UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Living under Post-Democracy: Political Subjectivity in Fleetingly Democratic Times

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in Political Science

by

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June 2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to a host of friends, family, and colleagues, without whose support this dissertation would not have been possible: the University of California Board of Regents, UC Santa Barbara Graduate Division, and the UCSB Department of Political Science, for their generous financial assistance; Dr. Corey D. B. Walker, Dr. Michael Gottsegen, the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University, Dr. Bernard Harcourt, Dr. Chad Cyrenne, Dr. Marissa Guerrero, and Benjamin Jewell, for encouraging me to pursue a life of scholarship; Dr. Bruce Bimber, Dr. Tom Carlson, Dr. Joshua Foa Dienstag, Dr. Thomas Hughes, and Dr. M. Kent Jennings, for their edifying instruction and advice; Geoff, Tristin, Natasha, Will, Nikki, Colin, Maggie, and Aaron, for their indispensable encouragement and fellowship; Dr. M. Stephen Weatherford, for his ongoing guidance and critical investment in my scholarship; Dr. P. E. Digeser, for her thoughtful, supportive mentorship and invaluable commentary on my work; and Dr. Andrew Norris, for helping me to grow as both a writer and scholar in ways I could never have realized alone.

I dedicate this dissertation to Marsha and Jeffrey Miro, for their endless love and support; Stephen Hall and Paul Miller, for inspiring me to ‘ponder the imponderables’; my parents, for always encouraging me to follow my dreams and giving me the tools to do so; and my wife, for helping me every step of the way and making the whole thing worthwhile.

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation addresses the theoretical implications of contemporary obstacles to democratic practice for the political self-conceptions of ordinary citizens. It does so by adopting a post-democratic perspective, one which, while sympathetic to the values of popular sovereignty and political equality, recognizes the practical ways in which contemporary democracies depart from them. In it, I argue that other theorists of post-democracy (including Jacques Ranciere, Colin Crouch, Richard Rorty, and Jurgen Habermas) haven't sufficiently appreciated the radical consequences that follow from a post-democratic diagnosis, which include serious challenges to the conceptual categories (e.g., legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability) that democratic theory tends to take for granted. In order to develop an approach to these categories that better comports with a less-than-democratic present, I build upon Thomas Hobbes's conception of servitude to develop a new model of post-democratic subjectivity, one largely predicated on the experience of political domination. This model opens up the possibility for a therapeutic approach to political theory and (pseudo-)political activity that prioritizes a 'care for the self' over the question of political judgment, one which allows individuals to work through the feelings of frustration, anxiety, and alienation that stem from post-democratic life.

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I. Introduction

At times, our political commitments encourage us to ignore or rationalize brute facts that would otherwise complicate or even challenge those commitments. For instance, we may look past a candidate's moral failings because we value his integrity or ignore his corporate donors because we see him as the right choice for labor. When considering those commitments which go beyond our partisan differences, those ideals — freedom, justice, equality, etc. — reinforced by nearly every aspect of our socio-cultural experience and shared with the vast majority, we become more willing to accommodate contradiction. We may even speak paradoxically, simultaneously asserting the presence and absence of a particular ideal (i.e., "despite the rampant inequality, we live in an equal society," "even with an unjust legal system, the courts are just," etc.). Still, we often choose to accommodate those contradictions precisely because they are so widely accepted; suggestions that the emperor wears no clothes are consistently met with hackneyed, often condescending defenses of his invisible attire. Our decision to do so, however, has profound consequences. By maintaining these sorts of fundamental contradictions, we not only lose sight of our collective, lived experience, but come to suffer the affective consequences of living a lie.

Our belief that ordinary people living in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe govern themselves, concurrent with our awareness that they do not, is one such contradiction. Specifically, despite all of our talk of democratic citizenship, we know that these individuals fail to exercise a non-negligible degree of political influence over sovereign decision-making. This is not to claim that most

individuals never serve as public officials or that citizens are not always able to realize their political preferences. The phrase 'non-negligible' is meant here in the barest sense: that their political power cannot easily be dismissed, that some mechanism exists by which citizens' preferences are constructively addressed, not simply ignored or symbolically patronized. This dissertation rests upon the observation that, for the vast majority of citizens in Western democracies, these mechanisms are absent, rendering “We, the people” politically insignificant.

Formally, we can gesture to a host of institutions and practices which are ostensibly intended to help realize popular preferences. Civic associations, electoral representation, and public discourse can all conceivably be employed for democratic ends, but are not intrinsically so. When, for instance, a multi-billion dollar company is able to hire private lobbying firms, make substantial campaign contributions, and dramatically outspend their opponents on advertising, it is difficult to characterize an individual's ability to canvass, vote, or speak as significant. Even when actively engaged with a host of like-minded citizens and forming a movement, these efforts can be instantly matched (or hijacked) by those with the requisite wealth. Moreover, even when the battle is 'won', well-funded interests can continue to chip away at any gains, watering down legislation or spoiling implementation, if not eventually reversing the decision. Under such conditions, the ordinary citizen is at an extreme disadvantage, to say nothing of the individuals not involved at all. Of course, this is not to suggest that all political contests are one-sided; even the wealthy disagree with one another at times in ways that can yield political change. Professional sports leagues may take issue with local laws concerning race, sexual orientation, or

gender identity. Ecologically-minded billionaires may challenge destructive drilling or mining practices. Excited entrepreneurs may take new opportunities to upset long-standing prohibitions. However, it would be disingenuous to describe these as genuinely democratic efforts; they would, at most, be a form of pseudo-democracy by coincidence.

Despite being familiar with our predicament, most of us continue to think of ourselves as democratic citizens.[1] Politically, we still conceive of ourselves as decision-makers. We either imagine that our preference plays some (almost mystical) role in sovereign decision-making or that it ought to, making its present relegation some kind of momentary glitch waiting to be fixed. We cling to the idea that our preferences matter or believe that the political system cannot long survive our exclusion. Most of all, we fail to consider the possibility that our political insignificance may persist, even outlast us, and that the democracy-to-come never will, or at best, will only be recognizable in retrospect through the ephemeral traces of a fugitive democracy neither predictable nor lasting. It may be simply because we have not had the conscious, collective opportunity to address our democratic failings. In ways palpable and explicit, our culture regularly reaffirms that *vox populi* will always win out in the end, even if sacrifices must be made along the way. More pessimistic diagnoses, such as George Orwell's *1984* or Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, conclude with clear defeats that are mortal as well as political. In these works, no

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[1] As Jones et al. point out, 64% of Americans are at least aware that they play no role in politics, believing that their votes do "not matter because of the influence that wealthy individuals and big corporations have over the electoral process" (Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Betsy Cooper, and Rachel Lienesch, *Anxiety, Nostalgia, and Mistrust: Findings from the 2015 American Values Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Public Religion Research Institute, 2015), 30).

one is left alive without their democratic dignity, rendering the question of how to live without it irrelevant. When the only imagined alternative to democracy is the struggle *for* democracy, we lack a way of thinking about politics appropriate for a context persistently characterized by democracy's absence.

Ultimately, this dissertation aims to remedy that deficiency. It seeks to describe our political circumstances in less-than-democratic terms, not in order to make (yet) another pitch for democratic reform or revolution, but to better interpret the lived political experience of ordinary citizens. This is not an immanent critique of democratic thinking — like most, I am fairly sympathetic to democratic principles — but a challenge to its contemporary relevance. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to show that democratic theory is inadequate for orienting contemporary citizens of Western democracies. In other words, that the resources offered by democratic theory are unable to prepare individuals for their practical relationship to political activity and authority, at times even furthering feelings of frustration, anxiety, and alienation. Instead of a democratic orientation toward politics, we need a post-democratic one.

What does it mean to be post-democratic? Distinct from being 'post-political,' which assumes that all questions of substance have already been foreclosed by hegemonic consensus, post-democracy doesn't necessarily signal the absence of politics.[2] Rather, it describes a context in which only a select range of actors participate in political activity to any significant extent, despite the formal availability of mechanisms (e.g., voting, representation, etc.) for greater involvement. These

[2] See, for instance, Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York: Routledge Press, 2005), ch. 3.

mechanisms, however, do not provide citizens the opportunity to autonomously influence political decision-making, but only the possibility of being activated or mobilized by other, authentic political actors.[3] Colin Crouch describes this ambiguity further, writing "One cannot call this kind of politics non- or anti-democratic, because so much of it results from politicians' anxieties about their relations with citizens. At the same time it is difficult to dignify it as democracy itself, because so many citizens have been reduced to the role of manipulated, passive, rare participants."[4] Ordinary citizens may still 'participate' in politics by consuming political news, holding political beliefs, and occasionally voting, but these actions offer only the most belabored, tenuous connections to the eventual political decisions they are intended to influence. Rather, effective political participation is limited to wealthy elites and dedicated activists (with the latter being at an absurd disadvantage), those with the time and resources to engage in the "slow, powerful drilling through hard boards" described by Max Weber.[5] The vast majority of us, whether by conscious choice or due to other responsibilities, largely restrict ourselves to the exercise of Benjamin Constant's modern liberty, leading the life of a private individual rather than a political

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[3] Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Pearson, 2002); Steven Schier, *By Invitation Only* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001).

[4] Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004), 21.

[5] Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation," *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 93.

actor.[6] As such, we cannot properly be described as having any significant impact on sovereign decision-making whatsoever.

This argument is hardly unique. In addition to recent work on post-democracy, the tradition of democratic realism stretches back to E. E. Schattschneider, Joseph Schumpeter, and Weber.[7] Still, because of our overriding attention to the role of political elites, we lack a satisfactory account of how ordinary citizens ought to approach political activity and authority under these conditions. In other words, we continue to attend to politics as a *vocation*, not to the *alienated* political existence with which so many of us are familiar. Most of ordinary citizens will not have to decide whether to go to war, how to apply a law, or if they can stomach the kinds of compromises necessary to legislate; they will, at best, decide whether to sacrifice for that war, respect that law, or consider that legislation beneficial. In conjunction with a more accurate appreciation of our post-democratic context, we need a new framework for interpreting the political experience of non-elites, one which focuses less on considerations relevant to political decision-making and more on the everyday experience of being governed. In short, an account not of political activity itself, but one which addresses how ordinary citizens can understand themselves in relation to it.

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[6] Benjamin Constant, "The liberty of the ancients compared with that of the moderns," *Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1988).

[7] E. E. Schattschnieder, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1960); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Ruskin House, 1954); Max Weber "Suffrage and Democracy in Germany," *Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994).

The value of a sincerely post-democratic political orientation lies in its capacity to provide a clearer sense of one's own political subjectivity in a way that can help citizens better address the frustration, anxiety, and alienation that result from a confused understanding of politics. In this sense, the aim is therapeutic, not normative. The intention is not to argue that a post-democratic context is ideal or even preferable, but to cultivate a way of thinking about our relationship to politics better able to prepare us for the kinds of worries ordinary citizens routinely share concerning politics; to develop a new non-political ethos toward politics, a way of approaching politics that doesn't assume having a role in it. Part of this requires coming to terms with a persistent condition of political insignificance, one which shows no signs of abating, but it also requires a reevaluation of one's relationship to political activity and authority in light of that insignificance. Specifically, it necessitates a serious reconsideration of the *legitimacy* of one's political system, as well as one's *membership* in, *responsibility* to, and *culpability* for it.

