisations/parties/initiatives are no different from the mainstream of society. Discussions about race, gender, sexuality and ability are often dismissed as identity politics. In fact, *DIE LINKE*'s Sahra Wagenknecht even belittled the political demands of "ridiculous minorities" (Klein 2021). Alliances bringing together organisations of people of colour, Blacks, migrants, Jews and Muslims and other marginalised groups are seen as necessary, and the few which do exist usually provide a *de rigueur* fig leaf of diversity or offer a "human shield" signalling the righteousness of the white mainstream. While the intersections with feminism have been disappointing, there is also an increasing alienation of the groups affected by various forms of racism.

It is no coincidence that the recent establishment of migrant anti-fascist groups such as *Migrantifa* after the Hanau attack has been enough to send the white German left into a state of panicked confusion. Despite the hashtags expressing solidarity on social media after the recent attacks and murders, there is also still a lot of misunderstanding about the needs of people who experience racism and yet feel dislocated from those jealously guarding the anti-fascist label as an element of cultural heritage. Instead, for young Blacks and people of colour feel this is a painfully reminder of the period following the reunification of Germany, when a huge wave of anti-Asian, anti-Black, anti-migrant, anti-Semitic and anti-Sinti/Roma violence escalated virtually unabated and illiberal treatment of asylum seekers and refugees hardened into law and policy. At that time, many people of colour were already organising themselves into groups that were explicitly and markedly different from the mainstream left.

Our observation, that the left – including parties as well as trade unions and other social movements, even where they explicitly see themselves as bottom-

up, leftist social movements – is still made up of *white* movements that have more problems with diversity than multinational companies, and that have more difficulties implementing power-sharing than public administrations that have been working on 'intercultural opening' since 1994. An example of this came at the end of 1994, when the then Federal Government Commissioner for Foreigners, Cornelia Schmalz-Jacobsen, published her *Recommendations for the Intercultural Opening of Social Services*.[9] Her goal, which could be compared with the personnel policies of left-of-centre parties and institutions, was, in her words, quoted in German in Diekelmann (2011), "to stimulate and enhance the debate about adequate social care for migrants within German society, both in practice and within associations and public agencies, as well as within educational and training institutions".

Since the reluctant admission that Germany is a *de facto* immigration country, "migration" and "culture" have been the two signifiers that have loomed large over the debate on racism there – despite the fact that the first immigration law came into force in 2005 and the process of intercultural opening has not been demonstrably unsuccessful in every domain. The insipid conversation about cultures not only neutralises discussion about various forms of racism; it also nefariously emboldens links to anti-modern and anti-emancipatory traditions when it comes to class and gender relations, along with race and ability. These traditions are a fundamental part of the system. From the genesis of liberal democracies to the present day they have worked against the proclaimed values of bourgeois-liberal democracy. Therefore, it is not enough to blame right-wing populist and right-wing movements and parties, since liberal-democratic institutions and other democratic actors play substantial, enabling roles in perpetuating racism.

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Against this background it is unsurprising that sizeable segments of democratic socialism are so vehemently opposed to the headscarf. This can be seen in all European countries, in whose view the so-called neutrality of the state is not endangered by the massive financial, personnel-related and ideological entanglements with the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church,[10] but by the minority religion, which stands forever accused of discrimination against women – and often also against queer people. The fact that the

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9   See Simon-Hohm (2004: 17f.).

10 See the website of the International League of Non-Religious and Atheists (*Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten*, or IBKA), www.ibka.org.

headscarf only becomes a problem when it is worn by prospective teachers or by female public prosecutors, judges or police officers has got lost in this debate. Neither the political right nor the political left have a problem with cleaners wearing headscarves.

The situation is rather similar for new mosques. Whereas little is made of Muslims praying in backyards, garages or private apartments, when a representative building is planned that is recognisable in the public space as a mosque, this leads to information sessions, rounds of dialogue and protest rallies in the respective local communities. What this repeated response actually means is not hard to work out: public premises are considered to belong to "us". The functional unity of the state and its legitimating *Volk* remains, as it has since Kant's declarations about the "unreason" surrounding non-whites, always in lockstep, with even the tendency to goose-step.

The wilfully ignorant lack of understanding of the overlapping, intertwining and mutual reinforcement of class and gender relations with race relations makes the left's often cautioned ability to forge alliances impossible, subverting its very electoral success among prospective leftist-inclined voters. Thilo Sarrazin of the German Social Democrats (SPD), as Berlin's Senator for Finance (or finance minister), was an extremely important figure on the city's political scene. He went on to become a member of the Executive Board of the German central bank, the *Deutsche Bundesbank*. Seen as a classic representative of bourgeois liberal democracy, he has long since recast himself as a mastermind of the New Right, in the full knowledge that his mix of biological racism as well as the cultural spiel of "fruit and vegetable merchants" who can do nothing better than produce more "little headscarf girls" (Berberich 2009) would resonate with populist racist discourse. The Social Darwinism in his 2010 bestseller *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Abolishes Itself) (Sarrazin 2010) was pre-printed in the number-one German daily newspaper and in the most popular weekly magazine and was discussed on all the talk shows. Although almost immediately calls were heard for the SPD to throw him out of the party, it took more than 10 years for them to actually accomplish this, although it was the bare minimum that he deserved – and then only after he had produced more extremely problematic publications. However, Sarrazin's actions were much more than mere embarrassments for a major political party that had, lest we forget, made its name as a party aligned with resistance to the Nazis. Sarrazin's writings actually fall within the purview of criminal

action, which is outlined in section 130, covering incitement to ethnic hatred, of the German Criminal Code (*Strafgesetzbuch*) (Federal Law Gazette 2019). With the publication of his interview in 2009, many individuals and non-profit organisations complained to the police, but following preliminary investigations no charges were pressed, with the Berlin's attorney general defending Sarrazin's right to freedom of expression. As a result, an NGO successfully lodged a complaint against Sarrazin with the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). CERD issued Germany with a rebuke (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 2013), but its decisions are non-binding, and so the most that one could hope for was that Germany would feel embarrassed about its *laissez-faire* attitude to the crass racism of not only Nazi hooligans. Unfortunately, an admission by Germany's ruling political class to the existence of structural racism in the supposed post-racial state, is not expected any time soon.

Any expectation that social democratic parties would act in concert to tackle racism might have died with EU policies on the safeguarding of refugees and the right to asylum after 2015. With the EU's border policies making it complicit in the deaths of tens of thousands of migrants from Africa and Southwest Asia who drowned in the Mediterranean, the wretched conditions of migrants in the Mória refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos and in other camps (at a time when Greece was governed by an ostensibly leftist party), and the illegal violence which the EU border agency Frontex unleashed against people with the international right to apply for protection, it should come as absolutely no surprise that anti-racist initiatives and social movements have simply lost patience with parties and other political entities that gorge themselves on power-sharing coalitions at the national or European level while duplicitously acting as an unconvincing, outraged opposition force at local or state level and ventriloquising anti-racist slogans.

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Of course, political parties are made up of a broad spectrum of members, and such diversity is often said to enrich the lifeblood of these parties. However, often the more conservative strands of such parties tend to silence or even force out more progressive minorities. The Democrats in the United States provide a stark example of this as they continually advance conservative candidates who have no desire to effect any systemic change. The pressure by the left wing of the Democrats (i.e. "the Squad" in the House of Representatives), the challenges it faces in getting progressive people of colour elected and the

resulting backlash from party elites all offer prime examples of this dynamic we have been delineating: leftist parties and organisations trying to preserve white supremacy in their ranks. It will certainly be fascinating to see what the Biden presidency will do for its constituents of colour who got them into office. Moreover, the emergence of a Black woman Vice-President was only possible with a candidate who was comfortable with the capitalist status quo.

A look at members of state parliaments representing left-of-centre parties in Germany, there are hardly any Black people or people of colour – perhaps three at the most. The structural exclusion of migrants and BPoC from these parties so obviously belies their pro-migrant stance that it is no wonder that anti-racist social movements have seemingly moved on from the prospect of leftist collaboration and have instead turned to the brute facts of survival and self-organisation.

RADICAL RESTRUCTURING? REPLACEMENT OF TRADITIONAL LEFTIST STRUCTURES

This chapter on the crisis and future of liberal democracy has been written from our perspective as activists. This gives us the opportunity to wrestle with demons we often struggle with, namely our questions about our own efforts to remedy a system we regard as inherently illiberal. From the angle of a prin-cipled politics of anti-racism, we hope to have made clear the gulf between what liberal democracy promises and what it delivers. From an anti-racist perspective alone, it seems rather simplistic to expect liberal democracies to eradicate the very oppressions it fosters and proliferates. Were we to widen the political scope to include the radical politics of the feminist, disabled or ecological movements which are primarily motivated by mutual desires for harm/violence reduction and justice, it is clear that the thin gruel of nominal liberty and democracy does not and will not suffice. The particular history of liberal democracy, with its murderous colonialism and genocides coupled with its Enlightenment alibis, provides no justifiable points of identification worthy of our allegiance, no scripted incantation that might herald a viable future – certainly not using the decrepit political equipment and lousy political vocabulary liberal democracy offers those of us committed to the project of dismantling the structures of unremitting racism. There has to be a funda-mental break with the empty promises of liberty and piecemeal allocation of democracy – both of which feel like kindred forms of security creep following

their perverse post-9/11 manifestations. Militantly liberal projects which are meant to increase so-called freedom through force, coercion and/or war must have no chance in practice.

To conclude this chapter, we note how a real project of dismantling structural racism would inevitably yield a radical restructuring of political, economic and ecological relationships worldwide. However, this would be the best case scenario. More realistic – and feasible – is the advancement of a successful anti-racism politics across the left. This is under way and probably unstoppable. As anti-racism continues to complement the public's political vision, it stands a good chance of becoming effective in as far as it is embroidered with other progressive justice movements and desires, resulting in a plausible, coagulated "we, the people" far bigger than the current, truncated "we" of each nation-state's legitimating electorate, reaching out to *everyone without exception*. Liberal democracy, built on the foundation of the pact of a white patriarchy and a rationale of capitalist accumulation at the cost of the planet's ecological systems and the lives of its workers. This relates particularly to the exploitation of people of colour and of women. Furthermore, people with disabilities, are considered unable to help create added value and are regarded as superfluous under this rationale. This rationale of liberal democracy seems to us an extremely risky bet for both anti-racist politics and for a sustainable and powerful left. Hence our advocacy for the very *un*-liberal-democratic aim of dismantling structural racism entails the birth of new structures.

These new structures are meant, by design, to impede the reproduction of existing class elites, abandon the discredited lust for profit and appeasement of conservative and reactionary populist tastes, reject violence and oppression *tout court*. They must be transnationally connected, intersectionally formatted, sensitive structures resonating widely and communicating in real time across every viable channel (Sweetapple 2018: 10). The charitable (white) left helping people in need is neither sufficient for the tasks at hand nor discernibly conscious of the sensibilities of the very people it aspires to govern, especially as the people "in need" are not elsewhere or hypothetical but part of the here and now.

With the increasing brutality of food insecurity, surveillance, incarceration, police violence and the restriction of human rights including the right to mobility, asylum, education, healthcare and decent work for people of colour and people with disabilities, we are also seeing increased intersectional

alliances and participation in resistance movements and communities of self-care. Leftist political parties and labour movements, which have been largely led by a white, ableist managerial elite, have been unable (or unwilling) to make lasting improvements to the political power of women, Black people and people of colour, and people with disabilities. These white-dominated institutions and organisations stand to lose further steam, ideas and energy to these new coalitions and groups prioritising anti-racist, decolonial, environmental and intersectional approaches.

While white leftists still rabidly discuss the finer points of textual Marxist theory and await the revolution, others are trying to escape an early death. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007: 247) reminds us, "[r]acism is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death". This exploitation, in other words the banal status quo, and the denial of exploitation and disenfranchisement, which makes white supremacy possible, must be reversed. The fate of "organized human existence" – to borrow Noam Chomsky's recent phrase, as quoted in e.g. EcoWatch (2017) – hangs in the balance. This would mean that the mainstream forms of institutional and organisational leftism recognise not only the exclusion, dismissal and denial[11] of people of colour and their experiences that have trailed the dynamics of white supremacy in the left, but also a radical restructuring of leftist structures and priorities that would affect the real world. The traditional power structures such as parties and trade unions need to be transformed with the recentring of the intersectional insights and voices of people of colour, poor people and people with disabilities as the starting point for a genuinely leftist politics. This reorientation must not be allowed to be dismissed as identity politics, as this rhetoric fractures and hobbles the left and distracts us from the real issue at hand, i.e. class-based political movements. In the past, this so-called critique has only brought heat and little light, serving at times as a manoeuvre shoring up white supremacy's grip on the left. The traditional left needs to move out of its comfort zone, which may initially lead to less immediate harmony but promises to definitely increase authenticity, the currency of political trust. People join political movements not because they sound harmonious, but rather because the politics practised ring authentic and true. This, in turn, will increase their legitimacy and the extent of their political reach, leading to more organising and more progressive change.

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11 See Emejulu (2016).

If this does not happen, and quickly, European leftist structures will continue to atrophy political legitimacy and more liberal-democratic ground will be ceded.

It has to be admitted that reform (i.e. endless workshops on diversity, intercultural opening, awareness of racism, homophobia and transphobia, and sexism) has not worked. If we look at, for example, the power structures in governments, political parties, trade unions, educational and cultural institutions in the Global North, and the list could go on and on, we see incredibly fierce resistance to power-sharing with people who have not traditionally held power, i.e. those who have been subject to structural violence. That is why the attempts to "open up" are referred to as "diversity" and not "power-sharing", given that there is no illusion that power will be shared when two migrants secure parliamentary seats to represent a leftist party. Unfortunately, this holds just as true in white-dominated progressive social movements as in the diversification measures of global corporations, and it is the reason why the next steps in leftist politics must be framed as a divorce from white supremacy and the racial contract.

In this light, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note that "[t]he show must *not* go on" (Shohat / Stam 2012: 201). In other words, as the artist collective D.N.A. warns us in El Kaisy Friemuth et al. (2020: 29):

Leftist movements beware – either do something different or be threatened with the same slogans that have been used against the ruling class. Crisis is here. Let's pour into it. Demand the systems to crash. They will. And they will burn.

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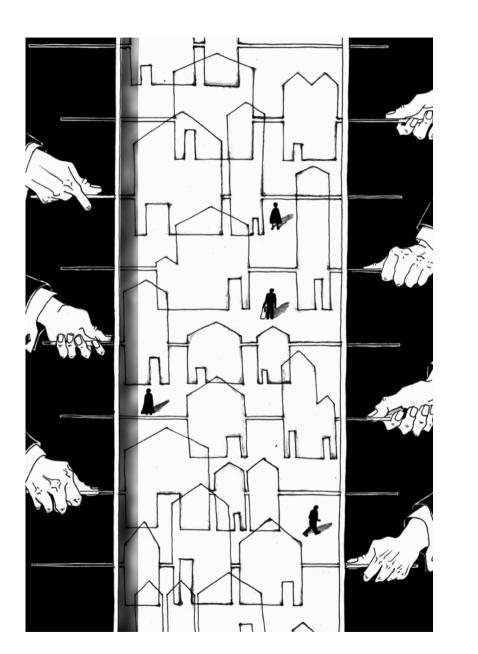
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FOR A MUNICIPALIST DEMOCRACY
– EVEN AFTER COVID-19?

LAURA ROTH

13

In a political context marked by political disaffection with traditional politics, new municipalism offers an alternative to state-centred liberal democracy by shifting the focus of political action to the local level and also aiming to radically democratise local government. However, the COVID-19 crisis seems to provide unpropitious soil for municipalism to flourish: centralisation, verticalisation and delegation of power to national government has been the rule in many places. Yet the pandemic has also shown that this is not only a health and economic crisis: it is also a crisis of care where those who were invisible to the state continued to be 'invisibilised'.

