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David Ingram: *The Limits of Critical Democratic Theory Regarding* *Structural Transformations in Twenty-First Century Left Politics.*

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Abstract: This chapter proposes a critical examination of ideological tendencies at work in two main democratic theories currently at play within the critical theory tradition: the deliberative theory advanced famously by Habermas and his acolytes, and the partisan theory advanced by Mouffe and others influenced by Gramsci and Schmitt. Explaining why these theories appeal to distinctive social groups on the Left, divided mainly by education and economic status, it argues that neither theory accounts for the possibility of a Left democratic, party-based politics with broad appeal. Exhibiting tendencies that weaken party-based politics, each of these theories encourages, intentionally or otherwise, forms of politics that obstruct democratic, emancipatory struggle and weaken democratic legitimation Their linkage being an essential condition for emancipatory struggle, I conclude that structural changes in capitalism, web-based communication, education, and working conditions offer limited opportunities to revitalize Left party politics with the popular support needed to reconnect working masses with party elites as both seek solutions to their precarity under global capitalism.

I INTRODUCTION

The two revolutionary elements, the direct interest in socialism and a clear theoretical consciousness, are no longer the common property of the proletariat but are now found among different, important segments of it. ---Max Horkheimer[[1]](#endnote-2)

Marx’s encomium honoring the Paris Commune’s “government of the people by the people” (Simon  1994, 311) attests to the venerable democratic spirit of the socialist movement that has shaped the critical theory tradition to the present day, despite that tradition’s criticism of bourgeois democracy, viz. national multiparty systems of representative government premised on a capitalist economic base .[[2]](#endnote-3) Eschewing one-sided, ideological forms of abstract theorizing, this tradition has sought to ground its emancipatory democratic norms in historically changing political struggles.[[3]](#endnote-4) The *partisan* class struggles that formerly energized critical theory, pitting the industrial *working class* and their *educated elites* against the captains of industry, have changed, along with critical theory’s description of their democratic nature. The partisan organization of the international working class toward the aim of abolishing capitalism has been largely eclipsed since the emergence of social democracy and its main vindication, the welfare state. The class compromise instituted at the end of the Second World War empowered workers, if not as co-partners in the management of state-regulated capitalism, then at least as beneficiaries of collectively bargained wages, benefits and safety nets derived from taxing and redistributing its social proceeds. Management of economic growth and crisis shifted to educated elites within government and business, who could be counted on to conciliate their divergent interests for the sake of a common end. Parties on the Left and Right continued to represent distinctive partisan aims that were readily identifiable along familiar class lines, roughly reflecting the interests of wage and salaried employees, on one side, and the interests of business owners, investors, and bankers, on the other. However, they relinquished the politics of class struggle, with the Right accepting limits on the concentration of wealth and the unilateral private control over economic matters, and the Left accepting private, unequal ownership of capital and productive assets. This replacement of partisan class struggle by deliberative compromise was fiercely resisted by students and workers during the sixties. Notwithstanding this popular revolt against the Left party establishment, the advent of a new neo-liberal phase of global capitalism in the post-Cold War era compelled Left parties to pursue a centrist Third Way that again catapulted the conciliatory interests of educated elites over the partisan aims of their working-class comrades, many of whom felt economically threatened by imports and immigrants. A *populist* rejection of oligarchic parties across the political spectrum has emerged. As Left parties have burnished their internationalist credentials by expanding their working-class base to include immigrants, women, ethnic minorities, and members of LGBTQ+, they have redirected their focus away from the partisan aims of their former blue-collar comrades, thereby inadvertently driving them into the welcoming arms of right-wing populists who promise to protect them from imports, immigrants, and all manner of threats to their security and identity.

Lest it be forgotten, critical theorists, led by Erich Fromm, studied a similar conservative shift in Germany’s divided working class during the economic crisis of the early thirties. Fromm noted that blue-collar workers, who leaned socialist in contrast to their more conservative white-collar counterparts, nonetheless exhibited authoritarian attitudes that made them vulnerable to National Socialism. Although this authoritarian tendency was stronger among skilled workers, who were more like to identify as Social Democrats, Fromm observed that more radical, unskilled workers, who typically identified as Communists, could become especially susceptible to National Socialism because of their greater risk of unemployment: “This emotional need, constantly fueled by helplessness and economic emergencies” for security, Fromm concluded, inclined both conservative and socialist sectors of the working class to embrace a “rebellious authoritarianism.” Such ideologically undefined authoritarianism, he added, was “indifferent to other aims, such as freedom, happiness, and equality.” Instead of offering partisan, ideological platforms for concrete social-democratic change, this populist authoritarianism targeted “symbols” of the supposed establishment: “the Weimar Republic, finance capital, and the Jews,” (Fromm 1984, 226-27).[[4]](#endnote-5)

This chapter questions the success of critical theory’s two main theories of democracy in fully addressing the current crisis in Left politics, the political dynamics of which all too closely resemble those of the early thirties. I begin by sketching out the basic idea underlying each theory, which I respectively characterize as deliberative and partisan. I then examine their *ideological* failings as *partial reflections* of an evolving political practice, dating back to the late eighteenth century, that once combined deliberation with partisanship as recently as the sixties but today opposes them.

To be sure, critical theory’s various articulations of the democratic project have been the subject of *Ideologiekritik* before, as must be expected from any approach that questions its own general claims from the perspective of historical contingency and unintended impact. My own criticism of the exclusionary effects of the deliberative theory, for example, will be familiar to many readers. The novelty of my current endeavor consists in showcasing how deliberative and partisan theories reflect competing class interests within Left parties while *unintentionally* aligning themselves with forms of populism that can be hostile to deliberation and organized partisan socialist struggle. The second half of this chapter also makes a novel contribution to the critical theory of democracy by highlighting the current fracturing of the Left into educated elites and blue-collar workers and the evolution of Left parties away from class partisanship toward broad, intersectional group aggregation and deliberative conciliation. The subsequent *hyper-partisan* rejection of organized Left parties, on one side, and their deliberative partisan diminution from within, on the other, conspire together to weaken a form of organized, institution-based party politics that had once, as in the case of Germany’s Green Party, successfully united educated insiders and rank-and-file outsiders in protesting nuclear defense installations. The final section discusses the emergence of *populist* Left parties that only seem to maximally instantiate both partisan and deliberative politics. I conclude by suggesting that a theory that better captures the synergy fusing deliberation and partisan rule must re-imagine a form of popular, digitally informed, party-based politics in view of potentially favorable (but uncertain) structural changes in global capitalism provoking a new Left coalition of educated and working-class strata.

PARTISAN AND DELIBERATIVE THEORIES OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Before proceeding further let me begin by roughly sketching what I take to be the two major democratic theories competing for the attention of critical theorists today. These theories are best characterized as both complementary and conflicting. Furthermore, they do not exhaust the field of theories that political scientists and philosophers (including critical theorists) have proposed but can perhaps be understood as designating two axes along which Left-leaning democratic theories can be positioned.

Following Habermas (1996) and Urbinati (2019, 91), I take as axiomatic that modern democracy is a process of collective decision making, deliberation, and opinion-formation that minimally presupposes liberty, equality and pluralism in protecting freedom (of dissent and association) and equality in competition for government power. Democratic theories that predominate on the Left further specify procedural constraints on capitalism, which they see as tendentially undermining these normative preconditions (see note 3). Democratic theories that predominate on the Right lack this specification. They include utilitarian theories, which as a general rule can also accommodate leftwing welfarist variants. Utilitarianism conceives democracy mainly as an aggregative process in which deliberation and power are less important than the preference signals that are revealed to government social engineers by means of electoral outcomes. On the Right, classical economists appeal to utilitarian thinking in closely identifying capitalist markets for their efficient use of price signals in registering public demand, which along with votes they imbue with political significance. Alternatively, some neo-liberals who are influenced by collective choice theory conceive democratic politics as a quasi-economic transaction between special interests and voters, wherein deliberation and power politics are sidelined for the sake of individual consumer choice.[[5]](#endnote-6) What prevails allegedly conforms to a competitive marketplace of information and influence wherein corporate interests trade favors amongst themselves and amongst the electorate in exchange for votes. Other neo-liberals conceive democracy less benignly, as at best a necessary evil---itself highly corruptible---for restraining government tyranny. So construed, democracy is properly nothing more than a decision-procedure for removing or electing government officials whose power to deliberate, decide, and implement policy should be sharply curtailed by laws protecting private property, freedom of contract, and competitive markets.