Generally, democratic theory relies upon the citizen's role as a decision-maker as the definitive criterion for theorizing her relationship to political activity and authority. A political system is legitimate to the degree that ordinary citizens play a significant role in the decision-making process. A citizen is a member of a political community by virtue of her ability to participate. Because of the significance of the citizen's political practices, the citizen has an obligation to participate (e.g., vote, serve on a jury, protest injustice). Finally, the citizen will have to bear the guilt for the 'crimes' of her political community; these transgressions may be excused by necessity (e.g., collateral damage, imminent domain), but they may also be

inexcusable (e.g., massacres, genocides). However, when ordinary citizens become unable to see themselves as decision-makers, this logic no longer makes sense. Instead, they need a new way to orient themselves consistent with their lived political experience, best characterized as a condition of being dominated.

This will necessarily involve exorcising some of the more persistent habits of democratic thought. For those invested, above all else, in pursuing spectres of democracy, embracing a post-democratic political orientation will appear defeatist, conservative, or even fascistic. Not much can be said to the captain and crew who choose to go down with the ship. Yet, for those committed to a level of political self-understanding beyond what democratic theory can offer, those who value clarity over principle, post-democratic thinking may provide an opportunity to seriously re-conceptualize the substance and consequences of a non-political — but not apolitical — subjectivity; one characterized not by a lack of interest, but by an inability to influence sovereign decision-making.

However, prior to expanding upon a post-democratic orientation, we ought to establish a firmer foundation for our initial criticism. In other words, we need to clearly demonstrate the contemporary inadequacies of democratic theory. To do so, we must begin by being clear about what we mean when we say both 'democracy' and 'politics'; otherwise, our argument may become bogged down by challenges from non-democratic forms of 'democracy' or non-political exercises of power. After clarifying these terms, this chapter will conclude with a brief outline of the chapters to follow, detailing how they will contribute to the greater argument developed in this

dissertation: that a post-democratic political orientation offers an attractive, therapeutic alternative to its democratic counterpart.

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

What do we mean when we describe something as democratic? With so many variants of democratic thought, including deliberative, agonistic, aversive, plebiscitarian, pragmatist, epistemic, fugitive, audience, and stealth democracy, not to mention eponymous models affiliated with Pericles, Machiavelli, Madison, Tocqueville, Emerson, Mill, Dewey and others, it may often be hard to tell.[8] However, despite a host of principled and procedural disagreements, most are all committed to the idea at its etymological root: that a genuinely democratic practice involves 'rule by the people.' Obviously, *how* exactly the people rule is up for debate, but we can say a few things further about what a broad commitment to democracy necessarily entails.

To begin, it requires that sovereignty be popularly exercised, that political decisions are made collectively rather than by a distinct subsection of that community. For instance, we distinguish between a monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy based upon who in that society — whether the king, nobles, or the

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[8] Respectively, see Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004); Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000); Aletta Norval, *Aversive Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007); Weber, "Suffrage and Democracy in Germany"; Christopher Ansell, *Pragmatist Democracy* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011); David Estlund, *Democratic Authority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2009); Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy" in *Constellations* 1.1 (1994): 11-25; Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987); and John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

demos — participates in political decision-making. Moreover, to rule is not simply to be an object of consideration, but to exercise an autonomous kind of power within society. While we can describe a king as ruling over subjects, we cannot similarly say that the king's subjects rule over him simply because he must consider their reactions to his decisions. To do so would be to recognize the king's consideration of his spatial or temporal context also as an instance of 'being ruled'.[9] Therefore, a democratic decision can only be reached through a process that empowers the citizens of that society to autonomously contribute to political decision-making. These contributions may often, if not regularly, be reactive or guided, such as when one is asked to choose between a bounded (if not binary) set of options (e.g., voting 'aye' or 'nay', selecting between candidates), but the opportunity to set the agenda and negotiate those eventual options must not itself be limited. In other words, citizens must have a functional mechanism for making active, unique contributions to political decision-making when presented with choices they find unnecessarily narrow. To only ever be in the position of responding to the alternatives arbitrarily decided upon by others only *appears* democratic as long as one of the alternatives presented is acceptable; being allowed to choose the manner of one's death when life is still possible can hardly be called governing oneself.

[9] Debates over the nature of consciousness and free will aside, the concept of rule requires the possibility of noumenal freedom.

In addition to popular sovereignty, democracy requires political equality.[10] In order for the people to rule, *all* of the people must rule. Of course, who actually constitutes 'the people' is up for debate as well; we may wish to exclude children or mentally ill, felons or the undocumented, or even entire populations based upon race, gender, or class. Regardless of how the boundaries are drawn, all of those recognized as members of the demos must have roughly the same level of political influence. There will necessarily be a small subsection of public servants who will undoubtedly exercise a greater degree of political influence by nature of their position, but the opportunity to be a public servant must not be limited, save by ability (though, for advocates of democracy by lot, this too is debatable). However, there must not be additional subsections of the citizenry able to exercise a considerably greater degree of political power. For instance, if a particular family, association, or race were able to exercise a level of political influence disproportionately greater than their relative size, this would contribute to political inequality.[11] While some levels of political inequality are perhaps inevitable, dramatic,

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[10] There are, of course, some models of 'democracy' that fail to honor the value of political equality, of which Arendt's council democracy is a notable example (see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), Ch. 6). Yet, unless the decision not to participate is *completely* up to personal discretion, contributing to a voluntarily form of political inequality, then a limited democracy must either imply, as Aristotle does, that not all residents are citizens or instead constitute a disguised aristocracy.

[11] One might challenge this point by referencing the democratic justifications behind reserved forms of minority representation. In instances where historically-disadvantaged minority groups have dedicated representative seats in order to combat systemic forms of exclusion, this would seem to be a corrective effort in service of political equality.

systemic, and persistent, distinctions between the political power exercised by different groups must be taken as signs of democratic dysfunction.

When political decisions are made in a way that approximates the values of popular sovereignty and political equality, the practice democratically *legitimates* the resulting decisions and acts as the criterion for *membership* in a democratic political community; it also makes us *responsible* and perhaps *culpable* for the consequences of those decisions, should they yield negative outcomes. Broadly, this logic informs a democratic political orientation; without significant, equal participation, it is questionable as to whether our decisions are democratically legitimate, in particular because we are unsure if the decisions are actually *ours*. If we cannot point to the way in which we non-negligibly influence political decision-making, we cannot reasonably hold that we govern ourselves; that we, in any way, rule. Any sincere claims to democracy without an explicit, functional mechanism for realizing popular sovereignty and political equality would be mere pretense, steeped in either a populist mysticism or a deep misunderstanding of the realities of contemporary political practice.

What this definition leaves undetermined is the mechanism by which citizens actually exercise their political power. A democracy may be direct, requiring that all citizens exercise political power themselves, or indirect, allowing citizens to conditionally transfer their political power to representatives on the basis that they attempt to realize citizens' preferences. We can further distinguish between democracies of distinct character; for example, it could be deliberative, asking citizens to communicate with one another in hopes of reaching a consensus, or

agonistic, recognizing that conflicts between citizens are inescapable and should be tempered, not extinguished. Furthermore, our definition does not specify what kinds of decisions democracies make, which may prove unjust, immoral, short-sighted, prejudiced, ill-informed, disastrous, or downright malevolent. In this sense, it is procedural, but not comprehensively so, only specifying two broadly interpretable, necessary conditions: that decisions are made by all and in an egalitarian fashion.

Could a particular practice or institution be democratic *without* satisfying these two conditions? In short, no. While such a system could be defended for non-democratic reasons (e.g., it produces informed decisions, it guarantees our private liberty), it would be impossible to offer a *democratic* justification without appeal to both popular sovereignty and political equality. Rather, such a system would be only nominally democratic, designated as such due to the need to be understood by others and in the absence of an alternative signifier. To suggest otherwise, that genuine democracies need only pay lip-service to these values, would be to lose the normative force unique to democracy. In other words, qualifying a practice or institution as 'democratic' would cease to influence our perception of its legitimacy, reduced to merely a technical or academic distinction. Democracy, as a whole, would become empty.

This becomes evident when considering the model of democracy offered by the realist (or empiricist) tradition. Take, for instance, the work of Joseph Schumpeter. Schumpeter argues that the 'classical doctrine of democracy', which asserts that the demos rules in some way, is hopelessly flawed.[12] Rather, he

[12] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, ch. XXI.

proposes that we instead reimagine democracy as a model of party competition, one in which elites jockey for a popular majority and then rule as they see fit.[13] Famously, citizen involvement in decision-making would be reduced to "the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them."[14] It could be argued that at least this is an opportunity for some involvement, but to what end is unclear. Schumpeter doesn't entertain the illusion that the ballot will eventually translate into some kind of influence upon decision-making; he, like many realists, counts on the fact that it won't. "People," he writes, "cannot be carried up the ladder."[15]

So why participate? Moreover, why consider the resulting political decisions legitimate? As Jurgen Habermas stresses in his own critique of empiricist democracy, "we can say that if rational citizens were to describe their practices in empiricist categories, they would not have sufficient reason to observe the democratic rules of the game."[16] In other words, realist democracy lacks any claim to normativity from the citizen's perspective: citizens are unable to find the system legitimate *simply* because they have some involvement in an elite power struggle. It may still be legitimate because it alleviates political violence or produces competent officials, but these would be pacifist or technocratic justifications, not democratic ones. Ultimately, a democratic justification requires the ability to rule, not simply the ability to choose *who* will rule in a political context otherwise unresponsive to the

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[13] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, ch. XXII.

[14] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 284-5.

[15] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 264.

[16] Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 295.

broader preferences of ordinary citizens.[17] We find a similar problem in Christopher Achens and Larry Bartels's recent work, *Democracy for Realists*. While they acknowledge that ordinary citizens are unable to exercise any meaningful level of political influence, they argue that elections are still valuable for other reasons: namely, they contribute to legitimacy, allow for turnover, incentivize the toleration of opposition, morally educate citizens, and keep elites from violating ethical norms.[18] Like Schumpeter, they defend an ostensibly democratic practice for non-democratic reasons, raising the question of why we ought to appeal to democracy in the first place.

We see this further in Jeffrey Green's defense of a novel form of plebiscitary democracy. In his book, *The Eyes of the People*, Green argues that we move away from a 'vocal' model of democracy, one in which we express (and attempt to realize) political preferences, and towards an 'ocular' model, in which we recognize our role as passive spectators.[19] Similar to the project at hand, Green is interested in "the way politics is experienced by most of the people most of the time and by the People itself (the mass of everyday, non-office-holding citizens in their collective capacity) all of the time."[20] By watching our leaders and subjecting them to our gaze, Green argues, we can get a better sense of our leaders' candor, not in order to influence

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[17] As we'll explore further in Chapter 2, a representative democracy may involve selecting representatives, but further requires that those representatives are broadly responsive to the preferences of their constituency, not just their donors.

[18] Christopher Achens and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2016), 316-19.