In this article I examine the potential of the municipalist movement to challenge and offer an alternative to how liberal democracies work in Europe. I start by focusing on two revelations of the COVID-19 crisis: the extent to which we depend on each other, and the extent to which some people are more vulnerable than others and are (or are not) ignored by the various actors in the system. After that, I analyse why and how municipalism can – in general – offer a more democratic and feminist alternative to state-centred democracy. In the section following that, I focus on three national cases in order to take a look at the role of the state, local authorities and local communities during the crisis and what this has meant for the municipalist movement in each of these places. I then discuss the prospects for new municipalism after the pandemic in each country, and some of the challenges the movement is facing. Finally, I formulate a few conclusions about why municipalism can be regarded as a promising strategy in spite of the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Values Survey, 85.3% of the world's population think that living in a democracy is important and yet 57.2% do not trust parliaments (Inglehart et al. 2014). One interpretation of these numbers that scholars have been developing for quite some time is that people value democracy, but just not the kind of representative democracy they have (Norris 1999).

In this context, traditional political parties, including those on the left, have lost their way, having been incapable of adapting to the world of today. In addition, political parties from the far right are gaining support in many countries, including European ones, offering simple and quick 'solutions' to people's fears and disenchantment with traditional representative politics (Mouffe 2018).

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, it only made things worse, and researchers have already documented in some places an "initial switch in mass public preferences towards technocratic and authoritarian government caused by the pandemic" (Amat et al. 2020). And it comes as no surprise that citizens will give up their right to have a say on matters affecting them when they are afraid, and will delegate this power to experts, in the hope that they will get clear answers. In addition, it also makes sense to have a coherent and predictable decision-making centre to incentivise coordinated action in the face of a crisis such as the one we are facing right now.[1]

In these circumstances, one must stay alert. At a time when people are fearful and decision-making is being delegated, there is always a risk of those in power abusing this and taking advantage of the situation to implement their own agendas. Hungary (Holroyd 2020) and Poland (Walker 2020) are just two examples of how this is a real danger. During lockdown, the Hungarian government passed a bill ending legal gender recognition for trans people, while its Polish counterpart tightened abortion laws. Yet it would take great creativity to find any link whatsoever between these measures and fighting the pandemic.

But it is not all bad news. In recent years, two alternatives to traditional politics have emerged on the progressive side of the political spectrum in Europe. The first of these is left-wing populism, a political strategy that has become popular

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1   Why this centre had to be the nation state and not a global body or set of bodies is a fundamental question I will not explore in this paper, although I do believe this is a case where, at least in an ideal world, a combination of local and global responses would have provided a better framework to address the crisis.

in many countries, with *Podemos* (We Can) in Spain and *Syriza* in Greece being the most visible examples. Left-wing populists aim to use the discourse arena to change the current political framework by appealing to common concerns that transcend class. Populists do this by making a fight against elites one of their guiding discourses, as this is something that can mobilise people from different sections of society. This kind of strategy has had some success in terms of changing political agendas and making some of the weaknesses of traditional politics clear, and therefore has also contributed to gradual change in the leftist space. However, this strategy does not challenge the decaying framework of state-centred liberal democracy, and it is also highly masculinised (Roth / Shea Baird 2017a).

The other viable alternative nowadays is new municipalism, and two of its main characteristics are that it does indeed challenge the state-centred approach towards politics and that it gives much more space to feminist ways of doing politics[2] than leftist populism (Roth / Shea Baird 2017b). Although the concept and practices have a long history in several European countries (Thompson 2020b), new municipalism manifests itself in the political landscape by (a) initially taking action at the local level with a view to achieving a global aim; (b) questioning the traditional role of states and state-centred politics; and (c) pursuing the goal of radically changing the way politics is done and bringing it back into the hands of ordinary people (Roth 2019b; Roth 2019c; Russell 2019) not only in discourse (like populism), but also in practice. Prominent examples can be found in Spain after the 2015 municipal elections, and also in many other places, as demonstrated by the Fearless Cities map (Barcelona en Comú 2017).[3]

These two alternatives aim (at least in theory) to complement the work of non-institutional actors who are always building alternatives, mobilising for change and resisting various forms of oppression (racism, sexism, etc.): social movements, collectives, associations and networks acting independently of formal political institutions. Both left-wing populism and new municipalism pay quite a lot of attention to these actors and in that sense they represent an improvement on traditional political parties. However, as mentioned before, the

2   By this I mean practices that are not based on competition and masculine ways of doing politics, but on cooperation, horizontality and shared power. See Roth et al. (2020), and more details are also provided in the 'Municipalist democracy' section below.

3   This is a map featuring many municipalist organisations that was devised by *Barcelona en Comú* in 2017. The map is not updated, but it does manage to give a general idea of the diversity of municipalist collectives in various parts of the world.

problem with populism is that it is unable to really transform the way politics is done in practice because it does not question the state-centred infrastructures of liberal democracy. The way representative state-centred democracies work, along with their centralised, bureaucratic and hierarchical institutions, makes it very hard to have a meaningful relationship with diverse and complex collectives and movements.

The current COVID-19 crisis is said to have 'changed lots of things', and we are told that after the initial months of the pandemic we now have (or will have at some point) 'a new normal'. These are phrases that we hear day after day. However, I believe that this change is not a change in quality but in quantity – one, of course, whose impact remains to be seen in the months and years ahead. The features of the existing neoliberal state- and market-centred system have just been exacerbated by the indirect effects of a virus that has unexpectedly hit us around the world. All the same, I think it is fair to say that during this crisis, relevant actors have simply been doing more of what they do best: as the case studies below illustrate, national governments have been centralising power, simplifying complex problems, using confrontational discourse, militarising the style of action and doing their utmost to avoid disturbing those already making profits. These are all not only non-democratic features but also patriarchal ones. On the other hand, a more feminist response has come from local communities and cities (even if feminism was not explicitly the approach they intended to take). Communities have been organising and have been rolling out ever more solidarity-based responses to the crisis and reacting to fill the gaps and mend the cracks in those areas that institutions are unable to address.[4] Meanwhile, local authorities have been doing a substantial share of the 'dirty work' of addressing the crisis on the ground.

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How is it possible for progressive politics to build up an alternative way of doing politics (in general, but also) in such a messy context? Does it make sense to keep on relying mainly on the traditional devices of state-centred democracy (even through left-wing populism) or is municipalism and its focus on local politics a better political strategy? In this article I examine the potential of the municipalist movement to challenge and offer an alternative to how liberal democracies work in Europe in terms of their lack of – paraphrasing the *Indignados* movement – 'real democracy'. I start by focusing on two revelations of the COVID-19 crisis:

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4   See, for instance, Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar (2020).

the extent to which all of us depend on each other, and the extent to which some people in society are more vulnerable than others and are (or are not) ignored by the various institutional and non-institutional political actors in the system. After that, I analyse why and how municipalism can – in general – offer a more democratic and also more feminist alternative to state-centred democracy. One might argue that municipalism sounds like a promising strategy, but that the COVID-19 crisis is not a favourable context. To some extent that is true, and this is a question I explore in the section following that, where I focus on three national cases in order to see what the role of the state, local authorities and local communities has been during the COVID-19 crisis and how this has affected the municipalist movement in each of these places. I then discuss the prospects for municipalism after the pandemic, and some of the challenges the movement is facing, based on some of the lessons learned. Finally, I formulate some conclusions about how new municipalism can be regarded as a promising political strategy from a feminist perspective after COVID-19 and why.

Keywords:
radical democracy
(new) municipalism
local politics
COVID-19
feminisation

THE TWO REVELATIONS
OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Several phenomena are becoming clearer in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Here I will look at two that are usually ignored in mainstream politics. First of all, we depend on each other. Quite obviously, one of the lessons of this crisis is that if people in China get sick, it can also affect those in Peru. But another dimension of interdependence is equally important: we depend on the people we relate with on a daily basis through face-to-face or other kinds of contact. We need our friends, family and communities to feel safe and to share our lives; we

need teachers in schools and nurseries who can take care of our children while we work and who can support their learning; we need those who can take care of older people; we need public health workers, from primary care to hospitals, who can help us recover when we get sick; we need people who can produce, transport and sell food; we need psychological support from professionals when we cannot deal with things on our own; we need artists to make our lives happier and to help us imagine different realities; we need those working in the culture sector to help us imagine new worlds and understand the one we live in; we need people who clean our cities and towns and keep them in good repair; we need people who do research and help to develop medicines and vaccines, and who also generate knowledge in other fundamental areas; we need journalists who help us understand what is going on; we need people to drive buses and trains; and we need public officials who make sure our democratic will is implemented and to coordinate many public-sector tasks and activities.

These are just a few examples of basic relationships brought to light by lockdown measures. We cannot lead our lives in isolation from others and any ethical/moral judgement we make about what should be done needs to take that into account. We cannot take these relationships for granted and we need to do politics in a way that protects those relationships by taking care of all those involved. This aspect of our existence is usually neglected in political discussions and also in philosophical discussions about politics, with some (feminist) exceptions (Held 1995; Held 2006; Kittay / Feder 2002; Noddings 2013; Tronto 1993). Normally, responsibilities, rights and duties are understood as something connected to individuals, as if we could take meaningful action without the help of others. The current crisis has shown that this is nothing more than an illusion, and care (an ethics of care, and not simply care work) should be given the central role it deserves in politics, following what some feminists have been arguing for quite some time (e.g. Held 2006).

A second phenomenon that has been revealed by this crisis is that there are certain people and groups of people who are simply invisible to mainstream politics: undocumented migrants; informal workers, like domestic workers, sex workers and seasonal workers in rural areas; children; people with mental conditions; the long-term unemployed; and homeless people.[5] On a scale of privilege, these are people who are at the very bottom. Again, lockdown meas-

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5   See e.g. Allen (2020), Deutsche Welle (2020), Dunstan (2020) and European Commission (2020).

ures have been particularly catastrophic for some of these groups because they rely on freedom of movement (and also on the relationships mentioned above) to keep their lives going.

These (and some others) are the people and groups who have been hit the hardest by the coronavirus crisis, alongside, of course, those who have been directly impacted by the virus itself. Although the media usually only pays attention to the latter, the existence of these vulnerable members of society has become a topic of public debate during the pandemic. However, it has been sad to see that often the reason has been purely instrumental, as responses were sought to various questions: How should we deal with homeless people to stop them spreading the virus? What should we do with children so that parents can get back to work? How can we make sure rural areas still receive seasonal workers in spite of travel restrictions, so that we can keep producing food? This crisis has shown that what happens to these invisible people affects everyone and political decisions need to take them into account. But it should do so for the sake of the wellbeing of those people, and not only so that they do not become a burden on those who are currently privileged.

MUNICIPALIST DEMOCRACY

There are at least four models for, or uses of, the term 'municipalism' (Roth 2019a; Roth 2019b; Thompson 2020b).[6] In the progressive arena they can range from, at one end of the spectrum, focusing on progressive local policies and claiming the autonomy of the local authorities to, at the other end, radical local organising and production completely outside the control of the local state. In the former, the existing instrument (the local state) is simply used for the purpose of implementing policies that generate more justice (social, economic, gender, environmental, etc.). In the latter, local public institutions are rejected as a tool and new infrastructures are built outside them. Somewhere in the middle we find new municipalism.[7]

New or radical municipalism, as currently practised in dozens of cities and towns across the world, aims to navigate the space between the two extremes and strike a balance between using local institutions and self-organising through civil society. It aims to work both within and outside formal political institutions, while changing them and also how these two spheres relate. That is why it is often argued that this kind of municipalism aims not just to implement progressive policies by taking action at the local level, but also to change how politics is done.

I have referred to the features of new municipalism elsewhere (Roth 2019b; Roth 2019a; Roth 2019c; Roth / Russell 2018) and so have other authors (Russell 2019; Thompson 2020b). For the sake of simplicity, here I will summarise those characteristics in order to explain how a municipalist democracy differs from state-centred liberal democracy and also why it is desirable in terms of changing the way politics is done.

First, and most obviously, municipalism is focused on the local level of politics. Unlike state-centred liberal democracy, municipalist democracy identifies the local level not only as the place where key decisions should be made, but also

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6   Autarchic municipalism (or autonomist municipalism), municipalism as local autonomy (or managed municipalism), market municipalism and new municipalism (or platform municipalism). Besides these, there are other uses of the term, such as municipalism as a research agenda focused on local policies.

7   Whether these three possibilities are better described as a continuum between two extremes or as three different 'ideal types' in the Webberian sense is a pertinent question (and probably also an open debate) that I cannot address in this text. Other questions include: How many uses of the word can we find nowadays? How many of them belong to the political domain of *new municipalism* as a constellation of practices? These are all fascinating debates for the municipalist movement and also for scholars interested in the field.

as (ideally) the main centre of political power. Local institutions (towns, cities, neighbourhoods or districts, as the case may be) are the ones which need to have the competences and to manage the resources by default (although they may delegate that power to other levels). The main reason for this is that, unlike in state-centred politics, proximity makes it possible to mobilise people for change and also democratise politics by sharing power, and this is key to dealing with the current disaffection towards liberal democracy. The reason is not that there is anything intrinsically more democratic about local politics, which would mean falling into what Purcell (2006) calls "the local trap". However, proximity, scale, regular interaction, shared problems and the possibility of decision-making through participatory democracy make a great difference to changing how politics is done (Roth 2019a; Russell 2019) because they allow ordinary people to take back control and to exercise power collectively. In addition, it is easier to gain political power and bring about change in local institutions than in their counterparts at the national/state level.

Second, while liberal democracy is based mainly on nation-state level political parties, and sub-national parties are an exception, in municipalism the centre of political action is in locally based autonomous organisations that resemble political parties (e.g. they run for local elections). However, they also differ from those traditional parties in many ways, e.g. their close relationship with social movements, their open character (anyone can join), the lack of affiliates (only activists are involved), their horizontal *modus operandi* and their feminist practices (Roth et al. 2020). Unlike the hierarchical electoral machines of national political parties, municipalist platforms are often formed through the confluence of a diverse range of actors, build their manifestos and lists using radically participatory mechanisms and organise in a democratic way. These features are closely connected to the aim of changing how politics is done, in order to re-engage citizens with public affairs.

Third, radical municipalism has the potential to feminise politics, and this is an issue that the municipalist movement has been addressing for some time, in spite of the practical limitations. The question is not simply how to make sure that there are more women in politics (and the reason for doing so), which was the key concern for Lovenduski (2005) among others, but to change the rules of the game so that politics can be done in a way that does not reinforce existing privileges. Here, changing forms of leadership and power are key, along with real democracy, care, non-violence and diversity (Roth et al. 2020).

Feminising politics means abandoning traditional practices so common in representative state-centred politics and trying out new ones, with the aim of building up political power by sharing it instead of concentrating it in the hands of the privileged, e.g. professional politicians. Again, there is no guarantee that local politics will necessarily be more feminist than state politics. But implementing such a feminist agenda in terms of changing the way political relations work is much easier to achieve in small(er) groups, organisations and institutions that allow for the direct involvement of non-professional politicians.

Fourth, new municipalism aims to blur the boundaries between what is inside local institutions and what is outside, fostering a substantial democratisation of politics and the sharing of power demanded by feminism. In contrast to the clear limits that liberal democracy draws between public institutions and society, where the main connection is provided by elections, here the aim is to radically democratise institutions so that ordinary people can have an impact on the decisions that affect them on a regular basis. The goal, again, is to dismantle political power based on privilege (for those of a certain class, race, origin and gender, among other features) and to distribute it. This means not only implementing participatory mechanisms that allow the community to engage, but also supporting the democratic practices that already exist in the community. Closely connected to this point, municipalism defends the commons as the approach towards the ownership and management of resources. It aims to go beyond the public-private ownership scheme and to defend the common use of the resources and, again, horizontal decision-making in this regard.