In this chapter I shall focus exclusively on deliberative and partisan democratic theories. Although I am particularly concerned with the Left-oriented versions of these theories that inform critical theory, I allow that Right-oriented (or ideologically neutral) versions of these theories also exist.

The first thing to note is that partisan and deliberative theories are distinguished by their principle aims: partisan theories address the organization of political power with the aim of installing a majority as a relatively exclusive and durable ruling factor in democratic decision-making. By contrast, deliberative theories address the conditions under which all citizens, regardless of partisan persuasion, can affirm a coercive legal order as legitimate; viz., as deserving of their loyalty, because it fairly incorporates their voices in an inclusive process of deliberation leading to an always revocable decision.[[6]](#endnote-7)

The exclusive nature of democratic rule as an outcome of partisan struggle here contrasts with the inclusive and impartial nature of democratic opinion formation. This fact reveals a second difference. Partisan theories designate politics as a strategic struggle between parties, each of which perceives itself under existential threat by the other, so that there can never be a question of permitting the other an equal share in power. Deliberative theories, by contrast, designate politics as a cooperative venture among persons who are regarded as fundamentally free and equal, so that no employment of legal coercion is morally acceptable unless it elicits their consent. Whereas partisan theories view politics as a domain of group warfare by other means that logically issues in partisan domination, deliberative theories view politics as a domain of individual cooperation cemented by mutual accountability, in which consent, or voluntary compliance based on the sufficient reasonableness of a proposal---if not consensus, based on the convincing nature of arguments given in support of it, which is usually unobtainable (Habermas 2022, 152)---is to be obtained by offering reasons rather than threats, emotional appeals to bias, or other forms of manipulation. Thus, what one theory views as an injustice and contraction of democratic freedom---the unequal and exclusive exercise of power by one group over another---the other views as a pre-requisite for socialist emancipation.

The last thing to note about these theories is their attitude toward the role that individuals’ comprehensive belief systems and group identities ought to play in politics. Partisan theories highlight the role that such belief systems and identities play in framing global visions of justice, utopian aspirations of emancipation and fulfillment, and the threats arrayed against our very existence and sense of self. Without these comprehensive narratives anchoring our lives, politics would lack the passion needed to engage in otherwise risky and economically costly praxis; without overthrowing systems of oppression and domination, emancipation would be empty.

Deliberative theories, by contrast, diminish, without excluding, the role that such belief systems and group identities ought to play in political life because they are inescapably divisive and polarizing. Rational deliberation aimed at achieving consent (if not consensus) frames politics as mainly a problem-solving endeavor focusing on specific policy mandates that call for scientific guidance and pooling of knowledge, including social perspectives and values.[[7]](#endnote-8) By sharing one’s interests and social perspectives in a conciliatory manner it is assumed that discussants will gain critical self-clarification regarding the limitations of their social outlooks and the social costs attendant on the satisfaction of their personal interests. Without reflection on the limits of power, politics descends into domination and emancipation from oppression remains blind.[[8]](#endnote-9)

Critical theorists draw from both deliberative and partisan models to explain and critique democratic politics. Among those who champion a partisan model, Chantal Mouffe incorporates features of liberal constitutional legitimation taken from Rawls’s own account of deliberation guided by public reason but adapted to the realities of strategic power politics. Despite this concession to the trappings of constitutional democratic legitimation, Mouffe’s partisan theory retains a deep suspicion of liberalism’s credentials as an emancipatory ideology. Following Schmitt and Gramsci, Mouffe objects to liberalism’s ontological privileging of individuals as the central actors in a political sphere that is conceived mainly as a domain governed by rational self-interest, constrained only by a weak sense of moral reciprocity. Despite its embrace of plural interest group competition, liberalism’s ethical embrace of rational moral autonomy discounts solidaristic identification with groups such as labor unions, whose members’ identities are heteronomously shaped in opposition to other identity groups, such as business associations (Mouffe, 2013, 4-5; 137). In contrast to liberalism’s insistence on alternating power held by minorities and majorities, Mouffe acknowledges that the working class and its Left intersectional allies logically aim to install themselves as a relatively exclusive and permanent ruling power. (Mouffe, 2013, 9-11, 73-75). [[9]](#endnote-10)

Mouffe parses the theoretical implications of such hegemonic rule by referencing Schmitt’s equation of democracy and majoritarian dictatorship. For Schmitt the general will inscribed in democratic rule cannot reflect the common interests of humanity, as liberalism claims. Human rights lack sufficient concreteness to be the basis for decisive political action. Indeed, no norm possesses prescriptive force until its precise meaning has been politically decided. Reflecting a unitary act of will, decision cannot but be particular and exclusive. Therefore, in a democracy, the sovereign majority and its elected and appointed officers reserve exclusive right to decide for a minority (Mouffe, 2013, 5-6).

The exclusive exercise of sovereign political power dictates the adversarial nature of democratic politics. Although Mouffe disagrees with Schmitt’s characterization of democratic politics as a zero-sum war between homogeneous groups that logically culminates in dictatorship, she agrees that any such politics will set in motion partisan groups that view each other as adversaries once the stakes reach critical existential proportions (Mouffe, 2012, 7, 137-39). It is with this acknowledgment that Mouffe concedes the need for ‘liberal’ constitutional constraints on the democratic pursuit of power, albeit not because they are inherently just (grounded in common public reason) but because adversaries mutually agree that their own partisan identity depends on preserving the viability of their opponents. Constitutional order thus depends on maintaining a “conflictual consensus” (what Rawls calls a *modus vivendi*) signaling partisan self-constraint for the sake of self-preservation (Mouffe, 2013, 8-9).

The deliberative model advanced by Habermas avoids this descent into hyper-partisanship and weak constitutionalism. Like Mouffe’s theory of democracy, Habermas’s discourse theory of democracy accepts the legitimacy of both the “agonal character” of a dissident partisan politics (Habermas 2022, 152) and the need for mutual, politically negotiated, self-restraint. Indeed, Habermas sees himself as no less a partisan advocate for socialism than Mouffe; for, despite his criticism of Marx’s socialist democracy, specifically his proposal to submit all functions of distribution and production to democratic control, he has never wavered in identifying himself as a Marxist. That said, his partisanship on behalf of socialism is qualified by a stark realism. Although in earlier interviews he endorsed the necessity of “abolishing capitalist labor markets” as a prerequisite for developing “capacities for self-organization . . . within autonomous public spheres” (Habermas 1986, 187) and maintained that workplace democracy within the framework of market socialism was worthwhile striving for (1997 141-42), by 2009 he had come around to thinking that “since 1989-90, it has become impossible to break out of the universe of capitalism [so that] the only option is to civilize and tame the capitalist dynamics from within” (2009 187, Ingram 2010, 260-62), Therefore, unlike Mouffe’s avowedly socialist theory of democracy, Habermas casts his mature theory of democracy as setting forth realistic normative expectations for a less partisan form of co-governance under the once disparaged terms of a class compromise.

Habermas’s privileging of deliberative democracy, of course, reflects more than a *politics* of compromise. As is well known, he also posits the *ontological* priority of deliberative democracy. The latter, he insists, institutionalizes the moral reciprocity among co-equal individuals that is foundational for societal cooperation based on mutual consent. Although a modern legal conception of individual rights, mirroring the functional needs of a market economy and administrative bureaucracy, coordinates self-interested behavior coercively, without need of voluntary cooperation, it cannot be the primary medium for coordinating strategic actors because its efficacy as a steering mechanism depends on widespread recognition of its legitimacy, as advancing widely shared interests. Law’s authority to command obedience thus depends on its genesis in a process that makes it rationally accountable according to a cooperative and inclusive exercise of dissent and argumentative justification (Habermas 1996). The imbrication of these legal and normative developments in turn logically culminates in a system of equal civil, political, and social constitutional rights and a democratic procedure for legislating, adjudicating, and implementing them.