[19] Jeffrey Green, *The Eyes of the People* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010), 3-4, 8.

[20] Green, *The Eyes of the People*, 3-4.

their decision-making, but simply to see what kind of people they are. Beyond occasionally being able to witness an event, a moment where a leader is so candid that our perception of them might actually change, Green explains that we'll be able to burden the leaders with our gaze, subjecting them to a kind of punishment "for their never fully legitimate authority."[21] As such, Green's theory of democracy suggests that our ability to revel in our leaders' gaffes should be taken as recompense for our *lack* of popular sovereignty. Instead of an ability to rule, we have opportunities for schadenfreude. While this justification may be compelling for some, especially those of a generation raised on reality television, it remains a stretch to describe it as democratic. It is, instead, an aesthetic defense of post-democratic politics, one which embraces spectacle as political activity's remaining popular contribution.

Despite the value of the broader descriptions they offer of modern political activity, Schumpeter and Green's respective attempts to redefine 'democracy' are unproductive. Intent on retaining the word itself, they render the concept beyond all recognition. In doing so, they further raise the question of why anyone would find the kind of democracy they describe attractive in the first place. As such, democracy becomes both overly ambiguous and underwhelming; it loses the ability to persuade us that the practices and institutions which bear its name are inherently legitimate. Instead of consistently altering the meaning of democracy in order to make it fit our present circumstances, we should invest in new terms able to capture the character, however diluted or disappointing, of our contemporary relation to politics. We should,

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[21] Green, *The Eyes of the People*, 20.

in other words, preserve democratic theory's internal validity, even at the expense of its external validity, lest we cede whatever normative force democracy has left.[22]

DEFINING POLITICS

Similarly, an overly expansive definition of politics may ultimately make the distinction inconsequential. When everything is political, from our consumer choices to the messages we post on social media, we lose sight of what distinguishes *genuinely* political activity from everything else and, in turn, what makes political activity so significant. While all forms of social activity provide an opportunity for individuals to influence one another, either interpersonally or through the production of both formal and informal rules, political activity is unique to the extent that it can exercise influence through the threat or use of legitimate violence. This capacity for 'acceptable' violence is precisely what distinguishes politics from other forms of social activity, rendering it a sort of higher, if not sacred, enterprise. This is not to say that all political activity is violent, at least not in the immediate sense, but it always concerns violence. Overall, politics is the practice of managing violence, of specifying when to abstain from violence, as well as the conditions under which an individual or group can become a target of legitimate violence.

Often, when discussing politics, we do not explicitly refer to this capacity for violence, but instead to the idea of *sovereign* power, which Jean Bodin defines as

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[22] For those post-democratically oriented, this is less in the service of some promise of democracy-to-come than its opposite: the belief that describing Western democracies as such will only continue to invite the values of popular sovereignty and political equality to inform our judgment, regardless of explicit, theoretical attempts to relegate their consideration.

"the most high, absolute, and perpetuall power over the citisens and subiects in a Commonweale."[23] As Thomas Hobbes argues, the ability to exercise sovereign power depends primarily upon having recourse to violence as a means of enforcing sovereign decisions. Without it, the sovereign would be unable to wield supreme power, its decisions no more than suggestions; only violence, or the threat thereof, has the ability to coerce otherwise unwilling citizens to abide by sovereign decisions.[24] Max Weber notes that "Violence is, of course, not the normal or sole means used by the state... But it is the means *specific* to the state," further describing the state itself -- the political institution *par excellence* of our historical moment -- as a "human community which (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a certain territory."[25] Carl Schmitt too emphasizes the ability to name public enemies, declaring war, "and thereby publicly disposing of the lives of men" as the essence of the political.[26] He, like Weber, allows that other associations below the state might still exercise legitimate violence, making them "subordinate groupings of a secondary political nature," but the state is the decisive *political* entity to the extent that it is able to authoritatively legitimate or de-legitimate instances of violence.[27]

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[23] Jean Bodin, *The Six Books of a Commonweale* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1962), 84.

[24] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1994), XVII.4.

[25] Weber, "Politics as Vocation," 33 *italics in original*.

[26] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 33.

[27] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 47-8; Weber, "Politics as Vocation," 33.

What constitutes violence's *legitimate* exercise? Broadly speaking, an action is legitimate to the extent we find it 'rightful' or 'appropriate'; it is an action which, regardless of the impact it may have on our other immediate interests, carries with it a *prima facie* 'internal justification'.[28] For instance, Hobbes famously argues that we give up the "right of governing" ourselves and authorize a sovereign for the sake of our "peace and common defense."[29] In other words, Hobbes considers the sovereign's use of violence legitimate to the extent that it contributes to our security.[30] We could consider sovereignty legitimate for a host of other reasons as well. Weber gives us three broad categories for classifying types of legitimation, distinguishing between traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal justifications for sovereign action; a sovereign power could be legitimate because of its long-standing history, a persuasive figurehead, or a set of agreed-upon rules, such as, for instance, a democratic decision-making procedure.[31] Beyond the ideal types offered by Weber, Schmitt argues that essentially *anything* can function as a legitimation, assuming the population in question finds it persuasive.[32] As such, the question of what constitutes a legitimate sovereign power is empirical. This isn't to say that any association able to achieve and maintain power is legitimate; it may have a kind of *de facto* sovereignty which results from the ability to dominate and terrify the

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[28] Weber, "Politics as Vocation," 34.

[29] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.13.

[30] However, what constitutes a threat to our security, as well as the best means of dealing with that threat, remains entirely up to the judgment of the sovereign (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVIII.8).

[31] Weber, "Politics as Vocation," 34.

[32] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27-9; 38.

citizenry, but legitimate sovereignty requires that individuals have an additional, self-sufficient reason for adhering to sovereign decisions beyond the immediate threat of punishment. Though a state may able to rely on force alone, perhaps indefinitely, a political relationship requires further justification in order to distinguish it from mere slavery.[33] Even Hobbes's servant (discussed in more depth in Chapter Five), who joins a polity under threat of violence, is presented as doing so in hopes of a better life, not just because the sword is at her throat.[34]

The practices which satisfy this understanding of political activity, however technical it may seem, should hardly be unfamiliar to us. Most obvious would be the procedures for sovereign decision-making associated with the state: namely, passing legislation, issuing executive orders, and setting judicial precedent. In each of these activities, decisions are made that influence our perception of the legitimate exercise of violence.[35] Ideally, when a congressional body passes a law, state actors are seen as justified in using violence (to a limited, prescribed extent) in enforcing that law; judicial re-interpretation has a similar effect. Further, when individuals attempt to obstruct an executive order, we accept the state's use of violence as legitimate. When, under mixed constitutions, different branches of government contend with one another, this too constitutes political activity, if not also a crisis of political authority. Other crises of political authority include revolution, civil war, and

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[33] See Bernard Williams, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory," *In the Beginning was the Deed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005).

[34] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XX.10.

[35] Declarations of war are unique in that they call both for the immediate use of violence, as well as triggering a set of hypothetical conditions which may also call for violence (e.g., punishing treason, mutiny, draft-dodging, etc).

influential instances of civil disobedience; all of which should be considered political activity insofar as they call into question the state's claim to *legitimate* violence, whether in entirety or, as in the case of civil disobedience, when enforcing a particular law or order. Finally, we should consider both a sovereign body's founding and its failure as instances of political activity, those which create or erase the very conditions for legitimacy in the first place.

Still, there are forms of so-called 'political activity,' best understood as (pseudo-)political activity, that fail to meet our definition. For example, there is a host of literature which now describes a movement away from electoral participation and toward more informal means of attempting to exert political influence, what Russell Dalton describes as the transition to 'engaged citizenship.'[36] A central figure in this debate, Dalton argues that engaged citizens prefer direct, expressive forms of political action, and in this respect differ from older generations of citizens.[37] Consequently, his conception broadens the idea of political participation to include such diverse activities as signing petitions, protesting, boycotting, buycotting (deliberately purchasing a company's products in support of their policies), and even visiting political websites or forwarding political emails.[38]

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[36] See Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Countries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997); W. Lance Bennett, "Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age" in *Civic Life Online* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Cliff Zukin et al., *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006); and Russell Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2008).

[37] Russell Dalton, "Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation," *Political Studies* vol. 56 (2008): 76-98, 85-86.

[38] Dalton, "Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation," 87.

However, when we entertain such a widely inclusive understanding of political activity, we tend to equate practices which otherwise vary significantly in aim and effect. On the one hand, selective consumer practices may force a company to change policy, but its unclear why we should place corporate policy in the same category as state law or judicial decision. Of course, both could have a tremendous impact upon our daily lives, especially if the corporate policy in question concerns labor or environmental policy, but then our only criterion for political activity would be having a significant effect on one's community. This definition would seemingly qualify a whole range of social, economic, and even private activity as political, as well as some forms of meteorological and zoological activity.[39] Life itself would become political, not poetically, but literally in a way that dilutes the concept's meaning and utility. One may have a democratic workplace, social club, or even family, but this cannot substitute for a set of democratic *political* practices.

On the other hand, though activities like signing a petition or protesting may have the intention of influencing sovereign decision-making, they are often so far removed as to render their contribution negligible. Of course, we are familiar with dedicated efforts which found success, such as the Suffragist, Temperance, and Civil Rights movements. However, sporadic, uncoordinated, or poorly-conceived actions that merely express dissatisfaction with a sovereign decision should hardly be considered the same. Without a coherent sense of how one's activity might significantly and uniquely contribute to sovereign decision-making (or its challenge), it is unclear how one can equate it to more effective political activities. It may be

[39] On the latter, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010).

countered that citizens still inform sovereign decision-making just by *having* political preferences, that politicians are somehow beholden to public opinion. Though we may still factor into the political decisions made by others through contributing to census or polling data, this involvement, both passive and deeply objectifying, is neither decisive nor binding. To describe this as political participation would seem to imply that we engage in political activity simply by being ruled.

Thus, when arguing that democratic theory inadequately orients citizens toward politics, we mean that the practices which legitimate the exercise of violence within our society have little connection to either popular sovereignty or political equality. In short, that the ordinary citizen is not, by any means, a sovereign decision-maker. Society may still have a democratic ethos; generally, people may distrust unsubstantiated authority or title, instead putting faith in their earnest, hardworking fellow citizens. Additionally, citizens may still be satisfied with sovereign decisions in which they have no active part. Yet, under such conditions, to continue to rely on a democratic conceptual framework toward politics is to ignore the striking disconnect between sovereign decision-making and the ostensibly political actions of ordinary citizens. Ascribing a democratic character, even a nascent one, to our present political context only trivializes the very real obstacles now successfully frustrating attempts to realize genuinely democratic practices. Whether in hope of a democratic future or out of the recognition that it may not be so forthcoming, we should direct our efforts toward a clearer understanding of the present.

PLAN OF THE DISSERTATION

How, then, should we set about achieving this clearer understanding? The next chapter will begin by assessing three predominant models of democracy: republican, liberal, and deliberative. After first identifying the method, specific to each model, by which citizens influence sovereign decision-making, we will then examine whether that method functions satisfactorily. Ultimately, we will find that, whether through associational participation, political representation, or the availability of defendable discursive conditions, citizens are presently unable to effectively influence sovereign decision-making. In short, that they lack sufficiently democratic forms of political activity. As such, this chapter will conclude that democratic theory is ill-suited for conceptualizing the contemporary citizen's relationship to political activity and authority.