Fifth, one of the reasons why there is backing (even beyond the radical municipalist movement) for an increased stake for local governments is that in fact, nation states are losing relevance in our globalised world, and cities have been gaining a more central role in recent decades (Sassen 2005). They are where many of the current global political challenges are experienced, but also where these challenges, in all their complexity, can be addressed (Harvey 2019; Lefebvre 2003; Subirats 2016). Nation states, by contrast, have been criticised for their lack of truly democratic decision-making mechanisms, and also for their inability to deal with the complexity of many of our current problems manifesting themselves globally and locally: poverty, the climate crisis, housing, migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and so on. Situating the decision-making centre, the legal competences and the economic resources in an intermediate

institution such as the national government is difficult to justify, except by tradition and a lack of imagination.[8]

Finally, municipalism is not synonymous with parochial politics and is oriented towards the global dimension of politics and the challenges of our times. Instead of adopting the competitive rationale of state-centred politics, in municipalism local institutions cooperate with other local authorities; local organisations cooperate with other platforms in other places, and so on. How this cooperation can be structured has been the subject of debate and there are several avenues available. From a confederated structure like the one exemplified by Kurdish assemblies (Bookchin 2015; Öcalan 2017), to networks (Roth / Russell 2018; Shea Baird et al. 2016), and Hannah Arendt's council democracy (Ederman 2019), there are many ways to coordinate local action on the one hand with regional and global action on the other, and new institutions can be created. Defining how this can happen is part of the municipalist project.

THE COVID-19 CRISIS IN SERBIA, THE UNITED KINGDOM AND SPAIN

As mentioned in the introduction, nation states have been doing what they do best during this crisis, and so have communities and local authorities. In other words, the pandemic has exacerbated the tendencies of state-centred democracy, but at the same time has highlighted the latter's limitations: there are many things that nation states were unable to do in domains where local authorities and communities have been quite active. This will be illustrated by the examples of three very different countries: Serbia, the United Kingdom and Spain. I will describe some of the recent events in each of these three cases and compare developments concerning the municipalist movement in each one of them.[9]

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8   I cannot go into a broad justification/critique of the state in this text, but an interesting attempt to reimagine it, given the current situation, can be found in the volume *Reimagining* the State (Cooper et al. 2020). In addition, how in practice to move from a state-based political system to a *glocal* system of governance is a central question, but it, too, goes far beyond the scope of this paper.

9   This section is based on interviews conducted in July and August 2020 with Biljana Đorđević (Serbia), a researcher and member of the executive committee of the initiative *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own); Bertie Russell (UK), a researcher and member of the European Municipalist Network and the Minim municipalist observatory; and Joan Subirats (Spain), a researcher and member of *Barcelona en Comú* and Barcelona City Council.

Although these are all European countries, their responses to the crisis have been similar in many ways, and each of them has a municipalist movement, there are differences between them making an analysis and comparison of developments particularly pertinent. The political contexts at the state level are quite different (virtually a one-party state in Serbia; a Conservative government in the UK; and a progressive government in Spain), as are the characteristics of the countries' municipalist movements (a powerful movement in Serbia, but one concentrated in Belgrade; a weak movement in the UK; and a movement in decline, following some very successful years, in Spain). Looking at how the movement has been impacted by the crisis should be useful both to understanding the current situation and to thinking about the future of municipalism.

SERBIA

A municipalist movement has been growing for quite some time in Belgrade, led by the citizen platform *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own). The collective started as a movement against the development of the huge deluxe Belgrade Waterfront complex, a €3-billion investment by the Eagle Hills Group (an Abu Dhabi-based private real-estate investment and development company). A number of problems arose with the development project, including corruption and violence (Bills 2018), and the movement against the project mobilised thousands of people on several occasions and continued to maintain a high profile in the years after that. In 2015 the municipalist activists set up a political platform that (unsuccessfully) ran in the 2018 Belgrade City Assembly election but remains active locally and still collaborates with various collectives at the local and translocal levels.

This movement is operating in a dire political context. In 2020, the Serbian political system was classified as a "hybrid regime" (rather than being a full democracy anymore) as a result of a decline in political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2020). The populist and neoliberal Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has been in power since 2012 and now controls all levels of government in a highly centralised way, revolving around President Aleksandar Vučić.

The COVID-19 crisis has accelerated this trend, with the ruling party using the crisis to centralise power even further and also to garner additional political support. The first illustration of this can be seen in how a state of emergency was declared: under the Serbian Constitution, this must be ratified by the country's legislature, the National Assembly, within two days, but this did not

happen until almost the end of lockdown, when the majority party in Parliament simply retroactively rubber-stamped all the decisions that had been taken previously (European Western Balkans 2020; Marinković 2020). The measures implemented were not only chaotic, changing on a fairly regular basis, but were also highly restrictive in terms of citizens' rights compared with other countries (Marinković 2020). For instance, those over 65 years of age were almost banned from leaving their homes except for a few hours a week early on a Sunday morning (e.g. from 4 to 7 a.m., according to N1 Belgrade (2020)).

In addition, the crisis was used for electoral purposes. In the words of Đorđević, "one of the most worrying features of the Serbian case is how the crisis has reinforced the identification between the state and the party, meaning that the country is continuously in election-campaign mode" (Đorđević 2020). For instance, groups and citizens were not allowed to meet and organise to support those in need during lockdown; instead, the ruling party took it upon itself to organise teams to deliver food and other essentials to people's houses, using this as an opportunity for some political campaigning. All the same, the crisis saw the self-organisation of local collectives in the form of Facebook groups, 'solidarity kitchens' for homeless people, and so on, while local authorities took charge of addressing many of the urgent needs of residents. Meanwhile, human-rights NGOs raised awareness of the plight of those who were disregarded by official responses to the crisis (informal workers, members of the Roma community, etc.) (Đorđević 2020; Stamenkovic / Radovanovic 2020).

Municipalist activists in Belgrade tried to organise during lockdown, but the obstacles were much greater than in other countries because of the oppressive political situation. For example, they were involved in the initiative of banging pots in dissatisfaction at the government (Vasovic 2020) and also the boycott of the parliamentary elections in June 2020. The results of the manipulated elections were as expected: President Vučić boosted his number of parliamentary seats at the cost of having more or less no opposition to speak of, which otherwise in fact would have legitimised his rule (Bieber 2020).

While initially most Serbs were fearful of the pandemic and the Serbian state's main ruling party was controlling every aspect of the COVID-19 crisis, the aftermath was marked by a general lack of trust in the country's president and institutions (European Western Balkans 2020). According to Đorđević, "the feeling now is that a state no longer exists. They sacrificed citizens for another term in government" (Đorđević 2020).

In the UK, the term 'municipalism' is associated with municipal socialism, a political strategy that mainly focuses on implement a progressive agenda through local government. Having been pressed into service in the 1980s to put up resistance against Thatcherism, nowadays it is demonstrated in particular by the Preston model (CLES / Preston City Council 2019). Municipal socialism has been mainly associated with remunicipalisation of public services or "community wealth building"[10]. It is driven by local authorities through progressive policies, falling under what Matthew Thompson calls "managed municipalism" (Thompson 2020b). However, it is worth noting that 'municipal socialism' does not have a tidy definition, and often carries very different meanings for those who use it. For some it refers to specific historical periods, while for others it speaks to any type of redistributive approach taken by local authorities. Furthermore, some see it as the use of local government as part of a combative strategy against the national government, while others might use it to refer to more autonomous, or 'right to the city'-inspired movements (Russell 2020b).

Most recently, discussions have started about making municipal socialism part of the Labour Party's strategy to regain power at UK level, albeit taking a purely instrumental approach. However, some members of *Momentum* (an organisation on the left of Labour that strongly backed former leader Jeremy Corbyn's stewardship of the party) have argued that a kind of municipalism that is built from the bottom up might be a better strategy for the movement than the traditional approach to party organising that Labour has pursued up to now (Russell 2020b). However, this does also mean that any shift towards municipalism would need to happen within Labour.

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In addition, an alternative municipalist strategy is under discussion in the UK. The most striking example of this is provided by the *Indie Towns*. These independent citizen platforms want to run their local councils completely independently of political parties and to run for elections, not on the basis of a manifesto but of an ethical commitment that encompasses how decisions are going to be made by implementing very democratic processes (Harris 2016). In this vein, Peter Macfadyen has produced two guides entitled *Flatpack Democ-*

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10 Community wealth building is a people-centred approach to local economic development, which redirects wealth back into the local economy, and puts control and benefits in the hands of local people (CLES 2020).

racy in which he provides an overview of various tools that will be useful for people who want to organise and win local elections with a view to "creating independent politics" and "reclaiming local politics" (Macfadyen 2014; 2020).

Although there are no other municipalist projects in the UK at the time of writing, there has been considerable interest in what has happened in Spain in recent years. Organisations such as Plan C and Compass have been arguing for municipalism for some time now in response to the critical political situation facing the country, with the Conservatives having a substantial majority in Parliament and Labour being unclear as to what strategy would provide the best way of reversing this.

The situation has deteriorated since Brexit, and especially since the Conservatives won another term in government in 2019. Unlike with, for example, the programmatic rollout of Thatcherism by the Tory administrations of the 1980s, there has been no sign of any consistent plan in any area whatsoever from Boris Johnson's government and the general feeling is that politics has become more chaotic than ever, especially during the COVID-19 crisis (Russell 2020b). One might wonder whether this way of doing politics (similar to 'Trumpism' in the United States) might not itself be the strategy, in that creating uncertainty and engaging in improvisation might give the government more freedom to implement its agenda. Anyway, regardless of the factors underlying the current situation, how the government has dealt with the pandemic has had rather a negative impact on the population, with its COVID-19 response having been widely criticised as one of the worst in the world (Jenkins 2020; Knight 2020; Rigby 2020; Scally 2020).

As in most countries, some measures to relieve the socioeconomic impact of the crisis were implemented (UK Government 2020). However, also as in other places, the crisis has been used as an excuse to centralise power and privatise public services (Russell 2020b). The adage "never let a crisis go to waste" could be a good way of making sense of the reform of the urban planning system (Wainwright 2020): proclaimed to be necessary for economic recovery, it actually has the effect of (and perhaps has as its true aim) taking competences away from local authorities. Another depressing example of this has been the abolition of the key institution that was Public Health England, and its replacement by the National Institute for Health Protection, given that it has been argued that this move is part of a broader privatisation strategy, as the private firm Serco has close ties to the new institute (Campbell 2020 –

despite the fact that the contracts with this company, in charge of tracking and tracing during the pandemic, had already been questioned. Unfortunately, this is not the only case of central government turning to private companies to deal with the crisis (Garside / Neate 2020).

People in the UK are talking of authorities at the local level having a "good crisis" (Copeland 2020; Jameson 2020), but it is still too early to judge to what extent this is true. According to Bertie Russell:

[L]ocal authorities have taken the lead on some issues (like access to data), and have been on the front line when it comes to supporting communities, but it's hard to know how well they have addressed the crisis. Commentators say local authorities have responded quite well, but at this point most evidence is anecdotal (Russell 2020b).

In spite of that lack of consistent evidence, local authorities have indeed been spending vast sums of money on addressing the crisis, while their revenues have taken a hit (most of the taxes they collect are associated with local economic activity). There has been an informal pledge by the UK government to support local authorities (The Guardian 2020), but there is a good chance that a new phase of austerity at the local level lies ahead and of a large number of them going bankrupt (Proctor 2020). If that happened, the UK government would have an argument for continuing its centralisation drive by taking charge of services and blaming local authorities for mismanagement and ineptitude (Russell 2020b).

Another dimension of the crisis that is highly revealing of how the different actors in the UK approached the pandemic is the support offered to vulnerable people during lockdown. As in most countries, there was a proliferation of mutual-aid groups, reflected by the Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK website (Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK 2020), where people could find groups, register their group and secure resources for their local communities. It includes 4,268 initiatives across the UK.[11] These groups grew on a street-by-street basis on many occasions, and some were more successful than others (Russell 2020b).

Both local authorities and the central government saw the potential of volunteer-based support for vulnerable people and reacted accordingly, albeit not just by giving them some kind of backing. On the one hand, city councils have some-

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11   The figure given here relates to the status on 1 September 2020.

times used this as an opportunity to outsource to civil society the provision of services (Ruiz Calluela 2020). On the other hand, the UK government organised a campaign for people to sign up through the Good Sam app as volunteers for the National Health Service, or NHS (with tasks including driving patients to hospital and buying medicines). More than 750,000 people signed up in less than a week, but it was not long before reports were piling up of how they had been given nothing to do (Butler 2020). Boris Johnson had no hesitation in referring to this as "an incredible display of public spirit" (Christodoulou 2020), and the aim was clearly to enhance effectiveness by centralising action. However, what actually happened was precisely the opposite, as well as proving highly disruptive for local mutual-aid groups (Russell 2020b).

SPAIN

Municipalism has a long history in Spain, but has risen to particular prominence in recent years, after in 2015 dozens of citizen platforms won local elections in towns and cities across the country, including most of the big cities. It is very hard to understand this movement without looking at the impact of 15-M (in particular, its call for "real democracy now"), and the various 'waves' (*mareas*) of public support for it in the preceding years and during the first term of municipalist rule represented a real turning point in Spanish politics. However, a number of factors, such as the difficulties in changing the political culture of local public institutions, have made it tough for the movement to keep on growing (Roth / Stokfiszewski 2020). As a result, in 2019 most of the platforms failed in their efforts to get their mayors re-elected, with the notable exception of *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona in Common), and the political movement found itself in opposition in many towns and cities.

However, also in 2019, *Podemos* (a close electoral ally of the municipalist platforms) forged a coalition government with the Social Democrats (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, or PSOE) at the state level. Among the new government's objectives was to change course from the policies implemented by the conservative Popular Party (*Partido Popular*), including dealing with the 'national question' (mainly the relationship with Catalonia) in a more productive way, reviewing the 'Montoro Law' of 2012, which restricted the competences of local authorities and the resources available to this level of government, and rolling out a feminist agenda.

As in other countries, central government's initial response to the crisis was to declare a state of emergency. In Spain's case this included not only the kind of provisions seen elsewhere, such as the ability to restrict free movement, but also the highly controversial step in a multinational state of taking the power to centralise competences of the autonomous communities. It established a single command structure around the Prime Minister[12], Pedro Sánchez, and four ministries: Health, Transport, the Interior, and Defence. In addition, the response was militarised not only through the deployment of the military to carry out many of the tasks resulting from the new legislation (control of people's movements, logistics, etc.) but also by dint of the kind of language used: the crisis became a 'war' against a common 'enemy' and people were asked to act like 'soldiers' (Zulueta 2020). For many, this was a striking departure from type for what Jaume Asens[13] famously referred to as "the most progressive government in the history of Spanish democracy" (En Comú Podem 2019).

However, many other aspects of this national response have also been criticised (Tena 2020). For instance, lockdown measures were decreed as a one-size-fits-all solution, regardless of the particular characteristics of the areas and people involved. Urban-centred approaches systematically disregarded the situation in rural areas (where the impact of the pandemic has been much less), and measures were exactly the same throughout the country from the declaration of emergency until the first week of the de-escalation on 4 May 2020.

As in many other places, individuals have in various ways had to bear the brunt of the crisis, from taking on the burden of care work to dealing with the psychological and economic consequences of the measures. For instance, children have been ignored and treated as nothing more than appendages to adults, despite their need for tailored support as a result of their tender age and sensitivity to stress. The government even forgot to mention them in any of the decrees promulgated in the first month of the state of emergency. This situation only began to change after people started mobilising online and Barcelona's mayor, Ada Colau, publicly called on the Spanish Prime Minister to "set our children free" (Eldiario.es Catalunya 2020).
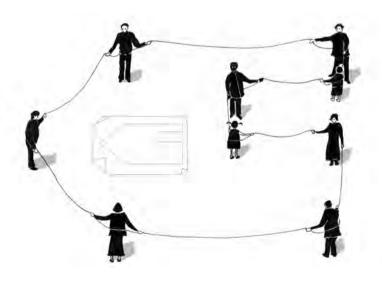
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12 Officially known in Spain as the "President of the Government".