Decisive for our topic is the way in which this democratic process alters the strategic exercise of partisan political power by submitting it to the discursive requirements for legitimating legally secure cooperation. At the outermost periphery power is exercised freely and inclusively (if not equally) by partisan groups within civil society whose strikes, demonstrations, protests, and acts of civil disobedience signal discontent with existing policies. Political action within this informal public sphere is as much strategic as it is publicly reasoned. Insofar as opinions and arguments are aimed at the broader public, they require dissemination by mass media. According to Habermas, the media selectively filter what messages are broadcast and how they are framed. Given their vital role in disseminating the information upon which citizens in a democracy rely for their deliberation, they stand under a public charge to present the news impartially, free from the power of special interests, including government. Relying on public opinion surveys, the media help their consumers weigh the impact of policies on different groups and thus facilitate the organization of public opinion into competing positions that can subsequently enter the platforms of partisan political groups. These groups, in turn, lobby elected officials to take up their arguments in formulating policy.

Parliamentary policy debates must shed much of their strategic garb since they aim to persuade an opposition. Formal parliamentary rules ensure that every legislator or party has an equal chance to make and rebut arguments, thereby securing the procedural conditions of reasoned and impartial deliberation. Although Habermas tells us that “the discursive quality of the(se) contributions, not the goal of consensus” is what is decisive for their deliberative character (Habermas 2022, 1952), it remains the case that rational deliberation of any kind is impossible unless there is at least an orientation to the truth and rightness of factual and normative claims, respectively, all of which, in turn, inextricably link the deliberatively quality of contributions to justifying “interpretations of the world” that are “generally rationally acceptable” (Habermas 2022, 163). Thus, although these public displays of deliberation may with justification lapse into partisan showmanship during periods marked by existential polarization, the subsequent fine tuning of legislation needed to garner sufficient support for passage often requires concerted efforts at deliberation leading to conciliation and compromise. Assuming that those who are party to this deliberation are fully representative of, and accountable to, all political groups without being bound by any one of them in particular (Young, 2000), deliberation should---if done in good faith---issue in fair compromise or majority consensus in which the interests of all affected groups are taken into account and properly balanced. The subsequent interpretation and application of legislation by independent executive and judicial authorities should also by discursive norms in order to ensure a representative and impartial sharing of relevant perspectives.

EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC RATIONALITY: THE PRACTICAL COSTS OF DELIBERATION AND PARTISANSHIP

Do the better educated have any good reason to damn those who are actually involved in the struggle? ----Max Horkheimer[[10]](#endnote-11)

In order to assess the ideological functioning of critical democratic theorizing we need to determine whether its two models articulate the standpoints and economic interests of all Left constituencies. Left constituencies have changed over the past 200 years; the original industrial proletariat has seen its numbers decline relative to the growing power of women, minorities, and immigrants, all of whom experience overlapping forms of domination and oppression, many of which are only indirectly related to a capitalist system. Particularly notable for our present study is the increasing percentage of younger and more educated voters who identify with the Left.

Deliberative – not partisan – theories of democracy embody the interests and perspectives of the educated. This can be supported indirectly by studies on media use. Media use “depends on [media user’s] attention and interest, their time budgets, [and] *educational* background” (my emphasis---Habermas 2020, 157). Citing studies documenting the decline if newspaper consumption and the rise of social media use, Habermas remarks that “reading digitalised texts presumably does not demand the same level of intensive attention and analytic processing as does reading printed texts (ibid. 161). He conjectures that “since the introduction of the internet, the average amount of attention paid political news and the analytic processing of politically relevant issues have declined” (ibid.) due to the “social complexity” and “diversity” of opinions regarding political issues generally (ibid. 163-4). These comments imply that motivational and cognitive requirements for rational deliberation on controversial complex policies are to be found among better educated voters. Recall, too, that the political organization of what Habermas, following Arendt, dubs communicative power at the grass-roots level conforms to a partisan logic. From the standpoint of economic rationality, the costs of consuming bias- confirming political propaganda in the form of tweets and social media soundbites are low enough that virtually anyone can become politically motivated regardless of their level of education. By contrast, political deliberation over policy exacts a high cost in time, money spent on print media and the acquisition of technical, problem-solving expertise, and cognitive effort that only the most educated can afford.

Another cost they can afford is a certain degree of political detachment. Enjoying a higher earning potential commensurate with their education, the educated are less negatively impacted by the insecurities that galvanize more vulnerable segments of the population to act politically. And, as Habermas notes, given their detached observation of the world, they are more likely to critically distance themselves from their own core commitments. Assuming what Rawls refers to as the ‘burdens of judgment,’ they will perceive themselves through the eyes of others, adopt an ironic or skeptical attitude toward their deepest convictions, and shed partisan loyalties of economic class, region, and cultural identity that impede impartial problem solving in service to the common interest (Habermas, 2009, 178-89; Ingram, 2019, 535)[[11]](#endnote-12).

This capacity to think impartially is often associated with the kind of argumentative reason deployed by academics. Reason predisposes one to appreciate the complexity, contextuality, and conditionality of social problems and policy solutions. Qualification of one’s conclusions, in turn, inclines the academic mind to conciliate and compromise. As an affluent sub-class of the educated, politicians exhibit this tendency to a supreme degree when discussing policies amongst members of their own party and (when necessary) partisan adversaries.

By contrast, partisan theories of democracy esteem forms of propaganda that will broaden support for Left parties and thus welcome the potential polarizing power of social media. The increasing hostility of deliberative democrats to socially mediated propaganda and disinformation, however, is based on an unjustified sense of their own epistemic immunity to forms of group think and bias.[[12]](#endnote-13) “Epistocrats” scornful of the ignorant masses might be rightfully chided for wanting to tighten voting qualifications based on education (Brennan, 2017). For deliberative democrats, the composition and structure of political representation all but guarantees that the educated will prevail in the end. But their privilege merely reinforces rather than mitigates their bias towards compromise and the status quo. The structural transformation of Left politics from its inception to the present day suggests that the ‘organic intellectual’ of yesterday’s working class has undergone mutation from student militant to establishment party leader, and finally to populist demagogue, with the second group showing the highest propensity toward accommodating the status quo.

We find ourselves caught in a dilemma, a paradox of democratic legitimation to be precise, the dynamics of which Habermas himself was all too aware. According to the two-track (periphery/center) “sluice” model of deliberative politics proposed by Bernhard Peters and adopted by Habermas, the possibility for *reversing* the top-down “taming” of “wild” and inclusive popular opinion by establishment elites in a truly democratic (i.e., legitimate) direction depends on “a *consciousness of crisis*, a heightened public attention, an intensified search for solutions, in short, by problematization (Habermas 1996, 359---my stress). However, when consciousness of crisis prevails, there too prevail deep political polarization, the breakdown in cross-partisan deliberation among legislative elites, and ultimately the undemocratic empowerment of the executive, judiciary, and (often unelected) administration. What all this might mean for the fracturing of contemporary Left politics into populist and educated strata, with college students straddling the divide between the precariat and the elite, will be the topic of our next discussion.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN LEFT POLITICS: CAPITALISM, POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, AND THE RISE OF AN EDUCATED OLIGARCHY

To provide historical context to our last discussion I shall examine Habermas’s study of the structural transformation of the public sphere from its revolutionary inception in the eighteenth century to its two major existential crises during the twentieth century, followed by Thomas Piketty’s diagnosis of the current state of progressive political parties. What these two studies suggest is that the alliance between educated elites and rank and file voters that has been the hallmark of progressive political movements over the years has shattered on the shoals of global capitalism and neo-liberal accommodation. The result has been an exodus of workers to populist movements of uncertain ideological pedigree as the parties on the Left have increasingly turned to education as the proper response to joblessness, income inequality, and socio-political stratification caused by global competition.