In its place, Chapter Three will introduce the idea of post-democracy as a way of theorizing the experience of living in societies which, despite professing democratic values, fail to realize either popular sovereignty or political equality. After further elaborating on the concept and distinguishing it from its close relative, democratic realism, we will distinguish a post-democratic orientation to post-democracy from a democratic one. While the latter recognizes post-democratic conditions as a fixture of one’s political existence, the former treats post-democracy as something to be rectified, and thus exclusively attends to strategies for doing so. In addition to adopting unrealistic expectations about overcoming the present obstacles to democratic practice, this attachment to democratic ways of thinking — found in the work of Jacques Ranciere, Colin Crouch, Jurgen Habermas, and

Richard Rorty — leads us to ignore the need to rethink political subjectivity in the wake of post-democracy, specifically how this affects previously-held, democratic interpretations of political legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability.

In Chapter Four, I will argue that post-democracy invites a distinctly therapeutic approach to the practice of political philosophy, one interested in clarifying one's own political self-understanding, not out of consideration for how one exercises political influence, but in order to help overcome the sense of disorientation and worry that accompanies post-democratic life. After further describing this therapeutic approach as one which prioritizes individual well-being over the exercise of political influence, making particular use of Jonathan's Lear's account of the Crow nation, I will contrast my interpretation with that found in the recent work of Jeffrey Green, who offers an Epicurean defense of extrapoliticism. Ultimately, I will argue that post-democracy requires not a justification for avoiding politics, but a deeper engagement with the experience of political insignificance itself.

Through offering a post-democratic reading of Thomas Hobbes, Chapter Five will then model this therapeutic approach to political philosophy. After first characterizing post-democratic life as a unique form of political domination, I will employ Hobbes's oft-ignored account of servitude to develop the first substantive model of post-democratic political subjectivity, one marked by a deep pessimism toward sovereign power. I will then explore the implications of this model of political subjectivity for one's consideration of legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability. Specifically, I will argue that a post-democratic orientation relegates the

question of legitimacy, highlight one's lack of membership in a political community, makes one's sense of responsibility to the state purely instrumental, and relieves one's sense of culpability for its actions. While hardly a cause for celebration, adopting this sort of political self-understanding can help alleviate the broader feelings of frustration, anxiety, and alienation that stem from the absence of democratic practice.

Yet, as will be argued in Chapter Six, these Hobbesian insights are only therapeutically valuable to the extent they are applied. This requires using them to conceptualize one's involvement in the many (pseudo-)political activities that make up post-democratic life. In particular, I will turn to an account of the Dark Mountain Project, a group of apocalyptic environmentalists who gather to mourn the destruction of the earth, as a way of imagining a therapeutic approach to (pseudo-)political activities like voting, protesting, and deliberating. After describing the ways in which a post-democratic appropriation of these activities can mitigate feelings of frustration, anxiety, and alienation, I will examine the greater political implications of adopting this self-conception. Finally, I will conclude by characterizing a post-democratic orientation as a form of political realism, sympathetic toward democratic values, but more deeply invested in realizing a coherent understanding of one's relationship to political authority and activity.

To continue to speak of the availability of democratic practices and the exercise of popular sovereignty is to willfully ignore the political context we have inherited. The aim of this dissertation is not to normatively defend post-democracy, but to better acquaint ourselves with a political context that, despite its familiarity, is

in need of an elaborating discourse appropriate to it. It offers an initial jumping off point, one which hopes to inspire even more comprehensive treatments of the peculiar political position in which ordinary citizens now find themselves. Suspended between our democratic ethos and our less-than-democratic reality, it is time to rediscover how we relate to politics and why it is important.

II. The Empirical (Ir)Relevance of Democratic Theory

Democratic theory has not always had the hegemonic position it presently enjoys. Since the Greeks started using the word *demokratia*, most, save Pericles, have disparaged the idea, equating it with an impassioned, impulsive rule by the poor.[40] Though Rousseau made the case for popular sovereignty relatively early on, even most republican theorists, until the mid-19th century, found any possibility of 'rule by the *demos*' terrifying, preferring instead to empower a minority of noble, virtuous, and often wealthy citizens.[41] As late as 1787, James Madison advocated for adopting the United States Constitution on the basis that it would *prevent* democracy, famously describing democratic governments as those which "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."[42] Across North America and Europe, democracy represented a form of organized anarchy, a threat to both traditional institutions and the health of the polity at large.

As it happens, it was also during the Federalist/Anti-Federalist debates that the idea of democracy began to gain popular currency. In their attempts to prevent the expansion of Federal power, Anti-Federalists made the case for a more politically

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[40] Thucydides, "Pericles Funeral Oration" *History of the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Penguin, 1972), Book 2, 34-46; Plato, *The Republic* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2012), Book VI, 448a-449c; Aristotle, *Politics* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998), Book V, Ch. 5, 1304b19-1305a36.

[41] See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2002), Bk. I, Ch. VI and Bk II, Ch. I-II.

[42] James Madison, "Federalist 10" *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 29.

empowered citizenry, one that would otherwise be neutered by the centralization of power called for by the Constitution.[43] As Russell Hanson observes, though they lost the greater debate against ratification, "The Democratic-Republican Societies and the Jeffersonian Republicans succeeded in neutralizing the more odious connotations of 'mob rule'... They also initiated the process by which the rhetorical links between democracy and the ideas of popular sovereignty and political equality were forged."[44] The War of 1812 saw further use of the term to criticize perceived aristocratic elements within American political culture as a means of distinguishing it from the British monarchy.[45] By the Jacksonian Era, the Democratic-Republicans had become simply the Democratic Party, no longer emphasizing the aristocratic republicanism of its Adamsonian forbearers and now "committed to the proposition of *vox populi, vox Dei*."[46] The publication of Alexis de Tocqueville's two-volume *Democracy in America* in 1840 and 1845, as well as the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and, later, Walt Whitman, only further cemented the idea that the United States was, above all, a democratic nation.

In conjunction with similar developments across Europe, democratic theory would soon come to dominate Western political thought. By the early 20th century, the idea of taking up a non-democratic position, much less an anti-democratic position, was reserved for a dying breed of philosophical aristocrats and all but

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[43] See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), Ch. 6.

[44] Russell Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985), 88.

[45] Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America*, Ch. 3.

[46] Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America*, 131, 148.

totally abandoned by those engaged in political activity. As one observer noted, "no doctrines are advanced as antidemocratic. The accusation of antidemocratic action or attitude is frequently directed against others, but practical politicians and political theorists agree in stressing the democratic element in the institutions they defend and the theories they advocate."[47] The fascists claimed a popular mandate, as did the Soviets; both, as well as the United States, justified their invasions of other countries on the principle that they were restoring popular sovereignty. As Wendy Brown recently pointed out, this pervasive commitment to democratic values has hardly changed. She writes,

> We hail democracy to redress Marx's abandonment of the political after his turn from Hegelian thematics (or we say that radical democracy was what was meant by communism all along), we seek to capture democracy for yet-untried purposes and ethoi, we write of "democracy to come", "democracy of the uncounted", "democratizing sovereignty," "democracy workshops," "pluralizing democracy" and more. Berlusconi and Bush, Derrida and Balibar, Italian communists and Hamas-we are all democrats now.[48]

Even those more inclined to recognize their government as a mixture of monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic elements do so while privileging the latter, emphasizing the state's ability to facilitate popular sovereignty and political equality over, for instance, a commitment to judicial acumen, expert decision-making, bureaucratic efficiency or other non-democratic criteria. In short, the West's contemporary idea of

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[47] Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1987), 3, itself quoting R. McKeon, ed., *Democracy in a World of Tensions: A Symposium Prepared by UNESCO* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 522.

[48] Wendy Brown, "We are All Democrats Now," *Democracy in What State*, (New York: Columbia UP, 2012), 45.

the 'good society' is the democratic society, with widespread agreement that legitimacy ultimately depends upon empowering citizens to exercise influence over sovereign decision-making.

Despite the near unanimous support for democracy, we are often still uncertain as to whether we actually live in a democratic state. While some may become incredulous only when their candidate loses or measure fails, there are those suspicious of political activity in general, believing that it consistently privileges some subsections of the population over others. Yet, these same skeptics may also point to other aspects of their political culture, such as the right to free speech or protest, to defend a kind of latent, democratic kernel within their society, one which either materializes when needed or persistently guides our politics in a subtle, if not mystical, fashion. As such, it's not uncommon to hear a society ambiguously described as 'somewhat democratic' or even both democratic and un-democratic at the same time. Moreover, thanks in no small part to our myopic focus on democratic theory, we often cannot avoid describing our society as democratic. Whether fixating on a democracy-to-come, putting stock in the power of social democracy, or defending realist democracy as an achievement in itself, our political context appears, conceptually speaking, inescapably tied to democratic theory, further making democratic theory seem unfalsifiable as a whole.

Thus, in order to answer the question, "Do I live in a democracy?", with any degree of precision, it's important to get clear to which theory of democracy one is referring. For instance, if we were to adopt Schumpeter's framework, we need only ask whether the state holds elections; if Green's, whether public officials are

sufficiently subject to the public's gaze. Yet, as argued in the previous chapter, neither of these conceptions place any stock in either popular sovereignty or political equality, troubling the authenticity of their democratic credentials. We may, just as well, judge a state's democratic character based upon whether it makes rhetorical appeals to the will of the people or simply if it calls itself thusly. In contrast, this chapter will focus on the three most preeminent traditions of democratic thought that *do* subscribe to these values, albeit in very different ways. Specifically, we'll address liberal democracy, republican democracy, and deliberative democracy.[49]

Perhaps most familiar to ordinary citizens, liberal democracy stipulates that popular sovereignty should be facilitated through the use of political representation. By means of regular elections and ongoing discussions with their constituents, representatives act as conduits through which citizens can realize their political preferences.[50] To the extent that these representatives are equally beholden to all of their constituents, political representation constitutes a form of democratic practice.

Alternatively, republican democracy emphasizes the role of civic virtue. Instead of relying upon one's elected representative, republican theorists argue that popular sovereignty is best realized when citizens actively engage in public life, making use of various civic and civil associations to exercise political influence. When these associations are sufficiently inclusive, allowing citizens to build

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[49] This distinction roughly parallels Habermas's own, offered in *Between Facts and Norms*, 297-302.

[50] This contrasts with Edmund Burke's "trustee" model; however, it's unclear whether that interpretation of political representation can be described as democratic. See Burke, "Speech to the Electors of Bristol" *Selected Works of Edmund Burke Vol. 4* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1999), 3-14.

relationships outside of their particular class, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc., these practices can contribute to a politically egalitarian society.