13 Asens is a Catalan member of the Spanish Parliament. He is part of the electoral alliance *En Comú Podem* (In Common We Can), which brings together *Catalunya en Comú* (Catalonia in Common) and *Podemos*.

Another conspicuous feature of the Spanish government's pandemic response was that decision-making happened behind closed doors and was then just communicated to people. In addition, as months passed, most of the negotiations started happening between central government and the autonomous communities, but not with local authorities, who were the ones dealing with the consequences of the crisis on a daily basis (Subirats 2020).

On the other hand, community responses thrived across Spain (Martínez 2020). As in many other places, people got involved in self-organising to sustain those who were forgotten about or explicitly ignored by central government. Many collectives also organised protests and campaigns to address some of the urgent needs of vast swathes of the population. Examples include the renters' strike (Huelga de Alquileres 2020) and the *#RegularizaciónYa* campaign demanding the regularisation of undocumented migrants. However, when it comes to real support for vulnerable people, these self-organised collectives were not always effective because of the conditions under which they were working. According to Joan Subirats (2020):

[T]hose who were poor already turned first to their municipal authorities or to the Church for support, knowing that they wouldn't be asked for anything in return. Unlike neighbourhood mutual aid, which finds it harder to flourish in poor areas and demands the involvement of those who receive the support, the Church and local state provide universal assistance.

Finally, the role of local authorities has been very interesting in this regard. On the one hand, the centralisation of competences, budget and powers, already entrenched in the Spanish system, has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. From the start of the pandemic, city councils increased their expenditure to tackle the crisis, for example asking the Spanish government for permission to spend the 2019 budget surplus, but meeting with resistance from there. On the other hand, although there is no systematised data about this at the time of writing, it appears that local authorities have taken charge of dealing with most of the complexities of the crisis, and especially of lockdown (Navarro Gómez 2020), i.e. rehousing homeless people, opening new buildings for housing and health services, changing urban design to help maintain social distancing, redesigning public transport, reacting to the immediate needs of local residents and cleaning and disinfecting public spaces, to name but a few.

Perhaps the most interesting example is the case of Barcelona City Council, which has been taking bold measures to tackle what Kate Shea Baird (2020) describes as "the intersecting crises of COVID-19, economic recession and climate breakdown". In addition to the measures mentioned above, the Barcelona city authorities, among many other actions, doubled their spending on social services, set up a municipal baby-sitting service for vulnerable families and lead the *padró són drets* ('registration equals rights') campaign, among other steps to protect undocumented migrants (Triviño-Salazar 2020), as well as turning 30 municipal buildings into community hubs for mutual-aid initiatives.

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PROSPECTS FOR MUNICIPALISM

The centralisation and verticalisation of decision-making in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis have had a severe impact on municipalists around the world. As a result, municipalist organisations are rethinking their strategies in a context where there is less scope for local action, local authorities have fewer competences, and resources are more scant than before. Does this mean that running for elections at the municipal level to try to establish a connection between a city council and the collective struggles of local communities does not make sense anymore for social movements? What are the key challenges for the municipalist movement in the three countries examined here?

Of the cases analysed above, perhaps the least promising is that of Serbia, where, in Belgrade at least, the prospect of a political shift towards municipalism appears rather remote. While the municipalism activists from *Ne da(vi)*

mo Beograd continue to mobilise locally, they are aware of the limitations of their strategy in a country that is not only centralised but also increasingly undemocratic. The initiative had great success in raising awareness and mobilising people, especially against the Belgrade Waterfront project, before making the switch from a single-issue movement to a political platform. However, they know that power is 'somewhere else' and even if they managed to win seats on the city council, their ability to implement a municipalist agenda of democratising the local state and redistributing power would be very limited. Therefore, they focused their attention on forging new national alliances such as *Moramo* (meaning 'We have to') with social collectives and political parties and on the 2022 local and national elections, given their limited resources (Đorđević 2020).

What makes this case special is not how competences and resources are distributed, but the highly corrupt and even violent political landscape. Of course, municipalism has flourished in non-democracies before – the Kurdish movement in Northern Syria is a good example of this (Knapp et al. 2016). However, the role of the media in Serbia has made it very hard for any political actor to have any real chance of securing widespread public support, in light of the influence wielded by President Vučić's government (Reporters Without Borders 2019). And this is probably one of the great challenges for municipalism in other parts of the world as well: How can a municipalist strategy be successful in a non-democratic, media-dominated political landscape? Should municipalism opt for alternative strategies, like the door-to-door campaigning of *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona en Comú 2019)? Should it continue with initiatives having a substantial visual impact, such as *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd*'s yellow duck[14]? Should the electoral strategy simply be abandoned or should it perhaps be focusing on working outside local government structures, as in the case of Rojava in Syria (see Knapp et al. 2016)?

In the UK, the situation is rather different. The Flatpack democracy project organised a large-scale campaign for the local elections in May 2021 that was aimed at supporting independent candidates who were committed to a high level of democracy in towns and cities across the country. However, while the long-term success of this movement remains to be seen, its impact so far has been fairly limited and the *Indie Towns*' strategy has mainly focused on small

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14   See Bills (2018) for some images of this duck.

municipalities, where it is easier to run successful independent campaigns. In the UK, there is no broader municipalist strategy going beyond towns at the moment, in part out of a level of apprehensiveness about compromising the Labour Party, which is the only really viable leftist alternative to Conservative rule. In recent years, *Momentum*, a movement which adopts a populist approach, has emerged, but this does operate within the confines of one of the traditional political parties and is not exactly feminist in its way of doing politics (strong leadership, hierarchical and meritocratic organising, etc.). All the same, many on the left are pinning their hopes to its success.

At the same time, as mentioned above, *Momentum* is having an internal rethink of its strategy, and new municipalism has a chance to play a role here. However, the key challenges in this particular case are as follows: Is it possible to develop a municipalist movement within the structures of an existing national political party? And is it possible for the structures of such a party to relinquish some of their power to allow for autonomous local organising? Labour may be pushed into such a strategy, but this is highly unlikely, especially under the leadership of Keir Starmer highlighting one of the left's typical dilemmas: whether to win power and implement progressive politics without changing how power is distributed, or to change how politics is done by making it more democratic and feminist, thereby running the risk of a more open-ended agenda that might take more time to implement. *Momentum* has tended to lean towards the first option, but this dilemma also affects the *Indie Towns* and they have clearly chosen the second path at the expense of remaining rather on the margins of UK politics and at the risk of having to implement non-progressive policies if that is what those living in their area decide by democratic means.

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Municipalist strategies in the UK also face major challenges in terms of the ability of local authorities to pursue a political course of democratisation and feminisation. Recent innovations – such as the Liverpool City Region's Land Commission (Thompson 2020a) – suggests there is some scope for stepping outside the traditional roles fulfilled by local authorities. Yet at the same time, the UK is considered to be one of the most politically centralised countries in the Global North, is heading for further centralisation and continues to deny local authorities either financial or legislative freedoms. Arguably, a municipalist strategy in the UK is likely to fall flat if it does not adopt a wider strategic

approach, namely one that approaches the problem and potential of local government from the perspective of broader social power (Russell 2020a).

As for municipalism in the Spanish state, Joan Subirats makes the following remarks:

Unfortunately, the crisis has not resulted in any positive change. We have been unable to bring about a 'municipalist effect'. The Spanish government is not interested [as] it believes in centralism. Now central government is considering co-governance with the autonomous communities, because this [brings them under control] a bit more while averting the possibility of them [going off and doing their own thing]. They are not interested in collaborating with municipalities. They have [only] just discovered the importance of federalism. And they are doing so very late in the day! (Subirats 2020).

However, talking about local government in Barcelona in particular, he adds:

The pandemic has given a boost to the government [...], which has performed very well. It has demonstrated that it is possible to get things done at a local level. Barcelona has shown real leadership and the crisis has reinforced the idea, promoted by *Barcelona en Comú*, that municipalism matters. We have seen a city government that has gone well beyond its formal competences (Subirats 2020).

The impact of these recent events will be seen at the next city council election (2023), when *Barcelona en Comú* will be the only municipalist platform in Spain to be seeking re-election as the incumbent. That is because, as mentioned above, most municipalist organisations lost the 2019 elections, leaving Barcelona as a lone municipalist figure in an otherwise non-municipalist (institutional) political environment. Between 2015 and 2019, no strong nationwide municipalist network existed, in part due to the perceived need for wholehearted support for *Podemos* at the autonomous community and national levels. Moreover, *Podemos* was always reluctant to tolerate the autonomy of local political platforms. While the electoral setback in 2019 was the result of various factors, the lack of a municipalist network cannot be ignored among them, as it meant somehow betraying the original aim of changing how politics was done. Furthermore, in recent years, *Barcelona en Comú* has become part of a Catalan platform (*Catalunya en Comú* (Catalonia in Common)) with a view to ensuring that its impact extends beyond the city

itself and also protecting the current local government. However, in so doing it lost much of its municipalist autonomy and spirit.

The case of Barcelona, like Belgrade and the UK, also illustrates some of the challenges facing a municipalist strategy: Is it possible for municipalists to flourish in just one town or city, or is a network of new municipalist governments needed to have a broader impact? Is it possible to scale up municipalist projects or do they need to scale out (Roth / Russell 2018)? What, in practice, would this look like while protecting the autonomy of local organisations and governments?

MUNICIPALISM AND THE TWO REVELATIONS

Moments of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, at least at first sight, provide unpropitious soil for municipalism to grow and flourish. As the three case studies show, the general trend has been towards centralisation and verticalisation, both of which are enemies of municipalism, real democracy and feminism. At the same time, local responses have tried to address the crisis from a different perspective, with mixed success, depending on the intensity of action by central government: from very intense in Serbia to a weaker (but still tough) response in Spain, with the UK falling somewhere in between.

Although radical municipalism as a political strategy could seem like a weak response to the great challenges of our times, it all depends on how the current crises, and especially the pandemic, are framed. Furthermore, such a statement overlooks new municipalism's ability to address complex issues, as if it were only capable of dealing with petty local problems. Indeed, some limitations and challenges faced by the municipalist movement were mentioned in the previous section, but in these concluding remarks I would like to focus on how some aspects of the COVID-19 crisis can help to reveal the potential of municipalism, however implausible this avenue might seem.

The first reason not to dismiss municipalism out of hand is that local governments are actually well placed for the task of addressing complex problems because this is the level where the effects of these problems manifest themselves and these authorities have readier access to information about the reality on the ground. They can find solutions that actually meet the needs of their local community, whereas national governments usually offer one-size-all responses. And this is reinforced where, as proposed by new municipalism,

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they coordinate institutional with non-institutional action. Proximity enables a strategy of sharing power and democratising decision-making that becomes less feasible the higher one goes in the public institutional bureaucracy. At the local level, the boundaries between the institution and the community can be blurred, and coordinated responses can be found at the interface between local authorities and social collectives. Of course, these may not always materialise and various dynamics are possible: from inaction by either side, to conflict and city councils externalising activities to civil society, as in the case of the UK mentioned above. However, new municipalism's potential lies in the possibility of that cooperation happening, which appears to be a much better way to address a crisis in care than centralised state action.

Second, a common criticism of municipalism is that it disregards the fact that local authorities have limited competences and resources, especially in certain countries. How the UK has handled the pandemic is a clear illustration of this problem, and many would argue that this is a reason to focus any political strategy on central government instead of local authorities. However, in general, the latter can always address issues beyond their formal competences through policy entrepreneurship (Mintrom / Norman 2009), e.g. Barcelona and its impact on migration policy (Garcés-Mascareñas / Gebhardt 2020), by influencing the national political agenda (as in the case of Barcelona's mayor, Ada Colau, spearheading a campaign to "set our children free" or to stop evictions during the pandemic), collaborating with other local authorities (as in the case of a recently established network of feminist cities[15] or the cooperation between UK mayors in seeking more funding to address the pandemic), local logistics (as I will explain below), and so on. If we add to this mix the ability to collaborate with local movements and collectives, then the possibility of making a difference and at the same time helping to transform politics becomes clearer.

Third, "proximity generates a great capacity for inter-sectoral coordination (e.g. health, mobility and education) that is much more agile than inter-administrative collaboration" (Subirats 2020). Subirats (ibid.) illustrates this with the case of Barcelona, where Spanish and Catalan bodies with health competences were unable to provide solutions for hospitals that were on the verge of collapse in the first wave of the pandemic. Seeing this, the city council looked at the buildings

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15 See Wray (2020).

in the relevant areas, identified public buildings nearby, talked to the managers of these premises, initiated the logistical processes required to convert these spaces into healthcare facilities, and within a few days there they were: a number of extra buildings to provide hospital overflow capacity, i.e. to accommodate patients for whom no beds were available in hospitals. It would have taken weeks for the Spanish or Catalan government to address this issue on its own, not only because of a lack of information, but also because of the bureaucratic nature of these governments. Furthermore, as Subirats (2020) adds, "we need to take as our starting point the problem, and then find solutions. Authorities have different diagnoses of the problem and then try to coordinate, but they have different objectives. […] That doesn't work."

Going back to the two revelations mentioned at the outset, one of the first observations that can be made is that, if we look at recent events from a feminist point of view and so see them as a crisis of care (not simply care work), then local governments and communities are far better placed than national governments to address the challenges that have arisen. The COVID-19 crisis has shown how much we depend on each other and how important it is to take measures that include care as a key consideration. While national governments have been centralising power and militarising their responses to the crisis, giving major televised addresses, counting deaths and threatening people with sanctions if they did not comply with the new rules, many local authorities have been taking plenty of measures to actually make sure that people stay safe (cleaning public spaces, reorganising public transport, etc.). And that is not all: people have also been organising locally to provide support for each other. Barcelona is a textbook example of how local government can be creative in this regard, and this is probably tied up with the fact that the authorities have very close relations with local movements and collectives, thereby serving as a clear-cut case of a municipalist experience. However, there is a more general point to make here: when it comes to taking care of each other, proximity is key and bureaucratic state apparatuses are incapable of addressing many of a community's immediate needs and of fostering (generally complex) existing relationships.

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Another benefit of the coordination between local institutional and non-institutional actors that is key to a radical municipalist project has been its ability to include the invisible people, i.e. the most vulnerable in society. If we want to make sure that we do not simply address challenges from the perspective of

those who are already privileged, then using local government as a tool may be a good idea, among other reasons because general rules like national laws are usually a poor solution, unless they cover absolutely everyone. The discussion around a basic income that arose during the pandemic clearly illustrates this. Many national governments implemented measures that were meant to alleviate the social and economic impact of lockdown and the travel restrictions on individuals and families. However, the rules that regulate who has access to those benefits cannot cover everyone affected – that is not (or not only) a feature of a specific case but a necessary consequence of how rules work, in that they always generate over- and under-inclusion (Schauer 1993). A universal basic income would have an entirely different impact, because it would cover everyone, making no distinctions between them. During the COVID-19 crisis, many truly vulnerable people, such as those working in the informal economy, migrants, homeless people, sex workers, and so on have been taken care of by local institutional and non-institutional actors. Quite revealing, too, is the fact that in many places calls for a universal basic income have come from the local level. In Spain, a network of municipalities pushing for such an income is forming (Gil 2020), and in the United States the initiative Mayors for a Guaranteed Income – as described in Mayors for a Guaranteed Income (2020) – has recently achieved prominence.