Habermas begins his study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), by tracing the birth of democratic political spaces in the eighteenth century out of deliberative fora composed of educated strata drawn from the middle class and aristocracy. The coffee houses, salons, table societies, and broadsheets that served as venues for this distinctly bourgeois public sphere generated opinions that criticized government abuse and paved the way for future waves of constitutional reform leading to the eventual enfranchisement of the working classes in the nineteenth century. This nascent democracy of opinion was premised on the free thinking of educated persons of independent means (mainly men) who could retire to the privacy of their libraries to reflect on what they read and heard. The men and women who gathered to discuss literature, art, morals, and public affairs respected each other as dialogical equals who could reason together in reaching consensus on the leading principles of the Enlightenment revolving around religious and intellectual toleration, open-mindedness, and personal freedom to speak, think, publish and associate. The common class affinities of the bourgeoisie convinced them that they could speak for all of humanity and that their commonsense would transcend all partisan factionalism.

The plebeian public sphere of partisan demonstrators and protesters often received their cue from this literate society of letters. The subsequent expansion of literacy and mass media throughout the nineteenth century would enable the working class to organize themselves into movements and political parties by availing themselves of educated elites (or to use Gramsci’s phrase, organic intellectuals) who could provide theoretical arguments in support of their struggle for enfranchisement. However, by the second decade of the twentieth century the emergence of radio and film would elevate demagogues over intellectuals as the leading figures commanding the public sphere, transforming it entirely from a sphere of deliberation and partisanship to one of propaganda-led hyper-partisanship. The organic intellectuals that Fromm, Horkheimer, and Gramsci had hoped to find among educated members of the working classes had been replaced by populist demagogues.

Habermas’s detailed account of the public sphere’s electronically-mediated structural transformation cites the rise of fascism – the first populist challenge to democratic expansion. Drawing from Schmitt’s diagnosis of the crisis of parliamentary democracy (Schmitt, 1988), Habermas agreed with Schmitt that liberal parliamentarism rested on a model of rational deliberation whose former basis in the preceding century, residing in an exclusively middle-class representation centred around a common class interest, no longer obtained. Working class challenges to private property and capital were existential in nature, and therefore not easily susceptible to rational compromise. It was inevitable, under this diagnosis, that the prerequisites for inclusive rational deliberation would inevitably clash with an agonal, zero-sum struggle for democratic power.

Traces of Schmitt’s diagnosis of parliamentary democracy resurfaced in Habermas’s later study of the legitimation crisis besetting the welfare state during the turbulent sixties and seventies. This second existential crisis was markedly different from the crisis of parliamentary democracy that had occurred forty years earlier in that it originated in what appeared to be a successful government-managed class compromise. The terms of this compromise, which had been meticulously negotiated between educated elites representing the interests of entrenched party oligarchs, depended on suppressing democratic debate over capitalism’s fairness and satisfaction of needs under the auspices of government-administered growth. But this effort failed. The technical management of the economy was torn between competing imperatives of subsidizing business and investment in growth, on one side, and compensating for the destructive side effects of business and growth, on the other. Government indebtedness inevitably prompted debate over issues concerning tax fairness. More importantly, class compromise premised on the promise of unending, technologically engineered growth in prosperity and consumption was increasingly regarded by educated students as wasteful, destructive, and unfulfilling. Questioning bureaucratic subservience and the rewards of status and wealth achieved through hard work and zero-sum competition, many of them demanded radical social change or dropped out politically.

Several aspects of Habermas’s diagnosis of the welfare state’s legitimation crisis bear special scrutiny. First, because the crisis emerged during the height of the welfare state’s most egalitarian management of growth, the issues raised by student protesters had less to do with economic justice and class struggle than with the competitive, wasteful, and destructive culture of consumer capitalism. In short, the student movement reflected an existential revolt directed against the entire polarizing Cold War ideology that positioned them as passive and subservient clients and consumers rather than as active revolutionaries who claimed a rightful share in self-governance (Fraser 2015). Second, pursuant to this claim, these revolutionaries raged against a bureaucracy that obstinately refused to listen to the masses demonstrating against nuclear armament and imperialist interventions abroad. Third, as Habermas’s own involvement in the Green and student movements amply attests, the theory and practice of these movements never resolved the tension between its commitment to inclusive deliberation embodying a principle of free speech and established party-based activism with their uncompromising goals of hegemonic empowerment.[[13]](#endnote-14) For him, the rhetorical suppression of more moderate voices by radical students who were intent on taking over the university amounted to nothing less than “Left fascism.”

Fifty years later, we look back on these turbulent times with a degree of incomprehension. Back then, students and workers in Europe and elsewhere, along with many educated elites, protested side-by-side against managerial hierarchies. Today that alliance is crumbling. In what seems to be an alarming repeat of the past, a substantial segment of blue-collar workers has allied itself with rightwing authoritarian populists against established educational elites. Meanwhile, a growing number of college-educated youth have lost faith in the established political parties to address their economic and existential precarity. When it is not channeled into partisan support for the rights of women, minorities, immigrants, and the environment, their left-wing politics finds expression in vaguely defined populist movements targeting the establishment.

The reasons for this shift are complicated. The aging of the population and the higher education of economically precarious youth implicate deeper economic causes. Beginning in the seventies, the failure of state-managed capitalism to manage non-inflationary growth within an emerging global system reached critical proportions with the advent of inflationary recession (or stagflation) which defied Keynesian predictions. The oil crisis, the collapse of the gold standard and the ascendance of a neo-liberal economic orthodoxy (the Washington Consensus) that heralded the benefits of tax cuts as incentives to private investment, coupled with government cutbacks and privatization of services, inaugurated a new era of global competition under the old banner of free trade and free investment.

Under this new regime of global financialized capitalism, heavily indebted governments now find themselves constrained by international banks and other global economic multilaterals to the point where today they no longer have freedom to manage their own economies and protect their people from the shocks of global competition.[[14]](#endnote-15) The economic landscape for many blue-collar workers has become increasingly bleak as jobs are lost to global competition and welfare states have cut back on safety nets and basic services. The parallel rise of digital capitalism has exacerbated the decline in workers’ percentage of total income. Leaving aside the value of data produced by the unremunerated labor of network users that is appropriated and sold to advertisers by Google, Facebook, and other platform giants, fewer workers are employed in today’s automated, high-tech industries and opportunities for entrepreneurial success on social media platforms favor users who are younger, educated, and more tech-savvy. The stagnation of workers’ wages and benefits in the expanding service sector, coupled with growing income inequality and concentration of wealth, has made it more difficult for working class families to afford good education for their children needed to compete in the global marketplace. As we know, the expectation that the working class would turn to social democratic parties advocating for affordable education and economic and environmental protections went unfulfilled.

Blame for workers’ rightward political realignment, however, must not stop with rightwing scapegoating of immigrants, intellectuals, and foreigners. As Piketty has shown, statistical evidence suggests that working class voters began abandoning the Left before immigration became an issue (Piketty, 2019, 754). The reasons for this abandonment are both local and global. In the United States, for instance, working-class whites migrated from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party in reaction to Democratic support for civil rights (Piketty, 2019, 809). In the 2016 presidential election around ninety percent of black and sixty-six percent of Latino voters voted Democratic, while only thirty-six percent of whites did (Piketty, 2019, 820). However, race does not entirely explain why white working-class voters switched party allegiances. After all, many of them voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 before voting for Trump in 2016. Nor does it explain the marked decline of working-class voters among the total percentage of the European and the American electorate from 1980 to 2012 (Piketty, 2019, 741-744).