Finally, deliberative democracy privileges the role of public discourse within political decision-making. Rather than focusing on the ways in which *individuals* exercise political influence, deliberativists attend to the quality of our political deliberations. They argue that the cultivation of inclusive, fair, dynamic, and justificatory deliberative conditions that advance, famously, the 'unforced force of the better argument' ultimately functions as a means of popular sovereignty, holding public officials accountable to the deliberative norms (presumably) held by ordinary citizens.[51] Assuming citizens broadly share and value the same discursive institutions (e.g., the same newspapers, television programs, websites), deliberative processes can further realize political equality. However, in the event of a superficial, fractured, or polarized discursive field, this assumption becomes more dubious, as citizens may feel as if the dominant discourse either fails to adhere to deliberative norms or excludes relevant concerns.

All three of these frameworks not only commit to both popular sovereignty and political equality, but also provide mechanisms (intended to realize these values) that can be operationalized and tested. In other words, they can be employed to distinguish democracies from non-democracies. For the liberal model, we can examine whether representatives do, in fact, make decisions which broadly accord with their constituents' preferences; for the republican model, we can explore

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[51] Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 306. For a critical take on this argument, see Amy Allen, "The Unforced Force of the Better Argument: Reason and Power in Habermas' Political Theory" *Constellations* 19:3 (2002): 353-368.

whether a given population exhibits a commitment to public life indicative of civic virtue; and for the deliberative model, we can determine if discursive conditions live up to deliberative norms. If any of the above thresholds are met, we can then establish the external validity of democratic theory's broader political logic; namely, the way in which a capacity to influence decision-making legitimates one's polity, makes one a member, and generates a responsibility to and culpability for the consequences of political activity. If not, however, we may find that democratic theory is no longer adequate for making sense of the ordinary citizen's relation to politics, at best, acting as a set of aspirational norms only tangentially connected to the present and, at worst, obscuring a political reality which otherwise alludes us.

Ultimately, this chapter will find the three democratic frameworks above unsatisfactory for describing our contemporary political moment. Through a survey of the relevant empirical literature, it will be shown that neither political representation, civic virtue, nor public discourse is able to facilitate the exercise of popular sovereignty. Rather, we'll argue that only the wealthy are able to make effective use of these ostensibly democratic practices, contributing to *de facto* oligarchic rule under *de jure* democratic conditions. In the final section, we'll discuss the nature of political involvement currently available to non-elites, best described as limited, passive, and perfunctory, before turning to a greater discussion of post-democracy in chapter three.

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

As previously noted, popular sovereignty and political equality weren't always considered so desirable. Yet, despite their ambivalence, some political philosophers

around the mid-19th century began to recognize the democratization of political practice as inevitable. Tocqueville famously notes that conditions "everywhere turn to the profit of democracy... The gradual development of the equality of conditions is thus a providential fact."[52] Rather than attempt to stem the tide, these thinkers began to imagine how best to direct this democratic impulse in such a way as to avoid its worst excesses.[53] In particular, they were worried that politically empowering the multitude would lead to an overzealous state, one willing to upset long-held traditions and practices for temporary gain or, worse, as a form of class warfare. One needed only to look to the French Revolution; in addition to widespread violence and terror, the popular government nationalized property, suppressed religious practices, and even tried to introduce a new calendar system. What was needed was a mechanism for mediating popular sovereignty, one which could allow citizens to exercise a low, but meaningful, level of political influence, while also ensuring that the state didn't become an instrument of the mob.

Benjamin Constant's 1819 lecture, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," exemplifies both this anxiety with democracy and the solution that would come to distinguish the liberal democratic tradition: a commitment to representative democracy. For Constant, Rousseau's direct democracy no longer made sense in a modern context. On the one hand, citizens

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[52] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2000), 5.

[53] As Mill points out, "Man cannot turns back rivers to their source, but it rests with himself whether they shall fertilize or lay waste to his fields." See *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill Vol. XVIII - Essays on Politics and Society Part One* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 158.

are too preoccupied with work and leisure to participate in politics; even if they did, the sheer size of nation-state makes individuals feel as if their political contributions are meaningless.[54] On the other hand, because citizens feel largely detached from political activity, they also tend to find state intervention "odious," preferring instead to be left alone to enjoy their private liberty.[55] Adopting an Athenian-style democracy would not only require citizens to forgo their private lives in the service of greater political involvement, but would further subject them to a regime-type historically prone to abusing sovereign power. However, while Constant wanted to avoid popular 'overpoliticization,' he needed to avoid 'overprivatization' as well.[56] Without some ability to influence politics, the rights and liberties citizens enjoy would still be at risk.[57]

In order to navigate between the Scylla of direct democracy and the Charybdis of private existence, Constant proposes the use of political representation. Though criticized by Rousseau as a form of alienated sovereignty, Constant argues that only representation can allow citizens to protect the individual liberties they cherish. By electing 'stewards' to ensure that the state never oversteps its bounds by violating their rights, citizens can continue to attend to private life

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[54] Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns" *Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1988), 316-7.

[55] Constant, *Political Writings*, 315.

[56] Stephen Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1984), 20.

[57] Only four years earlier, in *Principles of Politics* (1815), Constant argues that only a constitutional monarch can guarantee the protection of individual liberty (*Political Writings*, 183).

without putting themselves at risk of despotism or worse.[58] Additionally, the regular opportunity to participate in politics through elections can have an edifying effect on the public as well, as it "enlarges their spirit, ennobles their thoughts, and establishes among them a kind of intellectual equality which forms the glory and the power of a people."[59] As such, political representation is intended to cultivate a *sufficiently* democratic citizenry, one prepared for political activity but otherwise disposed to avoid it or, as Constant puts it, a citizenry which exercises sovereignty "always only to renounce it."[60]

Still, liberal theorists following Constant continue to be weary of the threats posed by democratic practice. Mill suggests limiting the ability for the lower classes to vote, out of fear that they still might elect those interested in violating the right to property.[61] Isaiah Berlin points out that "democracy may disarm a given oligarchy, a given privileged individual or set of individuals, but it can still crush individuals as mercilessly as any previous ruler."[62] Friedrich Hayek goes so far as to argue that

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[58] Constant, *Political Writings*, 325-6.

[59] Constant, *Political Writings*, 327. Cf "I have, it is true, seen elections accompanied by brawls, uproar, violent, disputes; yet the choice fell upon men distinguished either by their fortune or their talents; once the election was over, all went back to normal. The electors of the lowers orders, previously obstinate and unruly, returned to being industrious, docile and even respectful. Satisfied with having exercised their rights, they submitted the more readily to authority and conventions of their social superiors as, in doing so, they were aware they were only acting in their own interest... The people resumed their labours, but the public spirit has received a salutary shock, necessary to revive it" ("Principles of Politics," *Political Writings*, 204).

[60] Constant, *Political Writings*, 312.

[61] John Stuart Mill, "Considerations on Representative Government," *On Liberty and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), Ch. VIII.

[62] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 209.

democracy is valuable to the extent that it can peacefully resolve conflicts, protect individual liberty, and educate the public, not because it can realize popular sovereignty.[63] Yet, despite this uncertainty or, at times, outright hostility, most liberals concede the need for some level of democratic practice. As Judith Shklar makes clear, "Without the institutions of representative democracy and an independent judiciary open to appeals, and in the absence of a multiplicity of politically active groups, liberalism is in jeopardy... liberalism is monogamously, faithfully, and permanently married to democracy-- but it is a marriage of convenience."[64]

Despite liberal theory's instrumental commitment to democratic values, political representation can still satisfy the threshold for a genuinely democratic practice. When sovereignty activity is intended to be limited, constrained by procedure, countervailing influences, or a general sense of the proper ends of political power (i.e., the protection of private liberty), the popular, equal control of sovereign power constitutes a democratic regime. Therefore, the litmus test for recognizing a political system as a liberal democracy is that the preferences of ordinary citizens are pursued by their representatives. This is not to say that everything a majority of citizens desire has to come to fruition, but what the state *does* endeavor represents the will of people in general, not a particular subsection.

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[63] Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 171-74.

[64] Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear" *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 19.

Without this kind of representation, it may still be a liberal society, but it would not be underwritten by *democratic* norms and practices.[65]

Yet, regardless of universal suffrage and regular elections, ostensibly tethering our representatives to the general preferences held by their constituents, we find that wealthy Americans consistently exercise more political influence than other citizens, challenging the idea that our current political system is a vehicle for either popular sovereignty or political equality. Stretching from the 1950s, the American politics literature has consistently recognized a variety of ways in which the wealthy are better able to influence the state, not for the general defense of private liberty, but in order to realize particular class preferences.[66] Moreover, this unequal distribution of political power isn't at odds with political representation, but is rather facilitated by it. Not only are representatives susceptible to being influenced by private citizens with the resources to take advantage of the process, but they are more generally responsive to the wealthy as well. As such, instead of democratizing sovereignty, political representation has empowered an elite minority, which, though not always in agreement with itself, cannot be effectively challenged from the outside.

While many are quick to note the recent changes brought about by the *Citizens United* decision, the extensive work of Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and

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[65] One can certainly imagine an authoritarian or oligarchic liberalism, assuming one isn't personally familiar.

[66] See G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967); Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford UP, 1956).

Henry Brady demonstrates that better representation for the wealthy has been a characteristic of our political system for some time. Specifically, they argue that the wealthy are more apt to participate in politics, not only because they have the resources to do so, but because they consistently find their participation rewarded by the realization of their preferences. This contributes to a 'virtuous cycle' of participation, one which encourages further political participation by the wealthy based upon past successes, while also dissuading the non-wealthy from getting involved in the first place. As such, "political participation in America is highly stratified by social class, and that stratification has been a feature of political activity for as long as we have had surveys to measure it... which is the early 1950s... our major conclusion is the substantial and continuing participatory advantage enjoyed by the well-educated and affluent."[67]

Still, greater participation by elites doesn't necessarily mean that they'll be better represented. We could imagine a situation in which this participation still contributes to broader forms of representation; elites may vote more, but the candidates they elect may still be beholden to the population at large. However, Martin Gillens's work finds an extreme representational disparity between wealthy elites and ordinary Americans. Through an analysis of nearly 2,000 policy questions between 1981-2002, he finds that non-wealthy Americans may only be coincidentally represented, specifically when they share preferences with wealthy Americans. He writes,

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[67] Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2012), 174.

> On the policy questions on which low- and middle-income respondents share the same preferences as those with high incomes, they are, of course, just as likely as high-income Americans to get what they want. But when their views differ from those of more affluent Americans, government policy appears to be fairly responsive to the well-off and virtually unrelated to the desires of the low- and middle-income citizens.[68]

Even when controlling for education, in order to see whether attentiveness to politics (as predicted by education) or wealth was a better predictor of representation, he finds that "the preferences of the highly educated show no independent impact on policy outcome."[69] In a later article with Benjamin Page using the same data set, they would unequivocally assert that "When the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy."[70] According to their work, it would seem as if wealthy Americans are the *only* ones represented, agreeing with Schlozman, Verba, and Brady that "what is remarkable about political voice in American democracy is how unequal it has been for so long."[71]

While some may be tempted to argue that greater participation would ultimately correct this imbalance, it may not be enough. Rather, as Thomas Dye argues, it is not the *level* of participation that matters, but the *kind* of participation

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[68] Martin Gilens, "Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69.5 (2005): 778-96, 789.