As this chapter comes to a close, I must stress that, of course, this is not only a crisis of care and it does not only affect invisible people. It has also severely impacted the health system of the various countries examined here and the economy at large. Those backing central government might argue that this is a better tool for addressing such challenges. All the same, the importance of municipalism in this domain should not be underestimated. When it comes to the health system, the news in every country talked day and night about the number of people in intensive care and the number of deaths, as if big hospitals were all there was. But primary healthcare played a vital role in dealing with the pandemic in many countries. And here the collaboration between institutions and communities in such circumstances is usually key, as the Ebola crisis in Africa showed in the past (Rushton 2020). In addition, the economic impact of the health crisis is beyond doubt. However, national governments have been reluctant to implement radical changes which would make the economy less dependent on big business and large banks and which could be more conducive to small-scale producers and service providers. Maybe this is not a feature of national governments as such, but relying on

them to fight capitalism seems to me, at least, naïve, as they have historically been the main tool for sustaining patriarchy and capitalism, as a result of their ability to use coercion to keep social order.

New municipalism is no silver bullet. Nor are there any examples of wide-spread municipalist arrangements (besides, in all likelihood, the Kurdish case). It remains impossible to provide compelling evidence that radical municipalism is a desirable alternative to state-centred politics in all its dimensions. However, its potential impact on how politics is done is quite clear, and some of the points made in this paper also show that municipalism can seemingly address a number of the usual critiques. In any case, the question remains: Why should we keep on trying old recipes that have not worked or that have been demonstrated to be incapable of dealing with some of the most pressing challenges we are facing? If even a crisis like this pandemic shows that state-centred democracies are failing in so many ways, why should we keep insisting on central government as the main focus and solution? Why should we keep on implementing strategies that are patriarchal and that continue sustaining capitalism instead of care practices?

In Europe, several years ago there was an agreement to scale up and look for new solutions at a supranational level, i.e. mainly EU level. We could talk at length about how the EU has not been the panacea for our problems either, especially during this pandemic. Is it perhaps now the time to scale down, to decentralise and to radically democratise politics? To focus on care, relationships and the invisible members of our society? Time to recognise the fundamental role of local authorities, communities and social movements in looking after us, even in a global health crisis? Is it perhaps time to do politics in a more democratic and feminist way, so that we can re-engage ordinary people in politics? In short, is it maybe time to (re)consider municipalism?

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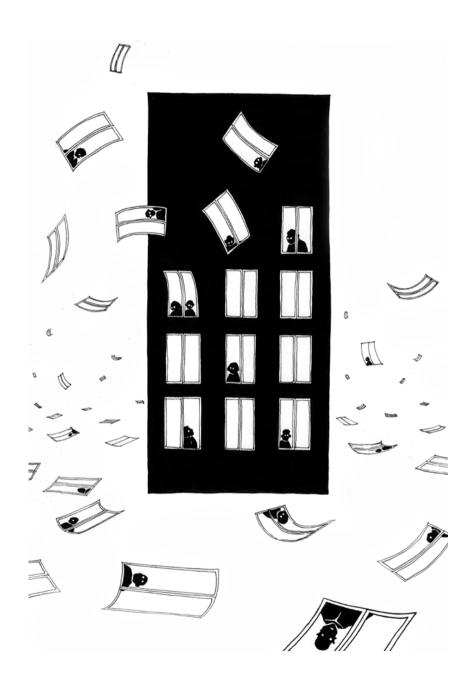
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MORAL CRITIQUE IN AN AGE OF MULTIPLE CRISES: TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

ADAM STANDRING

MATTHEW DONOGHUE

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Societies across Western liberal democracies are experiencing overlapping crises: economic, social, political and ecological. The feeling for many, particularly those on the left is, in Gramsci's terms, that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born", but what is necessary for the birth of a new socio-political order? Why is it that until now, socialists and those on the left have struggled to articulate a coherent counter-hegemonic discourse? In this chapter, we argue that this failing is, at least in part, the result of an ambivalence to making the moral argument for socialist transformation. Both a moral critique of the existing order and the articulation of a socialist future based on a distinct moral order derived from concrete struggles are necessary components of transformative change as they place substantive policy initiatives within a broader vision of how society and the state should function, and for whom.

Morals are important in stabilising otherwise contingent socio-economic orders as they work as cognitive shortcuts for actors, communicating meaning and generating expectations regarding the practices of ourselves and others. While the dominant social contract revolves around an ethos of individualisation, responsibilisation and competition, the current crisis means that the time is right to challenge this and propose a new moral order centred on justice, inclusivity and collective solidarity.

The first part of this chapter looks at the historical ambivalence of the left to moral critique while also examining its nature and possibilities. The second section sketches out what a new social contract grounded in a moral critique of actually existing capitalism might look like, examining ongoing struggles around austerity, deficit and debt and how they structure and constrain the expectations and preferences of European citizens. The final section looks at possible loci for the development of a leftist moral critique, in particular the emergence of new think tanks which provide robust economic analysis within a broader moral framing that challenges the existing orthodoxies of neoliberal capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

The intersecting crises of our times, engulfing the economic, social, political and environmental spheres, mean that the fundamental conditions for progressive systemic change look as propitious as they have in any period since the 1970s. And yet we – as the progressive forces of the broader European left – appear to be paralysed, divided and unable to even formulate, let alone enact, an alternative future. As the classic Gramscian refrain would have it, the old is dying and yet the new cannot be born. This paralysis has become yet more urgent, debilitating and costly in the shadow of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, an ecological crisis that has served both to make visible the deep social, political and economic inequalities pervading European societies and to exacerbate them (Standring / Davies 2020). Neoliberal austerity, itself a symptom of a socio-economic system struggling to reproduce itself, now appears to be back on the menu as governments ponder how to pay for the necessary social expenditure accrued during the pandemic. The principal questions facing the left in these times are 'what is to be done?' and 'how can the multiple, interrelated and overlapping crises of neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy be reframed in a way that is beneficial for progressive and inclusive politics?'.

In this chapter we argue that one of the stumbling blocks to the construction of an inclusive and progressive future is the inability (or perhaps, more accurately, unwillingness) of the left to articulate a clear and convincing moral critique of the contemporary conjuncture. The left – particularly in the UK, but also within the broader European left – has an ambiguous and ambivalent relationship with addressing morals and morality in its political argumentation. This comes, at least in part, from a tension between recognising the materiality of social relations of inequality under capitalism and acknowledging the ideological and discursive foundations of class consciousness. Moral critique has been much more prevalent and successful from the right – linking political demands to normative (but exclusionary) values attached to family, the nation and the 'deservingness' of the individual (Hall 2017). Morals are, therefore, viewed with distrust by many on the left, as relics or regressive tools that have limited value and may even prove counterproductive. We reject this view, instead arguing that morals can stabilise (albeit partially and temporarily) a normative framework on which both a leftist narrative of crisis and a new imagined future can be built.

Given the central role we reserve for morals in our vision for a new progressive future, we should devote some space here to explaining what we mean when we invoke them. Morals are important in the functioning of socio-economic order as cognitive shortcuts for people, communicating meaning, providing rationale and generating expectations regarding the practices of ourselves and others (Sayer 2007). They construct and stabilise contingent social orders and hierarchies at all levels of society by providing the underlying 'rules of the game' (Thompson 1971; Nachtwey 2018), constituted in the informal and formal sets of rules of our social relations and the consequences of adhering to, or breaking, those rules – ultimately they help to define the social contract. Moral orders – as different sets of values cohere to provide a stable foundation for society – are embedded in public discourse, power relations and policy practices and therefore provide multiple opportunities for critique (Boltanski 2011). Morals are deployed by a variety of political tendencies because of the power they have to guide thoughts and actions, constrain and expand expectations and give legitimacy and authority to particular meanings and practices. It is our position that moral critique is derived not from abstract theoretical or ethical frameworks but is negotiated through and emerges from concrete struggles. As Lea Ypi has argued, for many of us socialism already has a moral appeal, valuing solidarity, inclusivity and equality and explicitly criticising individualism, materialism and conspicuous consumption (Ypi 2019). If those of us on the left are unwilling or unable to make use of appeals to moral values to strengthen our arguments, then our opponents are likely to occupy that ground unopposed.

Morals are inherently political, forcing us to examine and question not just the contingent nature of social order (highlighting the distinction between what *may be* from what is constructed as *is*), moral critique allows us to take this further by applying an explicitly normative or virtuous lens to the contingency (distinguishing what is *right* and what is *wrong* from what simply *is*) (Marchart 2018). Perhaps the greatest contemporary example of this, and the case we will develop in more detail throughout this chapter, is that of national deficits, debt and austerity. The Great Recession (2007–2009) has had, and is still having, a profoundly unsettling impact on the European political order, now exacerbated by COVID19. The austerity and structural reforms implemented across many European countries were justified through a discourse of crisis and applied a distinctly moral lens, identifying the profligacy of immoral citizens and the thriftiness of moral citi-

zens (Standring 2018; Matthjis / McNamara 2015). In the meantime, one of the foundational moral tenets of capitalism – that risk is rewarded through profits or punished through loss – was catastrophically undermined as banks were bailed out and private debt was socialised. This in turn has generated a general level of disillusionment among European publics and called into question the existing economic and political system, broadening the scope to challenge the status quo and undermining the normative, moral basis of the current socio-economic order.

In the next section we explain why the European left has been ambivalent to moral critique, particularly in connection with its association with regressive politics, before giving a fuller account of how the existing moral order has collapsed and what opportunities this provides for leftist politics. The section after that will sketch out what a new social contract grounded in a moral critique of actually existing capitalism might look like. This section examines ongoing struggles around austerity, deficit and debt and how they structure and constrain the expectations and preferences of European citizens. Finally, we look at potential loci and actors playing a role in the emergence, development and propagation of moral critique. This involves engaging with examples of grassroots struggles and the production of expertise and knowledge that shape the critique. Even recent government interventions due to the coronavirus pandemic, such as pauses on rental evictions can be analysed to gain an insight into how – or how *not* – to build a new social contract based on the principles of a new moral economy grounded in a commitment to inclusivity, participation and equality.

Keywords:
crisis
moral critique
social contract
austerity
ideology

THE NATURE OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

Why are morals vital to the functioning and reproduction of the (liberal) capitalist order? What form does the moral crisis of liberal capitalism take? Why has the left often been uncomfortable or unwilling to use morals as a tool of systemic change? In this section we tackle each of these questions in turn, beginning, counterintuitively, with the final one.

A HISTORICAL AMBIVALENCE TO MORALS

The moral critique of capitalism has existed for as long as capitalism itself. Each of the prominent early political economists from Adam Smith to David Ricardo and Karl Marx sought to ground their observations on the functioning of the economy in a normative framework of moral values. It was not enough for the division of labour, the efficiency of the market or free trade to be empirically described but they had to be understood within a broader framework that described them as good and desirable (or else bad and harmful). Similarly, with Marx, the observation of exploitation and alienation carries a moral weight that urges efforts to affect material change. It acknowledges, more or less explicitly, that things simply do not have to be this way: bad things can change or be improved, and it is through human agency that this is achieved. In all cases, the ideal and moral are interrelated to and grounded in material observations, not to mention concrete struggles.

Morals and values have equally been recognised as providing the foundations and legitimation for the structured social order that influences how people act under capitalism. E. P. Thompson's important essay *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* gives a historic account of the social norms and obligations that the English peasantry and proto-working class felt in relation to economic processes, how these in turn created reciprocal expectations (over things such as pay and prices) which when unmet would provoke direct action, in the form of a riot (Thompson 1971). Sociologists from Max Weber and Emile Durkheim to, more recently, Luc Boltanski have sought to understand the social ethos, the values and the spirit of capitalism which sees people becoming complicit with, or choosing 'rationally' to participate in, the capitalist system. As Boltanski and his co-author Eve Chiapello describe it (Boltanski / Chiapello 2007: 10) (emphasis added):

The spirit of capitalism is precisely the set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps to justify this order and, by legitimating them, to sustain

Targeting the moral foundations of the socio-economic system had been a
popular form of critique among those on the left, particularly in the first half
of the 20th century, but it was itself not without its critics from within the
tendency. As Tim Rogan details in his account of three prominent "moral
economists" (Rogan 2017), we can observe a fundamental and decisive shift
away from "vivid moral argument" in favour of "calculations of advantage
and disadvantage fortified with anger and indignation", which, without an
anchoring in the "deeper questions of liberty, solidarity and order", mean that
a critique of capitalism is likely to be reduced to 'technocratic' or 'utilitarian'
issues. The three economists (albeit stretching this descriptor) Rogan profiles,
R. H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi and E. P. Thompson, each shared similar concerns,
despite significant differences in perspective, in particular the willingness to
deploy a moral critique in order to destabilise the utilitarian/liberal order, "by
insinuating alternative understandings of what it means to be human in its
place", and in doing so, to (re)imagine and (re)construct a new future.

Critics of the ideational and moral approach have tended to concentrate on what
they consider to be the reactionary nature of moral critique and in particular
the way it can obscure material antagonisms and conflicts arising from the
relations of production. Not only, in these terms, is moral critique regressive
and traditionalist but it is limiting of actual political change, as a dead end that
serves instead to "preserve bourgeois state power" (Eagleton 1976).

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By the mid20th century, the moral critique of capitalism was coming under
sustained attack from those on the left, in the form of Althusserian struc-
tural Marxists who rejected the singular humanism of moral critique, and
from those on the right, liberal technocrats of the post-war social demo-
cratic consensus on the lookout for a reformist compromise between capital
and labour. Accusations that this approach was 'old fashioned' and 'provin-
cial' (Anderson 1980) were repeated in both the UK and continental Europe
and saw the influence of moral critique on the left diminish and the ground
surrendered to a rejuvenated radical right who viewed their project as both
an economic and a moral one.

In his epoch-defining essay of early Thatcherism, *The Great Moving Right Show*, Stuart Hall highlights both the successful deployment of moral framing by those on the (radical) right – in connection with the construction of a discourse on law and order – while stressing the interrelation between the ideational/moral and the material (Hall 2017: 184):

[T]he language of law and order is sustained by moralisms. It is where the great syntax of 'good' versus 'evil', of civilised and uncivilised standards, of the choice between anarchy and order, constantly divides the world up and classifies into its appointed stations. The play on 'values' and on moral issues in this area is what gives to the law and order crusade much of its grasp on popular morality and common sense conscience. Yet despite this, it touches concretely the experiences of crime and theft, of loss of scarce property and fears of unexpected attack in working class areas and neighbourhoods […].

What is important to take from this is that morals, or rather the particular resonance that a moral critique may have among a group, are intimately related to the lived experience of the population.

The relational and situated aspect of morals is essential for our own conception of the source, production and stabilisation of critique. We are sceptical of both the possibility and desirability of universalistic theoretical and ethical frameworks to ground moral critique, given the ultimately contingent nature of social relations. This in turn acknowledges the contestability and revisability of our own moral stance (Howarth et al. 2016). As Axel Honneth argues in his own great work on moral critique *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 2005: 168), one of the principal issues in suggesting a moral basis for critique is distinguishing between the progressive and the reactionary. His solution is the establishment of an abstract normative framework based on the criteria of love, rights and esteem. Realist theorists like Raymond Williams and Raymond Guess reject the idea that (moral) philosophy, universal or abstract theories could serve as the foundation for ethical life, a criticism we share. Instead, they argue that "ethics is a deeply socially embedded and practical activity: a matter of acting in accordance with a set of internalised dispositions" (Hall / Sleat 2017). The practical activity of this comes through both the negotiated and

communal activity of struggle – producing solidarity and inclusion – and self-reflection or reflexivity.[1]

One of the most important elements differentiating humans and non-human actors (or agents) is our ability for reflexivity – we can reflect on and judge our external environment and how we (in the sense of both the individual and the group) interact with it. We use these moral judgements, i.e. judgements about whether interactions are good or bad, in order to justify our actions to ourselves and others, but these justifications are not wholly internal to ourselves, instead emerging from and (re)producing the broader social order we inhabit (Boltanski / Chiapello 2007: 10):

Contributing to the reproduction of the social order, [moral justifications] have in particular the effect of enabling people not to find their everyday universe uninhabitable – one of the conditions of a durable world. If, contrary to prognoses regularly heralding its collapse, capitalism has not only survived, but ceaselessly extended its empire, it is because it could rely on a number of shared representations – capable of guiding action – and justifications, which present it as an acceptable and even desirable order of things: the only possible order, or the best of all possible orders.