The decline in working class electoral participation and support for Left parties coincides with a change in Left-party platforms, which increasingly came to advance interests, values, and perspectives that aligned more with an educated middle class. One explanation for this phenomenon can be found in changes within higher education. As opportunities for advancement beyond secondary education became open to the working class in the Post-World War II era, many members of the working class obtained higher degrees and became middle class. The old alignment of education, wealth, and conservative party affiliation that still held true as late as the sixties[[15]](#endnote-16) began to fracture as members of this new middle class infiltrated the academy while retaining their progressive partisan sympathies. The left-ward tilt among those with higher education today also coincides with the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the rise of global capitalism. Despite their greater awareness of the structural and systemic causes of racial, gender, and economic inequality in comparison to their less educated counterparts, who are more inclined to attribute inequality to individual choice, educated progressives ceased to identify their own political interests with any concerted advancement of a radical democratic socialist alternative. Accommodating themselves to the neoliberal embrace of foreign competition, centrist social democratic parties did little to protect blue-collar jobs in uncompetitive industries. Instead, they offered market-based solutions to working class precarity that focused on the creation of more competitive industries requiring a technically skilled labor force. In exchange for job protection, they promised youth and older, redundant workers access to higher education and globally marketable job training. Because they didn’t (or couldn’t) do enough to cushion the blow of economic decline facing blue collar workers in uncompetitive industries and also failed to fulfill their promise to provide affordable technical education for their children, whose job- and living prospects remain bleak, these workers understandably switched their loyalties to the anti-globalists on the Right who offered to protect them from economic threats posed by immigration and foreign competition, even as their children, if they were lucky to get a college education, moved in the opposite direction.[[16]](#endnote-17)

As Piketty points out, it is not just the Left but also the Right that is divided over how to address the needs of vulnerable blue-collar workers. The Right has always sought to address the needs of workers by promising to create jobs through private investment fueled by low taxes on investors---a reduction in government revenue that correspondingly ‘justifies’ cutbacks in social spending targeting those very same workers. Today, this contradiction is on full display as conservatives debate how to navigate the conflicting interests of their various constituencies. It finds expression in the fracturing of conservative parties whose factions reflect many of the same divisions that we see on the Left. Far-Right cultural nationalists (anti-globalists) converge with far-Left egalitarian nationalists in supporting protectionist measures and restrictive immigration policies (Piketty, 2019, 790). Meanwhile center-Right libertarian internationalists converge with center-Left egalitarian internationalists in supporting immigration, multiculturalism, and free trade.[[17]](#endnote-18) The party elites who bridge the Left-Right divide are opposed by populists who, as we shall see, endorse their own amalgam of left-wing and right-wing agendas. [[18]](#endnote-19)

Today’s establishment has propelled into power one of these realignments: a centrist alliance, uniting internationalists across the Left/Right divide. Led by a coalition of educated elites (the “Brahmen Left,” in Piketty’s words) and wealthy investors (the “Merchant Right”), this alliance has shifted the cost of subsidizing the risks taken by the top one percent of investors representing select multinationals onto the bottom 99 per cent (Azmanova 2020). In doing so, it has also unwittingly provoked a populist backlash, as evidenced by Brexit and the election of Trump, with older workers and younger college students heading in opposite directions.

CRITICAL DEMOCRATIC THEORY AS POPULIST IDEOLOGY

There are those who recognize existing society as bad, but they lack the knowledge to practically and theoretically prepare the revolution. The others might be able to produce that knowledge but lack the fundamental experience of the urgent need for change.

Max Horkheimer[[19]](#endnote-20)

The structural transformation of politics recounted above tells a story of polarization in which established parties across the political spectrum have shed their class-based partisan identities. Changes in work, education, and mass media now favor populist movements that embrace a different kind of partisanship whose democratic logic inclines more towards nationalism and authoritarianism. Conditions for revitalizing the older class-based parties are not favorable. Indeed, I shall argue that the deliberative and partisan models of democracy that critical theorists propose work against their own aims by aligning with tendencies promoting a populist dissolution of class-based parties. Whether deliberative democracy, which is logically suited for the kind of non-partisan, pragmatic problem solving that prevails in parliamentary chambers during periods of normal political life, can also prevail during times of political crisis, which entails a more partisan orientation to existential questions of political identity, may well depend on whether changes in the global political economy that heighten the precarity of educated classes also promoting the technical education and digital literacy of workers.

In order to pursue this hypothesis further, we must first recall the functional role that political parties play within a liberal democracy. Traditionally, this role consisted in organizing the electorate around class-based identities. Changes in work, education, and mass media that I have recounted above have weakened these identities and conditions for revitalizing them are not favorable.

Besides these changes, expanding a party’s base weakens its partisan identity. Adoption of popular platforms with broad electoral appeal forces parties to further dilute their already undefined commitment to popularly held values such as liberty, equality, security, and well-being. These *catchall* parties, as Otto Kirchheimer dubbed them, encompass diverse and by no means harmonious constituencies and platforms (Kirchheimer, 1966). Out of the unavoidable clash of interests that modern catchall parties accommodate arise the conditions that promote deliberative compromises between party elites and different factions of the party rank-and-file. Parties that manage this critical interchange between educated party cadre and average voters without splintering into narrow sectarianism must then withstand the centrifugal and centripetal forces of anti-elitist populism (Urbinati, 2019, 140).

Popular uprisings against elites and their backroom compromises do not necessarily issue in populist rebellion.[[20]](#endnote-21) Protest movements reflect an essential, critical resource for revitalizing the representative democratic pretensions of political parties and must be distinguished from populism as an anti-democratic distortion of party organization. Popular social movements bring to bear the local and immediate concerns of average voters in renegotiating the long-term visions of party intelligentsia as they struggle to reconcile older ideological commitments and identities to the technical task of addressing prospective challenges.

This commitment to a long-term ideological vision of social justice as inclusive of newer and older groups is crucial in containing intra-party revolts within the bounds of democratic deliberation, thereby preventing them from degenerating into populist politics. In keeping with his concern, which I noted earlier, about the fragmentation of the political landscape into single issue, short term public spheres, Habermas himself expressly recognizes a connection between such political fragmentation and right-wing populism when he asserts that “governments give priority to their short-term national interests . . . the more strongly they are exposed at home to the undertow of right-wing populism” (Habermas 2018, cited in Urbinati, 227n115). Governments headed by populist parties circumvent the deliberative dynamic between educated party elites and average voters regarding traditional and prospective partisan commitments, thereby rejecting a cornerstone of modern mass parties, to wit: that behind each vote lies a plurality of interests and preferences whose harmonization requires endless deliberation by all affected.

The indecisiveness and divisiveness of deliberation, which, even when it succeeds in compromising conflicting viewpoints, can be accused of selling out one constituency for another, frustrates the average voters desire for decisive action in defense of the people’s common interest.[[21]](#endnote-22) Partisanship on behalf of the people re-emerges as *uncompromising* hyper-partisanship; viz., partisanship opposing *groups* (friends versus enemies) rather than *ideologies* (Left versus Right) (Laclau 169, Urbinati, 102). Populism identifies the friends of the people with only a part of the body politic: the ‘good people,’ or those who are not in any way affiliated with the enemy: the establishment elites.[[22]](#endnote-23) On the right, these elites are the educated and those for whom they speak (government regulators and international human rights advocates); on the left, they are the rich who monopolize investment (finance and digital capitalists) and their enforcers (the military-industrial establishment).

In truth, ‘the people’ to whom populist movements appeal are not pre-given but are created as a passive audience out of the polarizing propaganda of mass media.[[23]](#endnote-24) Ernesto Laclau describes how the disaggregation of demands put forward by different parties and their re-aggregation as “populist demands . . . through their equivalential articulation, constitute a broader subjectivity” (Laclau 2005, 74). Furthermore, because ‘the people’ are presumed to be one in spirit and will, they can only be represented as one, in the form of a single populist leader. Only the leader can navigate between the Left/Right divide that ‘falsely’ separates them. The authoritarian dynamics of this form of non-ideological, charismatic political representation becomes apparent once the reverse side of the people’s passive, media-constructed identity comes into view; namely, their uncritical, emotional attachment to the leader and acquiescence to his or her dismissal, upon ascension to power, of indecisive parliamentary bodies and constitutional checks.[[24]](#endnote-25)

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With their emphasis on rational deliberation and partisan commitment, the critical theories of democracy I have examined would seem antithetical to populism. In practice they are not. Mouffe herself openly embraces Left populism as did her comrade-in-arms, Ernesto Laclau, who acted as consultant to the populist Argentinian presidential reigns of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner.[[25]](#endnote-26) Conventional left party leadership, they claimed, has sold-out the people for the sake of accommodating the powers that be. Left populism is the solution, which requires “federating the democratic demands into a collective will to construct a ‘we,’ a ‘people’ confronting a common adversary: the oligarchy” (Mouffe, 2018, 24).