[69] Martin Gilens, "Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness," 793.

[70] Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, "Testing Theories of American Politics," *Perspectives on Politics* 12.3 (2014): 564-81, 575.

[71] Kay Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2012), 599.

available to elites. He writes, "The assertion that public policy reflects the 'demands of the people' expresses the myth rather than the reality of democracy. However widespread this myth is believed by the people, and however artfully this myth is defended by scholars, the reality is that *public policy is made from the top down*."[72] How is this possible? He observes that wealthy citizens and the institutions they head exercise political power over several dimensions of the political process to which ordinary American simply do not have access. This includes: policy formulation by think tanks and foundations; leadership selection through campaign donations; lobbying by interest groups; opinion-making through media enterprises; policy legitimation through entrenched institutions; policy implementation through bureaucratic offices; and, in the last instance, policy evaluation by regulatory boards.[73] At each of these levels, wealthy elites can make sure their preferences are represented in a way that both conditions and evades the electoral power of non-elites.

In their recent work, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein further explain how the wealthy exercise this influence. Quoting former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, they expose how those with financial resources can skillfully gain political access.

> When we would become friendly with an office and they were important to us, and the chief of staff was a competent person, I would say or my staff would say to him or her at some point, 'You know, when you're done working on the Hill, we'd very much like you to consider

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[72] Thomas Dye, *Top Down Policymaking* (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2001), 1, *italics in original*.

[73] Thomas Dye, *Top Down Policymaking*, Ch. 2-9.

> coming to work for us.' Now the moment I said that to them or any of our staff said that to 'em, that was it. *We owned them. And what does that mean? Every request from our office, every request of our clients, everything that we want, they're gonna do. And not only that, they're gonna think of things we can't think of to do.*[74]

Ironically, the same emphasis on private life, which should encourage us to limit our political action, allows the wealthy to manipulate public figures and offices through promises of future highly paid private employment in order to augment their own political influence. Still, even those committed to public life face electoral pressure to support the preferences of their wealthier constituents. Though money has always played a major role in politics, following the *Citizens United* decision in 2010, the wealthy are more able to spend freely in order to influence elections themselves.[75] As Mann and Ornstein discuss,

> We have had conversations with several incumbents in the Senate up for election in 2012. They say the same thing: they can handle any of the several prospective opponents they might face, but all of them fear a stealth campaign landing behind their lines and spending $20 million on 'independent' efforts designed to portray the incumbent as a miscreant and scoundrel who should be behind bars, not serving in the Senate. And, of course, the contributors to the campaign would be undisclosed.[76]

Thus, now more than ever, our representatives seem to be disproportionately influenced by the wealthy.

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[74] Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 68-9, *italics in original*.

[75] For pre-*Citizens United* lobbying, see Robert Kaiser, *So Much Damn Money* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

[76] Mann and Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks*, 78.

Even if the wealthy can manipulate representatives during their terms in office, one may object that citizens can still take advantage of elections to punish unresponsive representatives, adopting a retrospective theory of voter behavior.[77] Thus, ordinary citizens, while unable to proactively pursue their interests, can reactively challenge affronts to popular sovereignty. Yet, as Christopher Achens and Larry Bartels have recently argued, citizens may not even be able to exercise this sort of power effectively, writing that "The conventional account of retrospective voting, minimalist as it is, fundamentally underestimates the limitations of democratic citizens and, as a result, the limitations of democratic accountability."[78] Specifically, they argue that voter behavior is driven primarily by the contemporary state of the economy, often only in the last few weeks of the campaign.

> Like medical patients recalling colonoscopies, who forget all but the last few minutes, the voters' assessments of past pain and pleasure are significantly biased by 'duration neglect.' Their myopia makes retrospective judgments idiosyncratic and often arbitrary... The result of this kind of voter behavior is that election outcomes are, in an important sense, *random*.[79]

Perhaps a more informed, organized electorate could take greater advantages of electoral opportunities, but this would also seem to render retrospective voting unnecessary, as non-elites could then actually elect those committed to their

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[77] See V. O. Keys, *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting 1936-1960* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1966); Gerald Kramer, "Short-Term Fluctuations in U.S. Voting Behavior, 1896-1964." *American Political Science Review 65* (1971): 131-143; and Morris Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1981).

[78] Christopher Achens and Larry Bartels, *Democracy for Realists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2016), 145.

[79] Achens and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*, 175-6 *italics in original*.

preference. Without it, however, ordinary citizens seem able to exercise political influence in a haphazard, if not purely superficial manner.

As previously discussed, a liberal polity need not be a democratic one; to whatever degree we currently enjoy some exercise of private liberty, it would be difficult to describe how it's being guaranteed by a *democratically* representative political system. Of course citizens can vote, but when we acknowledge that political outcomes are influenced in a variety of non-electoral ways and that those outcomes invariably reflect the preferences of the wealthy, it's difficult to equate suffrage with the realization of either popular sovereignty or political equality, even under the terms set by a limited, liberal framework. As it stands now, our individual liberty seems to be correlative with elite domination, not with democracy. One could argue that the wealthy act as a better check on state power than ordinary citizens in mass; further, elite-driven conflicts can just as easily contribute to justice or 'progress' outcomes as they can reactionary ones. Nonetheless, the current practice of political representation constitute an exclusive, ultimately un-democratic political mechanism, making it problematic that contemporary thinkers have failed to justify an aristocratically-, oligarchically-, or plutocratically-guaranteed liberalism to ordinary citizens. If seeking to characterize the United States as a democracy, it's necessary to gesture to some other mechanism for democratic political practice.

REPUBLICAN DEMOCRACY

Barring brief moments of Progressivist optimism or revolutionary zeal, Americans have never really championed anything like direct democracy as imagined by Rousseau or Pericles. When arguing for more widespread political participation, we

typically do not mean that all decisions ought to be formally decided by every citizen, resulting in either endless referenda or the dedication of all our time to political forums, making us what Ralf Dahrendorf has called 'total citizens'.[80] Few of us have a sense that our fellow citizens would ever want any arrangement like this, much less want to engage in it ourselves. Still, there are those who think that just electing a representative or president isn't enough to satisfy the demands of democratic governance, that an exercise of popular *sovereignty* requires something more. As such, republican theorists advocate for a greater commitment to civic virtue as a means democratizing political power, encouraging citizens to take an active role in public life through their participation in various community associations. Through involving themselves in these organizations, citizens can informally exercise political influence in a way that's both significant and egalitarian, as well as develop the interpersonal skills necessary to realize political preferences.

Tocqueville's descriptions of early 19th century America have long inspired how republicans have imagined the democratic ideal.[81] He observes the way in which Americans turn to each other, rather than the state, to pursue their collective goals, contributing to a greater culture of political equality based upon the need they had for one another.

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[80] Ralf Dahrendorf, "Citizenship and Beyond: The Social Dynamics of an Idea" *Social Research* 41.4 (1974): 673-701.

[81] See Jessica Kimpell, "Republican civic virtue, Enlightened Self-Interest and Tocqueville," *European Journal of Political Theory* 14.3 (July 2015): 345-67, which makes the case for considering Tocqueville's motivation for associationalism based on economic, rather than virtuous, grounds.

> Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds constantly unite together... The Americans form associations in order to hold holiday celebrations, found seminaries, build hostels, erect churches, disseminate books, and send missionaries to the ends of the earth, in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, and schools... Thus the most democratic country on earth is found to be out of all of them the one where men have most perfected, in our day, the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires and have applied this new science to the greatest number of objects. Is this the result of some accident, or might it be that there exists in fact a necessary relation between associations and equality?[82]

By making a habit of dedicating our time and energy to public activities, prioritizing them above private pursuits (whether economic, familial, or recreational), we develop what Aristotle, Machiavelli, and others have called 'civic virtue,' what the Romans understood as a respect and love for the *res publica*, or the 'public thing.' When our neighbors all share a commitment to civic virtue, then we can call upon them to help us deal with problems besetting our political community. As Tocqueville notes, while aristocrats have the resources to effectively act politically without calling upon the efforts of others, "independent and weak" democratic citizens must necessarily rely on one another to exercise a comparable level of political power.[83] Hannah Arendt contrasts this understanding of political subjectivity with the French tendency to imagine power as emanating from '*le peuple'* in the abstract: for the "men of the American Revolution... power came into being when and where people would get together and bind themselves through promises, covenants, and mutual pledges; only such power, when rested on reciprocity and mutuality, was real

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[82] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 113.

[83] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 114.

power..."[84] Without these community bonds, citizens are only able to act as individuals, severely hampering their ability to exert political influence. Accordingly, democratic power cannot exist by virtue of representation alone (or at all), but must be embodied through a robust public life in association with one's neighbors.

John Dewey, writing a century after Tocqueville, would again emphasize the importance of associational life for democratic health, famously asserting that real value of democracy doesn't lie with what procedures we use (e.g., voting, representation), which are in some sense arbitrary, but as a social idea, which is "not an alternative to other principles of associated life..." but "the idea of community life itself."[85] For Dewey, beyond the obvious power inherent in people in mass, the great strength of an active public sphere comes from our ability to communicate with one another and develop clearer perspectives on both the nature of our problems and how we can fix them, a point deliberativists would later emphasize.[86] Without our participation in the kinds of associations which facilitate this communication, we have no means of actually knowing what *we*, as a political community, want. Despite the availability of ostensibly democratic procedures like elections, a fractured, isolated, and unaware public would be unable to make use of them, challenging the idea that they can be used to realize anything like popular sovereignty by themselves. For the republican model, the presence of a widespread commitment to public life is essential; as Dewey put it "there is no substitute for the vitality and

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[84] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 173.

[85] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Denver: Alan Snow, 1927), 144-5, 148.

[86] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 142.

depth of close and direct intercourse and attachment... Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community."[87]

Later theorists help us specify three additional benefits of an active public life: social capital, human capital, and citizen-state mediations.[88] First, as Robert Putnam emphasizes, an active public life helps generate social capital, a feeling of trust and reciprocity among citizens he feels is essential for supporting civic virtue.[89] By participating in a myriad of associations, we can feel as if we 'know' our community, making us more likely to reach out to others for support as well as lend our own when called upon, creating a 'virtuous circle' of participation. Second, through participation, we build 'human capital' or skill sets which can be utilized for political purposes. For instance, involvement in a neighborhood association can teach us how to resolve disputes, communicate effectively, manage resources, and mobilize our fellow citizens, all of which are general organizational skills and relevant for the exercise of political influence. Finally, through providing opportunities for ordinary citizens to socialize and develop relationships with elected officials and other political leaders, associational participation can provide non-electoral avenues for political activity. If we are able to know our leaders on a personal level through our involvement in church, a concerned citizens group, or even a lodge, then we will be in a better position to not only communicate our preferences but hold them accountable for realizing them. Of course, this relies on the availability of inclusive

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[87] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 213.

[88] See Seymour Martin Lipset and Jason Lakin, *The Democratic Century* (Norman, OK:University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 93-4.

[89] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 19.

associations; this kind of citizen-state mediation disappears when we segregate based on class, gender, race, etc.