There are multiple, competing and often antagonistic values and morals in any given social setting, but there are social institutions which serve to legitimise and stabilise particular sets of values around a single, hegemonic moral order. These institutions include entities like the political system and the media, and also schools and universities. They also help to construct and stabilise a shared understanding of what precise form broad social values like liberty, justice, etc. should take. For example, the notion of 'liberty' may relate to my freedom to own and accumulate property and pass that on to my heirs but it might also be understood as the ability to thrive and succeed in a just and equal society that minimises the transmission of unearned privilege. It may be a property of the individual or something gained through collective interaction. But these notions are historically and spatially contingent, not

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1   Our position diverges from that of anti-foundationalists like Raymond Geuss, who would reject any objective and universal basis for grounding social life, and has more in common with post-foundationalists (Marchart 2007). Judith Butler describes this position as follows: "the point is not to do away with foundations [...]. Rather, the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations authorizes, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses" (Butler 1995: 7).

universal, and are ultimately political in the sense that dominant meanings require alternatives to be obscured or devalued (Butler 1995).

There is a danger inherent to the moral element of or justification for capitalism because while it can embed the ideas, principles and values deeply within both the individual and the group, it must fundamentally acknowledge that those principles exist within a state of contingency (Marchart 2007). For something to be considered good or just, it must exist within a sphere outside fate – those things that we cannot, change, affect or influence can be celebrated but they do not inspire in us as humans the same sensation of guilt when we work outside or against them. Equally, as Boltanski and Chiapello again acknowledge (Boltanski / Chiapello 2007: 486), there exist spheres of activity that operate outside work: family, leisure, romance, etc. The moral justifications for capitalism, which impress on us a need to work more, work harder and work in particular ways (flexibly, networked, entrepreneurially, etc.) will necessarily create tensions in those other spheres and so the moral order – and thus critique – can be extended beyond our work life to examine whether capitalism impinges on our family and non-work life (Cooper 2017).

THE MORAL CRISIS OF LIBERALISM

Among the many crises facing liberal democracy, we must also consider the ongoing moral crisis of liberalism in which the moral order that legitimises and sustains the social order has been seriously, and perhaps fatally, damaged. We can understand this in two distinct ways, firstly what we might consider to be the organic moral crisis of liberalism which emerges from the very foundational beliefs and assumptions of liberalism as a universal frame of thought. Secondly, we might think of the conjunctural moral crisis of liberalism in which the organic crisis plays out differently in different social or national (or other spatial) contexts depending on the particular form liberalism has taken there. Here we consider 'liberalism' to be a general referent, a scheme of thought that, while holding a hegemonic position across Europe, remains differentiated and manifests itself in a variety of ways at different local levels. This gives us 'varieties of liberalism' (as well as its contemporary forms, such as late liberalism and

neoliberalism) across Europe.[2] We also recognise there to be an intimate interrelation between the development of liberal democracy and liberal capitalism, to the extent that a crisis in one is indicative of a crisis in the other (MacPherson 1977).

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2   For reasons of space, here we cannot go into either the nature or extent to which contemporary liberalism (late liberalism, neoliberalism, etc.) differs from classical liberalism. For a convincing description of this, we direct the reader instead to Chapters 1–3 of Dardot and Laval (2017). For our purposes, as we are referring to the overall scheme of thought that favours individualism over collectivism as well as a variety of contemporary democratic and capitalist systems, 'liberalism' here serves as a general and useful, albeit inaccurate, descriptor.

It is no coincidence that liberalism as a school of thought arose at a particular time in history when capitalism was emerging in Europe (Losurdo 2011). It marked a specific moral shift in which the principles of accumulation, private property and profit became more broadly socially acceptable (Thompson 1971), and in order to justify this, a system of thought had to articulate the rights and obligations, and the risks and rewards, i.e. the trade-offs, that such a system entails. What makes the moral underpinnings of liberalism particularly successful is the way in which they have been internalised among European publics to constitute a 'common sense'. The moral values themselves barely have to be articulated – indeed, it is often only in times of acute crisis that the specificities of morals are made explicit.

Equally, *liberal* democracy requires a similar set of moral trade-offs. In exchange for more people (the working class, women, ethnic minorities) having a say in how the social system is run, it is accepted that there are institutions (the judiciary, the media, technical institutions) that fall outside direct popular control. It is also paradigmatic that the system allows a plurality of views and politics up to the point that any particular view or politics might undermine or challenge that system. Under a liberal democracy/capitalism, this necessarily includes any overtly anti-capitalist system of thought that might be considered 'anti-system politics'. As Jean-Claude Michea, a notable French critic of liberalism, notes (Michea 2009: vii):

> Winston Churchill said of democracy that it was 'the worst form of government, except for all those other forms'. It would be hard to find a more appropriate formulation of the liberal spirit. Whilst this displays an unfailing optimism as to the capacity of human beings to make themselves 'masters and possessors of nature', it displays a profound pessimism when it comes to appreciating their moral capacity to build a decent world for themselves.

The obscuring of the moral foundations of liberalism can be observed in the proliferation of institutions and technologies of control that have developed in order to instil the moral order without articulating it. The very plurality of liberalism ensures that people are presented with a multitude of choices and yet they cannot be sure of making the right one. Targets, measurements and metrics discipline liberal subjects into making the 'right' decisions even when they are unaware of them (Beer 2016). In those cases where social structures prevent the 'right' decisions being made, then behavioural economics gives us techniques that 'nudge' us towards narrowing the range of possible oppor-

tunities and choices or stacking the odds in favour of the optimal choice, but often with a distinct sense of reward or punishment for compliance or non-compliance.

In the conjunctural moral crisis of liberalism, specific technologies that had embedded and legitimised moral order appear to have broken down or at least come to be questioned on a wider scale. One of the consequences of the Great Recession (2007–2011) was that a fundamental tenet of liberal capitalism was exposed as a sham: no punishment was forthcoming for those responsible for the crisis; indeed, many of those whose risky deals had jeopardised the financial system and the global economy ended up being bailed out at the taxpayer's expense (Glynos et al. 2012). Profits on capital are morally justified in terms of risk: the higher an investor's risk of losing their money, the higher the interest or equity share they will take. The crisis helped to break the link between risk and profit, not merely by failing to understand risk but, through a process of securitising loans of different levels of risk together, by obscuring it. Financial risk was socialised, as the concept of 'too big to fail' undermined the very idea of moral hazard, allowing greater risks to be taken without the costs falling to investors. Under such circumstances, the moral order was left open to challenge from both the right and the left.

Under contemporary liberal capitalism, debt plays an important moral role for disciplining subjects and one that has inverted a historical understanding of the debtor/creditor relationship. In the next sections we pay particular attention to the moral critique of austerity, debt and deficit, and so it is worth briefly expanding here on this issue. Across many cultures and periods, the act of lending money, usury, has been morally rejected – particularly the idea that profits or rents could be derived from this task. The development of liberal capitalism meant that credit was not just desirable but necessary for the reproduction of capital and therefore a moral shift took place, away from one in which the creditor was morally culpable to one in which the debtor became culpable. As Maurizio Lazzarato argues (Lazzarato 2012) (emphasis in original):

Debt produces a specific "morality," at once different from and complementary to that of "labor". The couple "effort-reward" of the ideology of work is doubled by the morality of the *promise* (to honor one's debt) and the *fault* (of having entered into it).

This inversion of the 'blame' for debt and thus the guilt for it was particularly important in the aftermath of the financial crisis when the largest debtors became countries themselves. A strongly moral frame was applied to the notion of countries taking on large deficits and increasing their national debt which became a primary motivation and legitimation for austerity policies. While moral equivalences between the national finances and household finances were regularly drawn, this in itself was unsustainable and contributed to the ongoing moral crisis of liberalism – as debt, exacerbated by increased precarity and falling living standards, became an increasing feature of many people's lives, the moral issue of debt itself became a source of critique.

SOCIAL CONTRACTS OLD AND NEW

A social contract is an agreement on the vertical and horizontal relationships (i.e. those between citizens and the state, and those between citizens, respectively) in a nation, state or political region such as the EU. It sets out the rules of membership of a political community – whether formal (e.g. citizenship) or informal (residence in a particular location or community, class membership, race/ethnicity, gender, etc.). The social contract is the bedrock of liberal contractualism, which has moulded the political and moral frameworks for societies since the time of Locke. Under liberalism, the social contract is based on the equal moral worth of individuals, which forms the starting point for the liberal notion of equality under the state. This is not enough in itself to build a socialist world, but it does provide vital signposts for that process. Liberal contractualism operates on the premise of entirely autonomous individuals, unencumbered by any type of restriction (save for utilitarian considerations, such as Mill's harm principle). In this scenario, income inequality for example is essentially natural; it is not seen as a negative that someone could buy influence through property, such as the requirement that only property owners could vote. This commitment to a very narrow form of individual inequality that is blind to multifaceted circumstances obscures the conditions arising from the forces and relations of production.

Liberalism's development into 'social liberalism', in combination with different forms of the safety net (or welfare state), justified state intervention in poverty, inequality and representation. It brought about major changes to the social contract through the development of various rights. T. H. Marshall, who famously outlined the development of rights under liberalism sketched out a path from civic rights, which provided for individual equality in the eyes of the law, to political rights, such as the right to assembly and to (eventually

universal) suffrage, and finally to social rights – "from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society" (Marshall 1950: 69). Social rights paved the way for what we now know as the welfare state, and as we know from examining different welfare regimes (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990), the definition, extent of these rights and the eligibility for them can differ quite significantly both across borders and over time.

The social contract was (and still is) so important to liberalism because it encapsulated the difference between liberalism and feudalism. Both had a contract, but it was liberalism that made the contract explicit, and involved – at least notionally – all members of society. The notion of the equal worth of all citizens is mooted, considering the (historical) role of property and the (qualified) acceptance of various inequalities as inevitable or sometimes even desirable. Yet the notion of the social contract as a component of moral critique and as a normative framework is powerful because it is something that everyone is implicitly familiar with. It is intuitively understood by many, if not most people, that social life is made up of a series of rights and responsibilities. This does not change under other systems like socialism. Thus, the left can use this framework to drive moral critique of actually existing capitalism, avoiding the 'abstract moralising' that Marx warned against.

The distrust of abstract moralising arguably comes from the distinction between 'base' and 'superstructure' in the classical Marxist conception of ideology. For reasons of space, it is not possible to develop this line of argument fully in this chapter. However, it is worth considering the overlaps between moral critique and ideology critique. Strecker (2008: 86) defines the latter as "the rational critique of social relations which are conceived of as legitimate by the actors involved in these relations". In many cases, social relations are legitimised through a moral framework, as demonstrated in the quotation from Hall's *Great Moving Right Show* earlier in the chapter. Critical theory positions itself as emancipatory, and ideology critique makes a contribution to this. There is a clear normative element; it articulates what should be, based on more than simply the technocratic deficiencies of the current order, and attempts to build in a theory of praxis to achieve the normative vision. Insomuch as emancipation is about justice, it makes a moral claim on what

is inherently good or bad, the narrative for which can be controlled through ideational and material struggle.

The aim is to take unarticulated feelings of discomfort about the social world, especially of (perceived) injustices, that many have and provide a means of making these explicit so that they can be acted upon. A moral framework here is useful because it can simultaneously appeal at both the individual and the abstract levels. A social contract, as a moral framework in itself, can provide the common rallying point for imagining a new set of rights and responsibilities based on new conceptions of justice and fairness that stand in direct opposition to those that are currently failing – and do so in a language and tone that provides a familiar reference point.

IMAGINING AND STRUGGLING FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

Moral frameworks outline and legitimise social, political and economic rules. These can be 'soft' (conventions; culture) as well as 'hard' (law), and gain legitimacy from the moral frameworks in which they develop. These frameworks create cognitive shortcuts for what is considered (socially, economically, etc.) good or bad in a given society. Yet they are not inalienable: they represent particular historical moments, and relations and forces of production. They are legitimised through the 'spontaneous consent' of the polity (see Donoghue 2018: 398). A new social contract can play on these cognitive shortcuts, challenge 'common sense' and provide the space to think of alternatives (e.g. Donoghue 2018: 400f.).

This is not a straightforward task. Social contract theory (and practice) is inherently connected to liberal Enlightenment-inspired thinking that, at first glance, may leave little space for socialist thought and practice. Yet, when combined with appropriate organising and made part of wider material and ideational struggles, a social contract approach could have transformative effects. This would necessarily require a (moral) critique of existing capitalism and contemporary neoliberalism, as well as a presentation of practical alternatives.

WHY SHOULD WE USE A SOCIAL CONTRACT?

The utility of a social contract for the left is that it can be used to guarantee a minimum floor of (social) rights, based on a reconfiguration of societies' understanding of the social good. The Irish think tank Social Justice Ireland (2020) sets out a series of goods that could be found in a modern social contract, including "access to meaningful work, as well as protection from poverty at

times where paid employment is not accessible" and "a guarantee that [citizens'] needs will be met at times of ill-health", among others.

These points are influenced by traditional thinking about welfare politics – especially the so-called 'golden age' of the welfare state, in the couple of decades after the Second World War. In this sense, it follows the implicit rules of the existing social contract. This represents an attempt to harness existing frameworks to instigate a more progressive social settlement. Different moral frames/frameworks provide different scopes of manoeuvre in terms of defining the character and depth of these goods. Take healthcare: a guarantee that health needs will be met could involve mandatory social insurance (potentially regressive, depending on sectoral interests within the welfare state). An alternative is a universal, free health service. Indeed, it could involve the abolition of private healthcare with all resources redirected into the public system. The underlying point is that the social contract provides the base level from which demands can be made, and the moral framework provides the scope regarding the depth of such rights. Even countries with highly regressive governments, in which capital has a stranglehold over labour, still have commitments to tackling poverty, no matter how disingenuous or lacking in ambition they might be.

The material context is also important here. Ireland is still recovering from a sovereign debt crisis, the effects of which were felt most strongly by the worst off in society. The recovery, as in many other European countries, was presented using a moral case. Bankers and the 'Troika' were demonised as a way of shifting blame for tough financial decisions. And, as with many countries (such as the UK), a strong framing of 'we're all in it together' was developed to justify higher taxes and painful austerity measures. These measures spurred on a vocal political response both in the form of social movements and political parties. Although this chapter focuses mainly on moral frameworks, their implications are felt in the material context. A radical-sounding social contract may achieve less in a (perceived) low-resource state than a more moderate one may achieve in a state with more resources and political will.
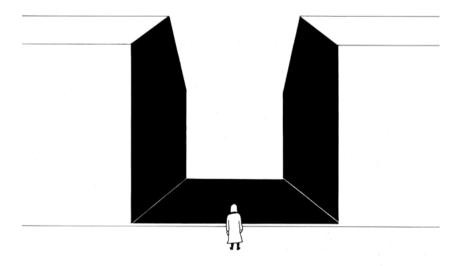
A clear moral framework has the potential to contribute to building up solidarity across class boundaries, giving what can appear abstract issues to some a human face. Therefore, a well-crafted social contract, couched within appropriate moral critiques and alternative frameworks, has the ability to provide fertile ground for making demands that simply would not be possible in the current circumstances.

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WHAT SHOULD A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT LOOK LIKE?