As Nadia Urbinati astutely observes, Mouffe’s populist movement cannot succeed in coming to power without compromising its identity. An uncompromising populist government cannot govern in the name of the people once it becomes a part of the establishment. It must confine itself to redemptive campaign rhetoric and delegate governing to the establishment, or it must empower the populist leader over and against the legislature and judiciary. In the latter instance it threatens the very democratic conditions of its populist rule, which, if they were accommodated, would once again set in motion the system of institutionalized party-based compromise and, along with it, Robert Michels’s law of oligarchy.

Refusing to abandon constitutional checks on partisan power, Mouffe’s leftwing populism occupies the nebulous terrain dividing dynamic movement from institutional party. For his part, Habermas’s deliberative theory harbors a paradox that mirrors in reverse fashion the tendential transcendence of party politics implicit in Mouffe’s partisan model. With the exception of non-partisan bodies devoted to local problem-solving, isolated experiments in deliberative polling, and representative focus groups, *deliberative politics has become too demanding for most people with average levels of education, political knowledge*, *and time* Coupled with their relative powerlessness in controlling how elected officials behave in deliberative chambers, average citizens act rationally by eschewing party identification and identifying with single issues. Mass parties that seek to unite various constituencies around multiple issues lack a strong ideological identity, thereby making it easier for rational voters to pick and choose policy positions from across the political spectrum.

Although politically independent voters are not inherently predisposed to populism, their desire to pick and choose policy preferences from across the political spectrum sets them at odds with parties and disposes them favorably toward populist movements whose platforms straddle the Left/Right divide, as exemplified in Italy’s Five Star Movement’s support for restrictions on both environmental degradation and immigration. As I noted above,[[26]](#endnote-27) even Habermas recognizes a kind of *dialectic of deliberative political enlightenment*, the fragmenting tendencies of which can inadvertently lay the groundwork for anti-democratic populism unless distinctive issue publics are reintegrated back into political parties guided by more inclusive narratives of justice and happiness: “The shift in voting behavior marked by long-term partisanship and allegiances to political parties to issue voting [caused by the] growing impact of public discourses on voting behavior . . . has [rational] effects only insofar as the issue publics enter into overlapping networks which counteract the *fragmentation of the voting public*” (2009, 178 ---my stress).

REVITALIZING A DELIBERATIVE AND PARTISAN LEFT PARTY COALITION?

I have argued that deliberative and partisan theories of democracy align with forms of political action that reflect the increasingly antagonistic perspectives and interests of distinct Left constituencies and unintentionally promote potentially authoritarian populist movements. Partisan theories, of course, are by their very nature favorably disposed to populism, and it can be argued *pace* Urbinati that the *ideological* differences separating Right and Left forms of populism also mitigate the anti-liberal, authoritarian tendencies of the latter. Deliberative theories, by contrast, are not as naturally disposed to populism, and that explains why, despite their fragmenting effects, they are no longer as descriptive of political life in today’s populist era as they once were, when normal politics prevailed over crisis politics. The party-based alliance between educated elites and average workers in which these theories applied has also eroded, along with industrial unions and reliable networks of face-to-face interaction. In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to briefly comment on whether the structural changes in occupation, education, and social media that contributed to this erosion can offer opportunities for reversing it, and in so doing, revitalize Left parties’ popular emancipatory ambitions.

Several structural changes are worth noting in this regard. The importance of digital networks under global capitalism places a premium not only on technical education in information and communication technology but also on cultural education in inventing new ideas and applications. The emergence of the internet and a flexible gig economy poses new challenges to older models of labor organization and exploitation. At the same time, it fragments the workforce and complicates political organization. This bodes ill for traditional Left parties founded on labor unions that organize in factories and rely upon on-site, face-to-face accountability linking rank and file with leadership.

Besides favoring tech-savvy youth, network capitalism encourages entrepreneurial branding, crowd sourcing, and the unprecedented exploitation of data to manipulate and reinforce consumption behavior. In addition to its ideology of ‘prosumer’ individualism and focus on immediate stimulation, social media have proven to be a toxic venue for platforms spreading misinformation and addictive reinforcement of all manner of hyper-partisanship. As Habermas has recently remarked, social media platforms qualitatively change the production of communicated content; gone are the gatekeepers whose fact-checking and editorial criticism tamed the partisan reporting of mainstream television and newspaper journalism. The new generation of authors empowered by social media have free rein to spread all manner of toxic disinformation, lies, conspiracies, and photo-shopped videos. They magnify the theatrical aesthetics and confounding rhetoric of traditional political propaganda by immediately eliciting rapidly and widely disseminated plebiscitary acclaim in a continuous stream of approving posts and clicks, the repetitive reinforcement and addictive attention-grabbing effects of which cement the audience to the author and provide no relief for private, undistracted reflection (Habermas 2022, 166). Needless to say, their potential for expanding and deepening a public sphere geared toward deliberation seems questionable at best. Indeed, populist movements are the best at exploiting social media to draw in members who are invited to participate in the on-line construction of party platforms. Despite the appearance of inclusive popular participation in a deliberative enterprise, this process is highly scripted by an elite who control the digital platform.[[27]](#endnote-28)

For better or worse, there is no turning back to the kind of pre-Internet politics in which propaganda and audience crowds were more easily tamed by widely consumed and more responsibly established news sources under the auspices of a truly deliberative public spheres. Digital parties are here to stay. That said, genuine digital democracy cannot be ruled out. Urging the regulation of platforms----not in the way that the founding generation of libertarian-minded Silicon Valley CEOs intended, as commodities in a free market subject to anti-trust laws but as political resources within a constitutionally protected public trust, as Habermas recommends---is a step in the right direction. A more ambitious step in this direction would involve the creation of a constitutionally secured *public* platform. As British Labor leader Jeremy Corbyn notes, a digital commons, or a publicly owned, fully transparent, and fully accessible digital platform for political organising, avoids the twin perils of elite scripting and censorship, on one side, and anarchic, viral posting by anonymous bots, on the other----both of which coexist in today’s privately licensed digital party platforms.

Creating such a commons, in turn, depends on narrowing the gap between highly educated and less educated workers. Citing Shoshana Zuboff’s study on surveillance capitalism, Habermas rues the economic forces that reinforce mindless consumption of disinformation. But capitalism’s demand for an educated, tech savvy labor force suggests an opposite trend. Another is the increasing precarity of an educated middle class that increasingly no longer feels insulated from the economic dislocations and planetary catastrophes suffered by the less educated and more vulnerable. [[28]](#endnote-29)

It remains to be seen whether universal access to higher education and digital political platforms will lead to the kind of student/worker alliance witnessed in Europe and elsewhere during the sixties.[[29]](#endnote-30) The emergence of militantly left- leaning, digitally-driven movements, such as Podemos in Spain, might yet congeal into parties whose educated leadership organizes popular deliberation around genuinely emancipatory policies. Needless to say, the verdict is not yet out on whether digital communication can effectively substitute for face-to-face deliberation and digital plebiscites and referenda for choosing candidates and legal proposals can avoid empowering wealthy celebrities and propaganda machines.[[30]](#endnote-31)