Without a strong, ubiquitous commitment to public life, republican theorists warn that citizens may become politically ineffective, which could further lead to a top-down political culture. Dewey contends that an isolated, non-associational public cannot "use the organs through which it is supposed to mediate political action and polity," putting it at the mercy of political bosses able to buy and sell votes.[90] Tocqueville fears that, without the habit of free association, democracy will inculcate a sense of 'individualism', understood as the total prioritization of private pursuits and the abandonment of public life.[91] This in turn, he asserts, creates conditions ripe for despotism, a point Arendt picks up on as well.[92] When adopting a republican framework, the presence of a robust associational life remains indispensable for qualifying a political system as democratic. As Dewey notes, there may be ostensibly democratic practices available, but they cannot realize popular sovereignty or political equality without an active, dedicated public to make use of them.[93]

Despite a historical attachment to, and perhaps even nostalgia for, associational life, it would be misleading to describe the American public as sufficiently civically virtuous for republican theory. Instead, Americans tend to

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[90] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 120-1.

[91] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 105.

[92] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 109; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 202; Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 99.

[93] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 143-46.

overwhelmingly commit themselves to their private, rather than public, concerns, giving little attention to the kinds of community-oriented, associational efforts this perspective champions and requires. Though, as we well know, there are many of us that do regularly participate in these sorts of activities, these individuals prove to be the exception rather than the norm; even if some of us, such as activists, lobbyists, or public figures, may be able to describe their political subjectivity along republican-democratic lines, we cannot accurately describe our broader political context as such. Without a widespread embrace of civic virtue, republican theory is unable to account for either popular sovereignty or political equality.

In their exploration of the contemporary viability of the Tocquevillian ideal, Robert Bellah and his colleagues interviewed a diverse group of Americans about how they conceptualized public life, specifically whether they considered it a meaningful or important aspect of their own lives. Their sociological research lead them to conclude that Americans are inundated with a sense of ontological individualism: we tend to unthinkingly prioritize how something will effect us over how it will effect our greater community, if we even end up thinking about the community at all.[94] Even those who do get involved, what Bellah et al. call 'concerned citizens', differ from the similarly archetypal 'town fathers' in how they conceptualize their public involvement. Contrasting the two, Bellah et al. argue that

> Unlike the town father, they [concerned citizens] experience such participation not as the routine fulfillment of the duties of citizenship, but as a heroic enterprise.... They see their involvement in self-

[94] Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 1985), 276.

> sacrificial terms, as a giving up of the real joys of a good life-- the joys of staying at home, at peace with family, neighbors, and friends.[95]

These 'concerned citizens' do not value public life in itself, but treat it as an obligation that otherwise impedes their ability to fully embrace private life. They are distinguished, not by their civic virtue, but by a reluctant willingness to participate when deemed necessary. Because this involvement is both limited and sporadic, even those who do act fail to develop the networks, skills, and persistence indispensable for the effective exercise of political influence. Consequently, Bellah et al. turn to Tocqueville's idea of an administrative despotism to describe our political context, one in which "citizens quit their state of dependence just long enough to choose their masters and fall back into it."[96] The authors end by emphasizing that "We have committed what to the republican founders of our nation was the cardinal sin: we have put our own good, as individuals, as groups, as a nation, ahead of the common good."[97] As such, we are no longer the nation of 'joiners' Tocqueville once depicted, apt only to involve ourselves when we're able to realize some private benefit.

Robert Reich offers us further insight into economic factors contributing to our general lack of public life. Just as Dewey observed in his own time, the opportunity for geographic mobility works to alienate individuals from communities, encouraging those who regularly move to abstain from making local relationships.[98] As Reich

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[95] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 181.

[96] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 209.

[97] Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, 285.

[98] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 141.

makes clear, those with professional skills in demand nationally or globally tend to move the most; these same highly talented and educated workers are also, unsurprisingly, the wealthiest. While they "are quietly seceding from the large and diverse publics of America into homogeneous enclaves," even those who persist in one place now live in communities inhospitable to the kind of deep attachments Dewey emphasizes.[99]

> In real life, most Americans no longer live in traditional communities. The majority live in suburban subdivisions bordered by highways and punctuated by shopping malls, or in tony condominiums and housing projects. Most commute to work and socialize on some basis other than geographic proximity to where they sleep. And most pick up and move every five years or so to a different neighborhood.[100]

Thus, while the wealthy are barricading themselves in gated communities, disengaged from the community at large, ordinary citizens live under spatial and economic conditions that actively deter the necessary ingredients for nurturing civic virtue. Moreover, because wealthy elites are the only citizens able to exercise political influence via representation, they are now doing so in further isolation from the population at large. This not only contributes to political inequality, but also facilitates a diminished sense of the problems facing one's community, as well as one's duty to ameliorate them. As Reich warns,

> For without strong attachment and loyalties extending beyond family and friends, [the wealthy] may never develop the habits and attitudes of social responsibility. They will be world citizens, but without accepting or even acknowledging any of the obligations that citizenship in a polity normally implies... Without a real political community in

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[99] Robert Reich, *The Work of Nations* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 268.

[100] Reich, *The Work of Nations*, 277.

> which to learn, refine, and practice the ideals of justice and fairness, they may find these ideals to be meaningless abstractions.[101]

As wealth disparity and class-based segregation continue to be exacerbated, Americans will find it harder and harder to find instances of the inclusive associational life that makes up the backbone of republican-democratic practices.

Robert Putnam's monumental *Bowling Alone* furthers this pessimistic outlook on American public life by investigating levels of social capital, one of the advantages of associational life enumerated earlier. Putnam connects social capital with a laundry list of benefits, including education, child welfare, safety, production, economic prosperity, health, happiness, and, most importantly for our purposes, democratic political power.[102] Building off of Tocqueville's thoughts on association, as well as Dewey's own "conundrum[,]...how to reconcile modern, large-scale, technologically advanced society with the exigencies of democracy," Putnam argues that social capital is a fundamental aspect of successful democratic practice for a number of reasons, including the ability to amplify and multiply individual voices, cultivate human capital, rein in extremism, communicate political information, and even motivate tax compliance.[103] Despite its enormous value, he finds social capital incredibly lacking, arguing that the demands of work, growing suburbanization, amount of time watching television, and generational shifts have made us all less-likely to associate with others in our community.[104] Aware both that "one cannot

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[101] Reich, *The Work of Nations*, 309.

[102] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 296-335.

[103] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 337-8, 343, 347.

[104] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Sec. III.

jump-start republican citizenship without direct, face-to-face participation" and "Citizenship is not a spectator sport," Putnam argues that, without an adequately interconnected community, "We remain, in short, reasonably well-informed spectators of public affairs, but many fewer of us actually partake in the game."[105]

In the absence of a more pervasive sense of civic virtue, Theda Skocpol describes how the nature of associational life *itself* has changed. Since the mid-20th century, "mobilizing fellow citizens into dues paying, interactive associations that met regularly no longer made sense for elites, who could instead run professionally managed organizations able to gain immediate access to government and the national media."[106] In other words, mass communication has come to replace the mass meeting, effectively excising the ordinary citizen out of process. Their role is now passive, if not directed. She writes,

> Where once cross-class voluntary federations held sway, national public life is now dominated by professionally managed advocacy groups without chapters or members. And at the state and local levels 'voluntary groups' are, more often than not, non-profit institutions through which paid employees deliver services and coordinate occasional volunteer projects.[107]

In this way, public life itself has become privatized. Rather than providing an opportunity to actively influence politics, civil and civic associations have so thoroughly transformed as to foreclose the opportunities that made them democratically valuable in the first place. Even if citizens wanted to get involved in

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[105] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 46, 341.

[106] Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 220.

[107] Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 7.

public life, they would find that the associational climate celebrated by Tocqueville no longer exists.

This account of a largely inactive, privately-oriented citizenry further squares poorly with agonistic models of democracy, themselves indebted to a republican emphasis on an active public life. Whether considering Bill Connolly's call for the 'democratiziation' of previously undemocratic spaces or Chantal Mouffe's hope for a more inclusive, radically democratic space, both hinge upon the availability of citizens willing to dedicate themselves to such ends.[108] Even classical republican accounts, such as Philip Pettit's contestatory democracy, which place considerably more emphasis on our capacity for limiting arbitrary state interference (or domination) than realizing ourselves politically, suffer without civic virtue.[109] Ultimately, our ability to challenge the decisions of the state and defend ourselves against domination depends upon the widespread presence of norms of civility, what Pettit describes as both "habits of civic virtue or good citizenship" and social capital.[110] Without it, not only will citizens be unable to foster the political practices able to effectively contest the state, but our community, marked by civic isolation and distrust, will itself be inhospitable for the realization of republican freedom.[111] When

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[108] William Connolly, "The Ethos of Democratization" *Laclau: A Critical Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 167-81; Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2005), Ch. 4-5.

[109] Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010). See also J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1975) and Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006), I-II.

[110] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 244, 253-4.

[111] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 185-202, 206-240, 265-7.

community members are by and large anonymous to one another, the 'intangible hand' Pettit invokes to cultivate norms through social pressure cannot function; we do not know one another enough to care what they think of us.[112] Pettit himself notes that trust, mutual reliance, and associational activity can paradoxically only be generated by earlier, productive iterations.[113] Without the initial experiences that predispose us to an active public life, Pettit seems to be at a loss as to how we can promote the requisite level of civic virtue.

As Tocqueville had feared (and Dewey and Arendt remarked of their own times), Americans do not demonstrate the sufficient levels of civic virtue as to make them active, competent, or purposeful participants in their own political destiny. Activists, lobbyists, and other public figures may themselves exhibit a strong commitment to public life, but it's unclear whether this commitment emerges out of a sincere sense of civic virtue or, rather, a desire to satisfy private aims. Even if their participation is appropriately motivated, involvement in public life, as a whole, remains sparse, challenging the notion that it can function as a vehicle for either popular sovereignty or political equality. Americans, generally speaking, do not embrace associational life in a way approximative of the republican-democratic idea. Neither represented nor active in public life, they still require a mechanism for democratic practice.

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[112] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 253-7.

[113] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 266.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Though ordinary citizens lack both electoral representation and civic virtue, deliberative democrats hold that we may yet achieve a sufficient measure of popular sovereignty and political equality through the availability of an inclusive, fair, and public political discourse. How is this possible? When public officials and their critics deliberate with one another in a manner oriented toward mutual understanding (as opposed to the realization of strategic aims), they have to offer sincere justifications for their positions. In doing so, they create a context in which they're responsible for explaining their justifications, as well as addressing further criticisms. In this sense, political actors become beholden to 'public reason'; they cannot simply do as they please, but are only able to make decisions that they can broadly defend as 'reasonable'. This check on political decision-making then functions as a form of popular sovereignty, allowing citizens to evaluate both the kinds of justifications political actors offer and deliberative conditions under which they're presented.[114] Through this process of 'reason-giving', citizens are treated "not merely as objects of legislation, as passive subjects to be ruled, but as autonomous agents who take part in the governance of their own society."[115] As Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue, these sorts of deliberative practices can foster a number of other societal benefits as well, including a willingness to correct policy mistakes, greater mutual

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[114] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 84.