Our plea for a new social contract assumes that the 'old' social contract is no longer fit for purpose. The social contract writ large is that of mid- to late-20th-century liberalism and Third Way social democracy, which has overseen a progressive degradation of living standards, working standards and the erosion of institutional support structures for millions of people across Europe. In this sense the existing social contract has presided over and legitimised the establishment of a deep precarity, primarily for wage workers, but also for those in traditionally white-collar jobs who can nevertheless not afford to participate in social and civic lives that require 'buy-in' in the form of assets and consumption. Guy Standing (2013) characterises the precariat as having "minimal trust relations with capitalism or the state, making it quite unlike the salariat. And it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states."

There is a whole stratum of society, then, that is no longer attached to the traditional forces and relations of production despite, ironically, being the biggest victims of those relations and forces. In this sense, i.e. given the acknowledgement that material conditions drive political relations, it is all the more important to develop a morally conditioned ideological framework that brings the precariat together with the more traditional working class, and indeed those in the middle classes experiencing the same alienation and anomie caused by these changes in the forces and relations of production.

Assuming for now the resilience of the liberal democratic model to frontal challenge (akin to Gramsci's 'war of manoeuvre'), if a new social contract is able to (eventually) challenge the status quo, it needs to afford citizens multiple routes towards both political and economic influence. However, the state will still primarily represent the interests of the economic elite and ruling class rather than the population as a whole. Marx famously asserted in *The German Ideology* (Marx 1845) that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas". If the focus of a new social contract is to lay the foundations for transformative change, the first step is to provide routes for 'ordinary' citizens and subaltern groups to challenge these ruling ideas. The difficulty is that in order to get to a position in which it is possible to even put in place these new foundations, the ruling ideas must already be destabilised. Fortunately, crisis provides the ideal plain on which to begin this destabilising process.

If we accept that even partial change can be brought about through largely reformist means, we cannot rely on the benevolence of the state. Reforms can be secured through a combination of direct action and party politics, but the larger and more wide-ranging the reform, the greater the need for grass-roots activism. Furthermore, the defence and maintenance of rights involves what Young (1989) describes as a constant process of rights claiming. Once rights are won, they are not then guaranteed forever. If these rights tip the balance of power away from elites, the ruling class will chip away at them. This has two implications for a social contract. Firstly, this must be a living agreement: it cannot be a relic of a long-gone historical moment, but instead should be reflective of the contemporary social, political and economic situation. Secondly, the social contract must protect and even prioritise the needs of the subaltern groups. Of course, these matters are usually controlled by the ruling classes. This reinforces the need for a 'live' and reactive social contract that enshrines citizens' ability to challenge the ruling ideas. This is unlikely to come from a direct and explicit attack on the existing social contract, but rather from multiple movements and campaigns around cognate issues that resonate with key tenets of the social contract. One such example can be found from the organisation of opposition to austerity measures across Europe.

BUILDING A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT: ACTORS AND LOCI OF MORAL CRITIQUE

Our vision of moral critique, as we have argued, is not something abstract or existing purely in the realm of ideas and rhetoric, but a strategy that is grounded in concrete struggles for equality, justice and change. There are any number of potential loci and actors through which the appeal for change, and the building of a new social contract through moral values, may be articulated, but here we focus on the role and the potential of what we broadly call 'think tanks', a term we elaborate on below. This section is in no way intended to be considered prescriptive or exclusionary. In fact, given the different political environments in different countries and across the local, national and transnational level, we would guard against prescriptive strategies of the 'one-size-fits-all' variety. For any political strategy to have broad and sustained success, it must activate a broad coalition of forces both within the state and beyond. At the very least, engaging social movements, the media and institutionalised political (parliamentary) forces will increase the chances of success. Our focus on think tanks is partly illustrative, in the sense that we see in them existing examples of how such coalitions are built through a joint endeavour and articulation of a shared moral vision of change, at least partly driven by our own theoretical and empirical commitment to the importance of knowledge and discourse in stabilising social order.

KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL ORDER

The close relationship between social knowledge and social order has long been argued, particularly by sociologists of knowledge. In their influential historical study of the interrelated emergence of liberalism and the scientific method, *Leviathan and the Air Pump*, Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer express this in a way that has resonated over the decades since it was written, "[s]olutions to the problem of knowledge are solutions to the problem of social order" (Shapin / Schaffer 2011: 332). Indeed, many scholars, commentators and activists today attribute the current breakdown of social order – the interrelated crises of democracy, capitalism and liberalism – to, in part, a breakdown in a shared understanding and base of social knowledge which in turn has seen the emergence of the post-truth milieu in which we find ourselves (Davies 2020). While these crises cannot be reduced to the question of knowledge, it is informative to understand what is meant by many when they declaim the rise of post-truth and its relationship to our current crises.

Post-truth, informed by an idealised (and ahistorical) liberal view of the Enlight-enment, is seen as a corruption of the notion that a strong distinction can and should be maintained between facts and values (Fischer 2019). It is our contention that this distinction has never existed in reality and where it has been promoted and popularised, in practice the purpose has been to obscure the political terrain of opportunities and difference. This is an argument that the moral economists, discussed previously, would have been all too familiar with, but it is something that has faded into the background in the intervening period as economics has sought to be presented as a neutral and objective science rather than a tool for arguing for a better world. Economics, as a discipline, with its form of knowledge and broader social logic has become the pre-eminent type of social knowledge structuring modern society, particularly in Europe, helped in no small part by the prolifera-tion of think tanks that popularise its logic and integration into decision-making processes. The idea that economics provides a singularly 'neutral', 'rational' or 'objective' view of the world is, to our mind, mistaken, and yet we are not blind to the power that it holds in legitimising social order, and so our interest lies in how think tanks have brought together economic knowledge and moral critique.

The term 'think tank' has quite a specific meaning in the Anglo-American world, calling to mind organisations such as the Brookings Institute, the Heritage Founda-tion, the Institute of Economic Affairs and Chatham House. These organisations are typically privately funded – although they may receive public grants and subsi-dies – and non-partisan but produce knowledge, expertise and policy advice along particular ideological lines (Fischer 2002). In other countries (and even transna-tionally), similar functions are performed by organisations with different names – research institutes and public foundations – and different relationships both with the state and the political institutions of their country. Examples are organisations such as *Institut Montaigne* (France), the Centre for International Studies (*Centro Studi Internazionali*) (Italy) and the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (transnational) and the German *Stiftung* (foundation) system. For ease of refer-ence, and while acknowledging the differences between them, we use the term think tank rather broadly to mean organisations that seek to directly influence public discourse and policy through the production of knowledge.

THINK TANKS AS LOCI AND AGENTS OF MORAL CRITIQUE
The functions of think tanks, while varied across countries in terms of the type of activities they fund, produce and communicate, share certain broad charac-teristics. For the most part these organisations produce knowledge, expertise

and advice in a way that is both 'legitimate' and 'authoritative' and so will have an influence directly on policymakers – the links to whom might be more or less formal – as well as to broader public discourse. As we mentioned, at least part of their legitimacy is derived from the nature as well as the tone of the knowledge they produce, providing policy advice that is framed in ostensibly neutral economic terms, thus obscuring the ideological, value-laden and implicitly moral aspects of their advice. In this way, think tanks have been particularly successful in developing and stabilising the neoliberal status quo (Pühringer 2020) and reproducing the existing social contract. What has changed, or at the very least begun to shift, in recent years and particularly in response to the financial crisis and the austerity measures passed by governments across Europe is the way that some think tanks have purposely changed their focus from a singular relationship with the corridors of power to serving as one node in a network that stretches from parliamentary politics all the way to social movements and struggles in the streets. Think tanks no longer simply provide expertise and advice to policymakers on how they might make (rational, efficient, effective) policy – increasingly they provide advice to activists on how to organise and articulate a challenge to the current order and in favour of a different future.

Expertise, particularly economic expertise, has provided a strong empirical and discursive foundation for the austerity policies which have been present in European societies in recent decades and which intensified in response to the financial crisis. That the counterpoint to this, anti-austerity, finds a basis within the same realm or sphere is not merely a question of imitation but both is a recognition of the power resting in these social relations and provides an opportunity or potential to broaden the scope of expertise (Standring 2019). Knowledge and expertise have great emancipatory potential if harnessed towards progressive goals and if imbued with progressive values (Wainwright 2018). There are numerous examples across Europe and across the anti-austerity movements (however broadly envisaged) that we might wish to relate but we draw in particular on the work and campaigns of the UK's New Economics Foundation (NEF) in order to illustrate our point more fully.

Our choice of NEF is informed not simply by the type of critique it produces – which is consistently informed by a moral critique of austerity and debt – but also it forming part of the ecology of the UK anti-austerity movement. It is not simply applying an abstract ethical framework to discrete struggles and campaigns, but rather moral critique is co-constitutive of the very struggles

that it supports. It fulfils a role that Mike Davis has recently described – albeit in the US context – as essential for the left, namely of being "'organizations of organizers' offering niches that allow poor young people, not just ex-graduate students, to lead lives of struggle" (Davis 2020: 30). NEF's expertise and connections with institutional parts of the state (such as links with the Labour Party) mean that it has the capacity to abstract moral critique from concrete campaigns and project this towards a larger struggle without subjecting critique to hierarchical or domineering relations.

At first sight, NEF appears like many other think tanks, producing policy papers across a range of issues – among those most recently published include papers on labour vulnerability in the fishing industry, childcare infrastructure and migrants' access to healthcare. These issues, we might concede, are suggestive that the organisation is progressive or left leaning and has issues of social justice as a principal focus. What sets it apart, or marks it as different, however, is a more integrated, consistent and coherent appeal to a set of moral values that underpin the type of work the foundation does. This is articulated well in the opening paragraphs of its report, *Change The Rules: New Rules for the Economy* (NEF 2020: 5), which serves as much as a statement of intent or manifesto as it does as an action plan or work programme:

A different economy that works for people and planet – dreamed of almost 40 years ago by the New Economics Foundation's founders – has never been needed more urgently. Yet change will not happen by accident or economic evolution; it will be driven by people fighting to change the rules that govern the way our economy works […] Some have proposed reviving the social democratic agenda of the post-war era, but this would not be enough.

It combines this moral exhortation for action, for transformative change, with rigorous economic analysis not just of the current state of UK capitalism and the uneven and unequal effects of austerity but of the costings of the policies it recommends and potential sources of revenue. This is a report that speaks the language of economics but with a distinct moral accent.

Another factor that sets NEF apart from other, more traditional think tanks, is the way it fosters and strengthens connections with a broad network of social actors, from grassroots social movements and campaigners to politicians and policymakers. While many traditional think tanks have long been seen largely as a vehicle for sympathetic intellectuals and academics to have their views

presented to policymakers (hence the idea of discussions taking place in 'smoke-filled rooms'), the function of movement building and organising is not just taken seriously within NEF but understood as a fundamental and integrated part of the production and legitimation of knowledge. There are numerous of examples of this, but the campaign on debt provides a good demonstration (NEF 2020: 17):

In East London, NEF has been working with a group of women who have direct experience of household debt. From small beginnings with just one or two people, the group has grown as more and more come to share their stories about how debt has ruined their family finances, harmed relationships and led to mental and physical health problems. But the group is not just about sharing experiences. Together – and supported by NEF's skilled community organisers – members of the group have started to build a campaign to end the household debt trap, which has now seen them meet with local authority leaders, key people in the Financial Conduct Authority, a cross-party group of MPs and John Glen, the government's Treasury minister responsible for regulating finance. They have won promises from each to take action.

Organisation, the mobilisation of personal experiences, moral critique of the debt trap and the skills, knowledge and experience of the think tank have resulted in concrete political action. Examples can be found in social housing provision, climate action and local democracy. This focus on building grassroots movements and empowering people to participate in politics and social action is itself a moral critique of a form of politics that sees people disempowered and views politics as a matter for elites whereby the public are just required to rubber-stamp the choices made above them when elections come round.

NEF had an important voice in the innovative but often tentative and uncertain policymaking debates taking place in the UK Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, marking a definite shift from the past – dominated by more traditional think tanks like the Fabian Society, the Institute for Public Policy Research and Demos. It remains to be seen whether such a relationship can be maintained under the current leadership – once again highlighting the ways in which the political terrain is uncertain and subject to shifts – but in the midst of the COVID19 pandemic the social order remains unsettled, febrile and in need of new ideas. Clearly NEF's work and activities are not unique in these respects and there are a number of similar movements and coalitions across Europe that have integrated a moral critique of actually existing capitalism with

the rigorous production of knowledge and expertise that give these arguments a surer footing and greater legitimacy among both policymakers and the public.

CONCLUSION

Moral critique is with us whether we like it or not. The language of 'deservingness', 'fairness' and 'liberty' have already consistently and successfully been deployed by conservative and reactionary forces across Europe. These moral frames have been used to embed ideas around austerity – "we're reaping what we've sowed" (Stanley 2014) – popularising the idea that it is the general public who must pay for the risks and irresponsibility of the few. Moral discourses have equally been reproductive of the inequalities in society, allowing passivity in response to cuts hitting hardest those already suffering the most. The 'skivers versus strivers' discourse was indicative of how moral values – here the idea that people should work hard and be justly rewarded for their work – are used to create social divisions, constructing a class of undeserving poor (Meek 2016). Reactionary moral critiques have been extended further to reinforce conservative social values across many aspects of people's work and family life, including the promotion of traditional notions of gender roles and individual responsibility. It would be a mistake to see the pandemic, and particularly governmental responses in the areas of social policy and welfare, as a decisive break with or challenge to the dominant conservative moral critique. The expansion of welfare provision, employment furloughs and the refinancing of public services (admittedly after decades of underfunding) have been accompanied by a ramped-up discourse of 'pain down the road'. Hanging over all these emergency measures like a sword of Damocles is the knowledge that they are temporary and that they will ultimately have to be paid for through service and welfare cuts, 'for the economic good'.

The question for progressive forces on the left is not how we can best imitate the right, given that moral critique has often been viewed with the suspicion that it is a blunt and ultimately reactionary tool, but rather, how we might harness this for the goals of our own political project. The ambivalence of the left to morals lies also in the understanding that questions of inequality, dominance and liberty have bases in concrete material struggles and the tendency moralism and idealism have of obscuring those. It is our contention, based on both our theoretical conception of moral critique grounded in political sociology and the way that it has already been articulated within anti-

austerity protest movements, that such a detachment or abstraction need not happen. Moral critique in this formulation is imbued with both emancipatory potential and political power – allowing us to see beyond that naturalisation of economic forces to imagine and construct a different future. Departing from the exclusionary discourses of the right around 'deservingness' and profligacy, leftist values of solidarity and fairness, justice and liberty can be combined to achieve an inclusive social vision.

The tendency of social democratic parties across Europe to internalise and reproduce the premises of electorally successful conservatives, revolving around the state-market relationship, notions of 'fiscal responsibility' and the responsibilisation of the individual, has seen the possibilities of political action and real political difference diminish. But, in the words of Jodi Dean, it would be 'childishly petulant' to imagine that in this epoch politics has been foreclosed – "[t]he failure of left politics to win, or even score, is equated with a failure of politics as such, rather than acknowledged in the specificity of left defeat" (Dean 2009). Morals, in our conception, are inherently political because they are used to distinguish between a reality that is immutable, natural or impermeable to human action and one that is contingent and susceptible to change (how can a 'natural' state be immoral?) and this contingency is the very essence of the political as groups and individuals struggle to define its contours and boundaries. More than this, morals provide the space for normative critique (Boltanski 2011: 12f.), allowing us to distinguish between what is and what could be as well as what is good and what is bad, and it is in this space that leftist politics must occupy and where it must construct its own contours and horizons.