**Endnotes**

1. “The Impotence of the German Working Class” (Horkheimer, 1978, 62). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Marx’s endorsement of the “really democratic institutions“ that he ascribed to the Commune‘s nascent “dictatorship of the proletariat“ (universal suffrage of adult male workers, election of workers’ representatives holding term limits, bound by popular mandate, and subject to popular recall, etc.) contrasts with his criticism of the less-than-democratic  bourgeois democracy of the United States, whose alleged guarantee of universal male suffrage and majority representation belies  its true repressive nature as an instrument of *minority* class domination (*The Paris Commune*, in Simon [1994, 307]. That said, Marx believed that revolutionary politics under bourgeois democracy could be advanced through the ballot box by granting workers the franchise, thereby enabling them to “win the battle of democracy“ (as he put it in the *Communist Manifesto*[Simon 1994, 175]). Interestingly, Marx‘s support for universal suffrage and proportional representation of working class interests in a bourgeois democracy contrasts with the ostensibly liberal, pluralistic view of his contemporary, J. S. Mill. Given his concern over working class tyranny, Mill’s support for proportional representation and universal suffrage was tempered by his own counter-majoritarian, anti-egalitarian proposal giving persons with higher education multiple votes and denying the franchise to persons on the public dole. Interesting, too, in light of this chapter’s topic is Mill’s conception of democracy---very unlike Marx‘s dictatorship of the proletariat--- as mainly a deliberative enterprise whose function was primarily advisory (the generation of informed opinion) rather than decisional and administrative.  In the final analysis, Marx’s view of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a genuine form of popular democracy must be further qualified in light of his view that any *state* government, no matter how democratic its form, would be repressive and as such would be superseded in a fully developed, post-political communist society composed of elected economic planners and administrators.  Also see note 9 below.   [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Leaving aside its emancipatory vision for a fully developed and reconciled humanity, the socialist struggle in its many democratic forms more directly targets the political domination of wealthy elites. One struggle aims to abolish capitalist private property and, in the most extreme instance, all markets in goods, investments, and labor. Such abolishment entails submitting economic planning to a central, democratically elected committee, which acts to equitably satisfy social needs. Other struggles aim to abolish capitalist private property while retaining decentralized (competitive) markets in goods and services alongside centralized investment planning. A weaker version of this variant retains a sector of capitalist private property but disperses and regulates property ownership (European social democracies can be regarded as one outcome of this kind of socialist struggle). Another democratic socialist struggle aims at empowering worker management of firms, be they private or public cooperatives. Finally, recent movements aimed at creating a democratic, digital commons, such as that proposed in Jeremy Corbyn’s Digital Democracy Manifesto, defend universal internet access and electronic voting, free from the control exercised by profit-driven, private platforms such as Facebook and Google. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See Max Horkheimer, ‘The Impotence of the German Working Class (Horkheimer, 1978). For a discussion of how rightwing, authoritarian parties such as Andrzej Duda’s Law and Justice Party (Poland) and Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz Party (Hungary) have built their nationalist platforms on linking worker-friendly social guarantees to anti-immigrant policies, see Piketty (2020, 871-877). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. See, e.g., Justice Kennedy’s United States Supreme Court opinion in the *Citizens United v FEC* decision) (Ingram 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. That deeply unjust voting outcomes such as substantive rights violations can follow from ideally just deliberative procedures suggests that proceduralist theories of democratic legitimation are insufficient. To characterize such decisions as even weakly binding until the majority has changed its mind seems wrong. A better account of legitimacy must therefore appeal to a process of recursive institutional contestation in which substantively correct reasons (e.g., exercised in the course of judicial review) determine the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of laws that severely harm selected social groups. For a detailed presentation of this critique of proceduralism, see Lafont (2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Habermas, like John Dewey, views a commitment to truth as foundational for deliberative democracy. Hilary Putnam, who endorses Dewey’s theory of deliberative democracy, concedes the limitations of deliberative theories in addressing existential concerns (Putnam, 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. A further practical difference between partisan and deliberative models is that the former describes national party-based politics while the latter describes local, issue-oriented politics. This is not to overlook the synergy that exists between national political struggles and local politics, as school board meetings in the United States, with their strident debates over mask wearing and critical race theory, clearly attest. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Marx and Engels regarded democratic political struggle within a capitalist state as a means to achieving power, not as an end to be maintained indefinitely: “[S]o long as the proletariat still makes use of the state, it makes use of it, not for the purpose of freedom, but of keeping down its enemies and, as soon as there can be any question of freedom, the state as such ceases to exist” (Engels, 2011). In a stateless communist society, as in the Paris Commune of 1871, the democratic association of workers would freely deliberate and decide matters of administration and coordination directly, without mediation by hierarchically organized parties. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. “A Discussion About Revolution” (Horkheimer, 1978, 41) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Citing studies by Russell Dalton (2006), Habermas notes that since the post-war period the “insufficient functional differentiation of the public sphere” from “cultural background and social status” has been reversed, thanks to a loosening of “ascriptive ties” between these determinants of social identity and political behavior. He adds that the “increasing independence of political attitudes from[these] determinants” corresponds to a “shift in voting behavior marked by long-term partisanship and allegiances to political parties to issue voting,” a shift that he attributes to the “growing impact of public discourses on voting behavior.” Habermas is hardly oblivious to the danger posed by what is otherwise a rationally progressive differentiation of the public sphere: “the trend toward so-called ‘issue publics’ . . . has effects only insofar as the issue publics enter into overlapping networks which counteract the fragmentation of the voting public” (2009, 178). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Evidence shows that even among educated people an impartial consideration of alternative points of view can only be expected to the degree that deliberators are forced to give a face-to-face account of their views before a live audience of epistemic peers whose views remain unknown to them (Lerner and Tetlock, 2003). The overwhelming consensus among cognitive psychologists is that confirmation bias, reinforced by powerful tendencies toward group conformism, cannot be dislodged by reasoning, and that post-hoc rationalization can only aspire to rational self-criticism under circumstances that are rarely seen even in the academy, let alone in the public sphere. For an analysis of the concept of confirmation bias and its positive contribution as a cognitive heuristic, see Klein (2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. The extra-parliamentary opposition (Ausserparlamentarische Opposition, or APO) in the late sixties was a core part of the West German student movement that expressly opposed the grand coalition (Grosse Koalition) of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which controlled 95 percent of the seats in the Bundestag. The APO’s ire was directed against the coalition’s passage of the Emergency Acts that restricted civil rights in an increasingly radicalized political atmosphere. Led by Rudi Dutschke and others, the APO’s alliance with unions and the working class as well as its support for freedom of speech and the democratization of the university had the support of Adorno, Bloch, Marcuse and Habermas (in France, the APO movement was supported by Sartre). In the end, the APO movement dissolved, with some of its members joining the Greens (which eventually became a political party). I thank Anastasia Marinopoulou for this observation. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. As Fraser points out (Fraser 2015), the structural contradiction embedded in capitalism (the crisis of concentrated accumulation) is not merely displaced onto its sustaining social, political, and ecological environments. Rather, capitalism tendentially undermines all these necessary conditions for its functioning in its liberal, state-managed, and neo-liberal phases. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Drawing from American data, two-thirds of the college-educated preferred Nixon over Kennedy in the 1960 US presidential election. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Although young people as a group tend to be more progressive than older people, education remains the most reliable predictor of voting and partisan allegiance. To take a recent sample, in the 2020 US presidential election, Biden won 56 percent of those who had earned a BA and 67 percent who had earned an MA or higher, while garnering the support of only 41 percent who had a high school diploma or less. Biden won just 27 percent of white voters without a college degree, compared to Clinton’s 1996 margin of 60 percent from this demographic. Biden also won 59 percent of the vote of people 18-35 years old and 55 percent of the vote of people 30-49 years old. Given the higher education of people under the age of 50---in 1952 only 5 percent of Americans had a college degree in comparison to 41 per cent today---it is not surprising that age and education correlate politically. There is no evidence that shows that higher education---rather than family up-bringing in a progressive environment---mainly causes this leftward political tilt. Nonetheless, it might be conjectured that exposure to more complex accounts of social reality, coupled with expectations for independent, critical reasoning, partly explains why college-educated voters tilt leftward. Where young people are not college-educated, they are as likely---and, in some cases, even more likely---to support conservative political parties (e.g., the distant memory of dictatorship is lost on those young, less educated Greek voters who make up a majority of the neo-Fascist Golden Dawn Party). In the US, support among educated progressives for aggressive gun control, environmental regulation, defunding of police, LGBTQ+ rights, and critical race theoretical education ---coupled with their relative indifference to the economic precarity of blue collar workers---has pushed many ordinary working people, both young and old, to the right, See Pew Research Center Report, June 30, 2021, “Behind Biden’s 2020 Victory” [**https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/06/30/behind-bidens-2020-victory/]** [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. The Left/Right political landscape varies from country to country and is inflected by religion in complicated ways (e.g., recent papal authority within the Catholic Church currently supports curbs on capitalist development in the name of sustainability, human welfare, human rights of migrants and minorities and the common good while also opposing abortion and gay marriage). To complicate matters, some strands of libertarian (or neo-liberal) thought, such as Hayek’s, unconditionally support the right of religious communities, private establishments, and local communities to discriminate against minorities and women. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, in the US today, neo-liberal ideology finds reception among religious conservatives, who defend the right of religiously conservative state and local governments to restrict the scope of freedom vouchsafed to women (e.g., abortion) and non-cisgendered individuals by the federal government. Finally, the anti-globalist orientation of rightwing populist parties can just as easily accommodate conservative, neo-liberal domestic policies, as in the case of Britain and the United States, as progressive welfarist policies, as in the case of Hungary and Poland (see note 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. The convergence of Left-leaning educational elites with Right-leaning neo-liberals on some points should not obscure their differences. For example, Left-leaning educated elites during the height of state-managed capitalism might have endorsed uncoupling technical economic management from militant forms of class politics, but they would have opposed constitutionally entrenching a competitive capitalist economy beyond the democratic reach of redistributive compromises negotiated between political elites representing labor and business. In general, libertarian (or neo-liberal) thought has rejected all but the most formal understanding of democracy as a system for transferring limited decision-making power from one set of office holders to another. Hayek, along with Friedman, Buchanan, and the Virginia School of Public Choice, is representative of this school. For the public choice crowd, democracy is a corrupt system of logrolling, pork-barrel self-advancement, and bribery that feeds off the hard-earned income of the masses and is much less democratic than the workings of the market. For Hayek and exponents of the Trilateral Commission, democracy, like any government system, merely refers to the source of legal coercion, which, but for the protection of private property and market exchange, is always a diminution of freedom. So understood, democracies are not necessarily preferable to authoritarian regimes in protecting individual liberty and in fact have totalitarian tendencies not possessed by capitalist-friendly authoritarian regimes. This explains how, despite their lip-service to democracy (Friedman endorses a necessary complementarity between liberal democracy and capitalism) these thinkers had no qualms about advising General Pinochet in entrenching neo-liberal economic rules in his otherwise undemocratic, post-Socialist Chilean constitution (Brown 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. “The Impotence of the German Working Class” (Horkheimer, 1978, 65). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. The gap between voters and government elites inevitably fuels populist movements whose logic, to quote David Runciman (2018, 65), is conspiratorial thinking; not just the losers in an election but even the winners (like Trump and his followers) feel that government elites (the ‘deep state’) have covertly robbed them of their rightful power. Such conspiratorial populism poses a grave risk to the stable functioning of democratic institutions, as witnessed by the Washington, D.C. demonstrations that took place on January 6, 2021. In the past the cure for conspiratorial populism has been total war, which, unlike today’s professionalized limited military interventions, mobilizes an entire population against a collectively experienced common threat. Patriotic faith in government elites during these moments of crisis is often reciprocated by governments enacting political and social policies that expand popular democratic participation, thereby closing the gap between voters and government elites. It is an open question whether, today, global capitalism and climate change can be collectively experienced as an equally compelling existential threat by the 99 percent that might restore faith in government elites. It is likewise uncertain whether elites in mature democracies can reciprocate the people’s faith by expanding popular democratic participation more than it has already been. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. For a thorough discussion of the deliberative dynamics that touch on the morality of conciliation, compromise, and dissent, see Randolph Carlson, ‘Political Justificationism: A More Realistic Epistemology of Political Disagreement (unpublished dissertation). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Populism collapses three distinctive senses of ‘the people’: as sovereign source of constitutional legitimacy; as socio-ethnic collectivity; and as political democratic majority. The absolute sovereignty associated with the first limits the temporary and partial sovereignty of the third and denies the sovereignty of the second. By proclaiming the absolute sovereignty of the second, populism erases the boundaries, which are to some extent inescapably permeable, separating ordinary politics from constitutional politics and constrained majorities from tyrannical majorities (Morgan 1988, 90-91, cited in Urbinati 2019, 78). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Bernard Manin (1997) identifies ‘audience democracy’, in which independent voters passively identify with media celebrities and executive authority instead of with parties and legislative authority, as the third and last stage in the evolution of representation, following the government of notables (based on limited suffrage, limited constitutional rights, and executive supremacy) and party democracy (based on universal suffrage, partisan competition, constitutionalism, and centrality of the legislature). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. See Theodor Adorno’s earlier diagnosis of the narcissistic identification of the people with the fascist leader (Adorno 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. In this context one might cite the involvement of legal theorist Costas Douzinas in the populist SYRIZA (The Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance) government of Alexis Tsipras up until its loss of power in 2019. Also notable is the intellectual support that Slavoj Žižek threw behind the party until 2015, the year it capitulated to EU austerity conditions in exchange for a bailout. For Žižek, the fact that 61 percent of Greek voters had voted against the bailout plan in the 2015 referendum showed that anti-establishment, anti-corruption populist rhetoric and electoral support for the SYRIZA government did not enable it to develop positive policies that provided an alternative to existing capitalism. When Syriza was voted out of office in 2019 it had sacrificed much of its popular appeal for the sake of pragmatic, consensus governance in coalition with conservative parties (Žižek 2019). I thank Anastasia Marinopoulou for this observation. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. See note 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. To take just one example, M5S was launched in 2009 as a network movement by Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casallegio in an attempt to bypass establishment parties and media in order to connect average voters directly to each other and to their leaders. Grillo’s blog beppe-grillo.it allegedly provided a public and transparent platform for disseminating news, facilitating meetings, launching discussion posts around specific problems and policies, placing voters in direct contact with experts, and, once M5S became a full-fledged party, for serving as a clearing house for vetting candidates’ credentials and selecting candidates through on-line plebiscites. M5S’s launching of the interactive on-line platform Rousseau enabled members to propose laws, selection of which depends on conformity to the Italian Constitution and M5S’s core principles. Despite what appears to be a promising infusion of direct democracy into an otherwise hierarchical party system, Rousseau is licensed as a private enterprise and its filtering algorithms and expert opinions are orchestrated by owner and son of the founder Davide Casaleggio. Grillo himself has authorized the expulsion of elected representatives from the party if they are deemed to stray too far from the party line. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. For an insightful diagnosis about how justice-related social movements pertaining to civil rights and economic inequality have morphed into ‘ecological’ movements pertaining to the preservation of a meaningful lifeworld, see J. Habermas (1987, 393). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Recent Left social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street in the United States, SYRIZA in Greece, and Podemos in Spain reflect a broad coalition of students, workers, environmentalists, and other groups. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Podemos emerged out of the Indignados movement in 2011, which condemned impoverishment and elitism. It’s founder, Pablo Iglesias Turríon, is a political scientist as well as being a media star like Grillo. From the beginning Podemos has functioned as a digital party conducts on-line plebiscites and primaries for choosing prospective candidates. The fact that plebiscites consign audience participation to a passive act of acclamation and primaries circumvent party organizations in selecting candidates and empowering celebrity outsiders eventually became a point of contention between Iglesias, who supported this form of direct democracy, and íñigo Errejón, who did not. See Gerbaudo (2018 131-41).

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