One of the most promising signals we see within the broad left of how a moral critique can be deployed to significantly shift public perception and understanding, particularly around issues of austerity and debt, is the way that coalitions between activists and new think tanks (along with some of its older and more well-established counterparts) have sought to align technical economic expertise more closely with a broader moral social critique of society. The effectiveness of this combination is based on the existing epistemic authority that economic expertise has among the public and policymakers, with technical economics carrying with it social weight and legitimacy. While this has often been deployed on the right to support or justify conservative and regressive measures such as austerity, similar tools have been used by the left to show the emerging gap in wages, quality of

life and home ownership, among others. Used on their own, such facts and figures are at best unlikely to have transformation potential and are at worst likely to be incorporated in technocratic and managerial discourses to maintain the status quo – albeit with the veneer of social democracy and social justice.[3] When these data are combined with the experiential practices of activists engaged in concrete struggles – which are necessarily contextually varied and divergent – as well as a grounding in a leftist moral critique, then they can produce narratives of crisis and transformative futures that resonate with a broad spectrum of people.

The example we point to here is the UK's New Economics Foundation (NEF), which, since its creation in 1986 and in particular since the Great Recession of 2007–2008, has successfully integrated rigorous economic analysis with a socially transformative moral critique of existing capitalism. It has done so with a vision of campaigning for social change and empowering collaborators from a wide range of social movements to help to change the conversation surrounding issues such as debt, community wealth building and housing. NEF is far from alone in this regard, as a number of other think tanks and activist organisations across Europe have begun to articulate a more concerted and consistent moral critique of the societies in which they operate. The one missing link we can see in the chain is how such critiques and narratives find their way into the institutionalised political system. Opportunities have arisen within established political parties, e.g. the UK's Labour Party, Spain's *Podemos* (meaning 'We Can'), Portugal's *Bloco de Esquerda* (Left Bloc) and Germany's *DIE LINKE* (The Left), which have recently attempted to shift the dominant narratives on austerity and debt. The challenge that now lies ahead is to find narratives that resonate with the lived experiences of the European public throughout the numerous interconnected crises our societies face. We cannot do this if the only tool available to us is a hard, technical rationality but instead we need a moral narrative that grounds social struggles and social change in values of justice, equality and inclusivity.

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3   For one example of the many ways in which economic data and logics have been used to reinforce existing social and economic relations, see the 2018 pamphlet written by the then Labour member of the UK parliament Chris Leslie and published by the Social Market Foundation, Centre Ground – Six Values of Mainstream Britain (Leslie 2018).

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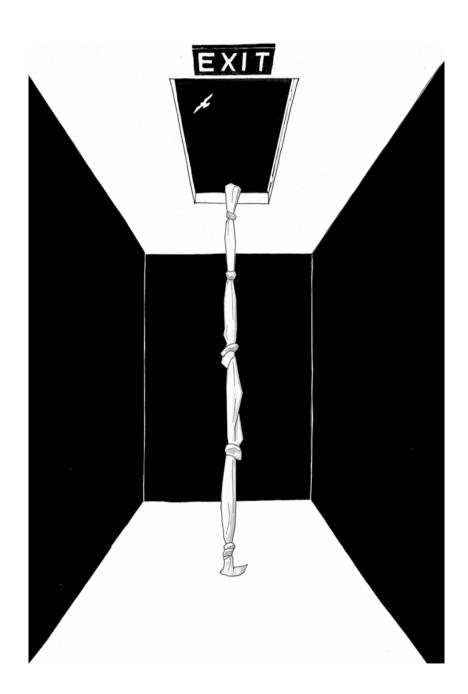
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ANNEXE

LIST OF
CONTRIBUTORS

DAVID J. BAILEY

is Senior Lecturer in Politics in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham (United Kingdom). His work focuses on critical political economy and how this relates to protest.

MARCO BOFFO

has degrees in Economics from the University of Rome "La Sapienza" (BSc, MSc) and from SOAS, University of London (PhD). He has taught at SOAS and worked as a Research Fellow at the Leeds University Business School as part of the EU FP7-funded research project FESSUD (Financialisation, Economy, Society & Sustainable Development). At present, he is an independent researcher.

HEIKO BOLLDORF

is a freelance advisor to various trade unions. He studied sociology at the University of Wuppertal and the University of Marburg (both in Germany), culminating in a PhD on the social power of trade unions in Croatia at the latter institution.

BERND BONFERT

is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research and Data in Cardiff (UK). His work revolves around social movement networks in and around the foundational economy. Bernd holds a PhD from Roskilde University (Denmark) and Radboud University in Nijmegen (the Netherlands).

BARRY CANNON

(Dublin City University, 2005) lectures on politics in the Sociology Department of Maynooth University (Ireland). His research focuses on Latin American politics, populism as concept and practice and civil society anti-Far Right strategising, among other issues. His most recent book is *The Right in Latin America: Elite Power, Hegemony and the Struggle for the State* (Routledge, 2016).

DANIELA CATERINA

holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Hamburg (Germany) and is now a lecturer at the School of Philosophy of the Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST) in Wuhan (China). Her publications include the 2019 monograph *Struggles for Hegemony in Italy's Crisis Management. A Case Study on the 2012 Labour Market Reform* (Springer).

MÒNICA CLUA-LOSADA

is Professor in Global Political Economy at the Department of Political Science at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (United States). Her research focuses on the contestation, subversion and resistance by labour and other social movements of capitalist relations of domination. She's editor-in-chief of the Global Political Economy journal published by Bristol University Press, vice-president of the Catalan Political Science Association (ACCP) and member of the organizing committee of Historical Materialism Barcelona.

PABLO COTARELO

a qualified engineer, is a political analyst and consultant on public policies at Ekona, an economic consulting and research cooperative and a member of the European Research Network on Social and Economic Policy (EReNSEP). Pablo participated in the 15-M Movement debates in Madrid and was involved in the foundation and early stages of the citizen platform *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona in Common).

SERGI CUTILLAS

is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Business and Economics of the University of Barcelona and an activist. As a researcher, he explores digital developments for a more decentralized and democratic socioeconomic governance. His activist work has focused on the elimination of public debt, platform work, the gig economy, artificial intelligence and web3. He was previously involved politically and professionally with *Podemos* and *En Comú Podem*.

MATTHEW DONOGHUE

is an Assistant Professor (Ad Astra Fellow) in Social Policy at the School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice at University College Dublin (Ireland). He works in the broad field of critical policy studies, applying principles of critical theory and critical political economy to the study of social problems and policies.

TEPPO ESKELINEN

is Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at the University of Eastern Finland and a docent in Political Philosophy at Tampere University (Finland). His main research interests include global political economy, global justice, democracy theory and critical development theory. He has written and (co-)edited books including *The Revival of Political Imagination – Utopia as Methodology* (Zed Books, 2020); *Demokratia utopiana ja sen vastavoimat* (Democracy as a utopia and its counterforces), published in Finnish (Vastapaino, 2019); and *The Politics of Ecosocialism* (Routledge, 2015).

ALBERTO FAVARO

Alberto Favaro is an Italian architect graduated from the University Of Florence. His architectural work has always been accompanied by artistic research. He is currently residing in Malta, where in the last years he focused on developing art projects.

NIKOLAI HUKE

is a Research Associate at Kiel University's Department of Political Science (Germany). His research focuses on democracy, social movements, precarity, powerlessness and international political economy.

MÁRK LOSONCZ

has a PhD from the University of Novi Sad (Serbia). He conducted part of his doctoral research at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, or EHESS) in Paris (France). Subsequently, he was a visiting postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Ethics of *Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität* (LMU) in Munich (Germany). He is now a researcher at the University of Belgrade's Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (Serbia).

BENJAMIN OPRATKO

is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Leuphana University Lüneburg's Institute of Sociology and Cultural Organization. From 2019-2022 he was a researcher in the Cultures of Rejection research project (www.culturesofrejection.net). He also sits on the editorial team of the monthly journal TAGEBUCH.

VERONICA PASTORINO

is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political and Social Science at the University of Bologna (Italy), in a partnership programme with the Department of Geography, Planning and Environment at Radboud University in Nijmegen (Netherlands). She obtained a Master's degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology at *Freie Universität Berlin* (Germany) and later worked as a research assistant at the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration (SVR) in Berlin.

JENNIFER PETZEN

was awarded her doctorate by the University of Washington, Seattle (United States), defending her PhD thesis on *Gender Politics in the New Europe: 'Civilizing' Muslim Sexualities*. Since 2001, she has been researching racism, intersectionality and transnational queer politics and movements. Currently, she is a Guest Professor at the Alice Salomon University of Applied Sciences.

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ADA-CHARLOTTE REGELMANN

Ada-Charlotte Regelmann is a project manager at the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Brussels Office. Her work mainly focuses on democracy and feminism as well as the office's activities in the Nordic countries. She holds a PhD from the University of Glasgow (United Kingdom) and taught at universities across the British Isles before joining the foundation.

LAURA ROTH

is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the philosophy and sociology department of the Universitat Jaume I (UJI) in Castellón (Spain) and an activist. Her work focuses on participatory democracy, political culture, feminism and municipalism. She has been a visiting scholar at Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation (United States), Goethe University Frankfurt's Cluster of Excellence "Normative Orders" (Germany) and the University of Stirling's philosophy department (United Kingdom). A member of the Minim municipalist observatory and an activist in feminist and municipalist networks, she lives in Spain and is the mother of two young children.

ALFREDO SAAD-FILHO

is Professor of Political Economy and International Development at King's College London, having previously held the role of Senior Economic Affairs Officer at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Alfredo has degrees in Economics from the University of Brasília (Brazil) and the University of London (SOAS) and has taught at universities and research institutions in Brazil, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mozambique, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

SAORI SHIBATA

is a lecturer at the University of Sheffield (United Kingdom). Her research, which draws on institutionalist approaches to capitalism and critical political economy, focuses on Japan's political economy, including the changing nature of work; the digital economy; and the transformation of the Japanese capitalist model.

ADAM STANDRING

is currently a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Individual Fellow at the Centre for Urban Research on Austerity at De Montfort University in Leicester (UK). He has published on expertise, depoliticisation, crisis and austerity in the *European Journal of Political Research*; *Policy & Politics*; *WIRES: Climate Change*; *Environment & Planning C*; and *Dialogues in Human Geography*, and is a co-editor of the volume *Comparing Strategies of (De)Politicization in Europe: Governance, Resistance and Anti-Politics*, published by Palgrave Macmillan.

CHRISTOPHER SWEETAPPLE

is an anthropologist from Detroit (United States). After completing his BA in Islamic Studies at Western Michigan University and his MA in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Amherst, he became a graduate fellow in the context of the Legal Studies programme and is currently completing his PhD at the latter institution. He has also been engaged in labour, queer and anti-racist activism. He now lives in Berlin (Germany).

FELIX SYROVATKA

is a Research Associate at the Free University of Berlin (Germany). His research focuses on European integration, Collective Bargaining and labour and social policy. He is the author of the books *Die Reformpolitik Frankreichs in der Krise* (France's Reform Policy in Crisis), and *Neue Europäische Arbeitspolitik* (New European Labour Policy).

NORMA TIEDEMANN

is a Research Associate at the University of Kassel's Department of Political Theory (Germany), where she is working on her PhD on authoritarian statehood and municipalist platforms in Croatia and Serbia.
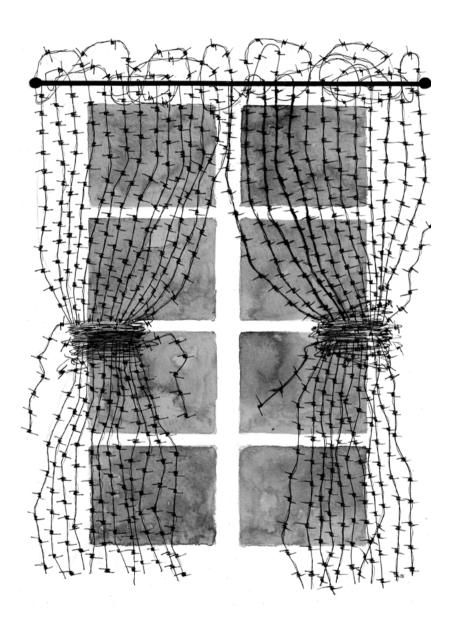
BEATRIZ V. TOSCANO

PhD is a Spanish scholar based at the Institute for Sustainable Urban Development at Hochschule Düsseldorf – University of Applied Sciences, where her research focuses on the intersection between urban planning and biopolitics. With degrees from the University of Seville, the University of Pennsylvania and Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, she has taught as a guest lecturer at universities in the United States, Spain and Brazil.

JANA TSONEVA

is a sociologist based at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and a founding member of KOI, a Sofia-based research NGO and publishing house. She has published on many topics ranging from the sociology of work and social class to political ecology.

KORAY YILMAZ-GÜNAY

is co-director of *Migrationsrat Berlin* (Migration Council Berlin) in Germany, an umbrella body bringing together migrant organisations and organisations of Blacks and people of colour. He has been an activist in various movements since the early 1990s. In addition, he works as an interpreter and translator and in political education. He has his own publishing house, Verlag Yılmaz-Günay, producing numerous publications on racism, pedagogy, (multiple) discrimination and intersectional education.

ILLUSTRATOR'S NOTES

The illustrations for this publication are intended to serve as a graphic thread that cuts across the themes addressed here. Some are fairly descriptive, dovetailing with the accompanying text, and others freer and more abstract, but all of them take as their starting point the key issues covered by this volume.

I therefore suggest regarding the images as metaphorical pointers rather than literal graphic representations of the text and looking at them in the way you would view open questions rather than unambiguous answers.

I conceived this cycle of illustrations as an integral part of my wider artistic research, expressed in recent years through different media, including various art installations, photographs and performances. A range of tools are used in a bid to explore and challenge the implications of social and political conditions.

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A number of the images featured here could be interpreted by some as depictions of a dystopian future – a future where the only possibility left open to us is an attitude of resignation. However, I believe that for most readers such scenarios will instead provoke, triggering a counter-reaction and providing a stimulus for resistance and to fight in the face of a potentially hostile future.

Alberto Favaro

ROSA-LUXEMBURG-STIFTUNG

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung is an internationally operating, left-wing non-profit organisation providing civic education. It is affiliated with Germany's 'Die Linke' (Left Party). Active since 1990, the foundation has been committed to the analysis of social and political processes and developments worldwide.

The Stiftung works in the context of the growing multiple crises facing our current political and economic system. In cooperation with other progressive organisations around the globe, the Stiftung focuses on democratic and social participation, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and alternative economic and social development. The Stiftung's international activities aim to provide civic education by means of academic analyses, public programmes, and projects conducted together with partner institutions.

The Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung works towards a more just world and a system based on international solidarity.

Democracy is in jeopardy. The rise of authoritarian populism, the polarisation of politics and the attacks on the foundations of liberal representative democracy leave little doubt about it. The fallout of the COVID-19 crisis has only reinforced these tendencies. Yet, we also see a revitalisation of radical demands for democratic renewal. Societies are once again acknowledging that inequality is hurting democracy. Calls for democratic regulation of key sectors are getting louder. Demands for inclusion, equality and redistributive justice are gaining currency.

These trends are reactions to a democratic system, which appears ill-equipped to address the fundamental conflicts underlying these problems we are facing. As political institutions struggle to tackle a plethora of 'crises', polities are changing how they deal with the most basic democratic questions, i.e. who decides on what, for whom and how.

It is the aim of this volume to take stock of some of the key problems permeating contemporary liberal representative democracy in Europe (and beyond) and to discuss proposals for bottom-up restructuring of politics and society with a view to a radical democratisation process. It explores approaches to transforming the conditions of democratic representation and participation at all levels of politics, to forge an inclusive, equal, free and just society.

In 14 chapters, this book tackles a wide range of problems surrounding democracy and how it might evolve, often drawing the reader's attention to less-discussed matters. The authors, with their diverse country and disciplinary backgrounds, bring together a wealth of knowledge, astute insights and forward-looking conclusions about the state of democracy, the potential for democratic change and the actors and strategies that can get us there.

We hope it will inspire political action striving for a democratisation of democracy.

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