[115] Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2004), 3.

respect between opposing groups, a sense of civic virtue, and even increased political legitimacy.[116]

The deliberative perspective further differs from the previous two democratic frameworks in the way it conceives of the individuals' involvement in political activity. Whereas the liberal model assumes that the citizen will be personally represented and the republican model holds that the citizen will actively participate in public life, the deliberative model is decidedly less subject-centered. As Habermas explains,

> Discourse theory drops all those motifs employed by the philosophy of consciousness that lead one either to ascribe the citizens' practice of self-determination to a macrosocial subject or to refer the anonymous rule of law to competing individual subjects... Discourse theory reckons with the higher-level subjectivity of processes of reaching understanding that take place through democratic procedures or in the communicative networks of public spheres.[117]

In other words, the democratic actor is not the individual citizen, but the process of deliberation itself. As such, it's not essential that the citizen herself actually participates in deliberative practices; what matters is whether those who *do* participate do so in a manner that the citizen finds acceptable. As opposed to Dewey, who privileged the face-to-face experience of the town hall meeting, deliberative democrats contend that this process can play out impersonally, through its publication and broadcast. As long as deliberative conditions are such that citizens feel confident that the reasons given by political actors are sufficiently reasonable, they need not personally be involved; they exercise sovereignty by virtue of the limits deliberative criteria places on political decision-making. To the

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[116] Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy*, 10-13.

[117] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 299.

degree this deliberative process is both fair and inclusive, addressing all relevant concerns and not just those of a particular group, it further satisfies the demands of political equality.

It is precisely this turn away from the individual that might explain deliberative democratic theory's recent popularity; as Gutmann and Thompson point out, "No subject has been more discussed in political theory in the last two decades than deliberative democracy."[118] By focusing on the broader norms relevant to political decision-making, deliberativists can make a case for democracy without relying on the citizenry's ability to achieve a sufficient level of either representation or civic virtue. Democracy no longer becomes a question of individual participation, but instead a way in which decision-making practices address the population at large, treating citizens *as if* they are decision-makers despite a real lack in political standing. In this sense, deliberative democracy constitutes a kind of hypothetical democracy, one which assumes that, under ideal conditions, the same decisions would be reached with or without more widespread participation. Yet, this all still depends on the availability of an adequate political discourse and a population committed to its conditions.

To what extent is an inclusive, fair, dynamic, and justificatory political discourse available to us? In an age of unparalleled communicative freedom, our political discourse appears fragmentary and, as James Fishkin would say, unrefined.[119] Instead of taking advantage of our technological advances in order to

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[118] Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy*, vii.

[119] James Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 14.

achieve greater degrees of mutual understanding, we tend to engage in self-selecting partisan discourses, often called 'echo-chambers,' that only exacerbate our feelings of antagonism. These polarized discourses create a context in which the news media persistently fails to cultivate the kind of political discussion which holds leaders accountable for the justifications they offer for our decisions. There are of course incredibly erudite discussions on politics happening among academics, writers, and policy experts, but these deliberations have a limited audience, most of whom tend to be self-selecting, wealthy, and highly educated; moreover, these discourses consistently fail to generate the kind of political force required to actually hold leaders accountable for their decisions, even when unanimous in their condemnation. When taking deliberative democracy as a regulative ideal, we are so far removed from satisfying its criteria that our context cannot help but appear irretrievably lost.

Robert Entman's work gives us some insight into how the state of our news media systematically imperils our political discourse. While deliberative democracy requires an open 'marketplace of ideas,' in which strong and often complicated arguments are given the unbiased attention they deserve, audiences consistently tend to neither understand nor care for this kind of journalism.[120] This lack of public interest creates a "vicious circle" in which, "With limited demand for first-rate journalism, most news organizations cannot afford to supply it, and because they do not supply it, most Americans have no practical source of the information necessary

[120] Robert Entman, *Democracy Without Citizens* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 17.

to become politically sophisticated."[121] For economic and practical reasons, news media outlets tend to uniquely rely and focus on elites; as such, our stories are much more individual-focused than idea-focused.[122]

Not only does this make our political discourse exclusive, limiting its discursive perspective to a particular socio-economic class of elected officials and community leaders, but it also affects the way we understand the news. Instead of seeing it as an opportunity to evaluate the justifications that inform our political activity, our stories are often constructed with a focus on personal conflict. For example, we may see a story about the president's conflict with congress, but with little attention to the arguments offered by each side; for those of us paying attention, our appreciation of politics becomes strategic, not substantive. Where, according to Habermas, the norms of communicative reason should reign, we find the return of a rational-purposive logic of electability, one which we gleefully and knowingly indulge in at the expense of a real conversation about our political decision-making. We have become what David Riesman calls "inside dopesters," those who have long given up any hope for having an impact on politics and now pay attention, not in order to participate, but merely to be considered informed by others.[123]

Moreover, since our leaders do not have to rigorously defend their ideas in a robust political discourse, they can worry less about justifying an argument and more about marketing it. Able to enlist the efforts of professional firms to test and refine

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[121] Entman, *Democracy Without Citizens*, 17.

[122] Entman, *Democracy Without Citizens*, 18-19.

[123] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001), 180-84.

ideas (and even personas) through polling and focus-grouping, our elected officials and community leaders can hone simplified, appealing arguments designed, not to withstand critical scrutiny, but to be catchy, emotive, or sexy. As Fishkin points out, echoing Arendt's sentiments nearly half a century prior, "As our political process is colonized by the persuasion industry, as our public dialogue is voiced increasingly in advertising, our system has undertaken a long journey from Madison to Madison Avenue."[124] Under such conditions, where the winning argument is not always the best but the best marketed, Fishkin also highlights that elites and well-organized interests are better positioned to realize their political preferences than ordinary citizens without comparable resources.

As evidenced in Entman's work, one major problem of our news media system is that we, the audience, incentivize it to simplify its content. In other words, part of the reason our political discourse is so bad is because we want it that way; we aren't willing to tolerate much political news, and what we will tolerate has to conform to certain standards of narrative and entertainment that otherwise deprive it of its deliberative value. As Markus Prior notes, in our post-broadcast media environment, in which multiple cable channels and the internet provide greater choices for viewership than ever before, this issue is only exacerbated. Whereas limited media options had the prior effect of educating audiences about politics whether they were motivated to do so or not, increased choice in media consumption allows individuals who would have previously watched the nightly news to watch something else instead. "Cable television and the Internet have

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[124] Fishkin, *When the People Speak*, 6. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 268.

transformed 'politics by default' into politics by choice. By their own choice, entertainment fans learn less about politics than they used to and vote less often."[125] As a result, contemporary hopes for deliberative democracy have to grapple with a self-selecting, voluntary form of political inequality, whereby a sizable portion of the population consistently chooses to ignore, rather than engage with, our politics.

Additionally, this expansive media environment also facilitates increased partisan polarization. When we self-select our news media, we tend to choose programs that confirm the biases we already have and not pay attention to those we disagree with. As such, we tend not to engage in sincere attempts to understand one another through justificatory arguments, but only reinforce our own perspectives and demonize the other side. As Cass Sunstein has pointed out, this self-selection can result in increased political polarization, itself mutually reinforcing toward a fragmentary public discourse.[126] In other words, the more we isolate ourselves from opposing perspectives, the more we doubt the legitimacy of those perspectives, leading to further isolation; in this regard, the internet proves to be even more problematic than television. As we continue to become more polarized, we not only respect each other less, sometimes to violent extremes, but we lose the shared discursive grounds for future agreements as well. As Dewey argues, a public requires common symbols in order to communicate with itself; as we continue to participate in self-selecting partisan discourses, we fail to generate the kinds of narratives and metaphors for shared experiences that can collectively bind us and

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[125] Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2007), 256.

[126] Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007), 76-80.

allow us to adjudicate between competing political claims.[127] Our senses of justice, equality, freedom, and what constitutes a *casus belli* will continue to be divorced, maintaining a political discourse in which different parties just speak past one another.

In this elite-driven, fragmentary, and polarized discursive context, it's difficult to imagine how our political leadership can be held accountable for offering bad or dishonest justifications for our political decisions. There is perhaps no better example of this discursive impotence than the one Gutmann and Thompson choose to begin a recent work with: the Second Iraq War. They offer the somewhat optimistic viewpoint that

> the deliberation that did occur laid the foundation for a more sustained and more informative debate *after* the U.S. military victory than would have otherwise taken place. Because the administration had given reasons (such as the threat of the weapons of mass destruction) for taking action, critics had more basis to continue to dispute the original decision, and to challenge the administration's judgment. The imperfect deliberation that preceded the war prepared the ground for the less imperfect deliberation that followed.[128]

In short, the fact that there was *some* reason-giving prior to the invasion created a more hospitable context for deliberation later. What should strike us is not that the Bush administration was willing to offer provisional justifications for going to war, but that, upon discovering how elaborately misleading these justifications were, not a single official was held responsible. This demonstrates not the appearance and effect of deliberation, but ultimately its inconsequentiality; the reasons our leaders

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[127] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 142.

[128] Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy*, 2.

offer need not be well-argued, consistent, or even true, they just need to be reasons. In such a poor discursive context, we may deliberate about politics, but our politics are not deliberative.

Like the republican calling for more associational activity or the liberal hoping to get money out of politics, there are a number of deliberative democrats who are optimistic that some virtue, incentive, or procedure will take hold that can helps us realize a more deliberative politics. At present, however, it would be inaccurate to paint ordinary citizens as deliberatively-situated to the extent that we can call our political context democratic. Our political discourse is rarely deliberative and seems to be rather politically insignificant when it is. As such, we remain at a loss as to how our political discourse can work as a democratic political mechanism, how our present news media context in any way politically empowers ordinary citizens.

CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Neither liberal, republican, nor deliberative theory is able to account for the persistent obstacles, both internal and external, that prevent ordinary citizens from democratically exercising political influence in our contemporary context. However, despite this lack of influence, citizens are still involved in political activity. They can elect their representatives, but these same representatives seem to realize the preferences of the wealthy over their own. They can join and form associations, but ultimately decide against it; even at times when they do get involved, citizens often find that the associations able to exercise the most influence are inhospitable toward democratic practice. Finally, though political news and commentary are readily available, they collectively fail to amount to a discursive practice able to hold leaders

accountable to public reason and realize democratic norms. As we'll explore more thoroughly in chapter three, this persistent, looming ambiguity concerning the citizen's role within political activity constitutes one of the defining characteristics of post-democracy. Yet, before turning our attention to the conceptual consequences of that ambiguity, this chapter will conclude with a brief description of the role occupied by non-elites.

Baldly put, political participation by ordinary citizens is by-and-large *instrumental*; elites only involve ordinary citizens to the extent that their participation can facilitate the realization of elite preferences. This is not to suggest that elite preferences are always at odds with those of ordinary citizens, that the latter's involvement is inherently manipulated in such a way that non-elites are always acting against their own interests, but that their involvement is influential only to the degree that elites make use of it. Without elite support or cooption, citizens are almost never able to exercise any significant level of political influence on their own; the instances where this does occur prove rare and ephemeral, if not fugitive.[129] Overall, ordinary citizens function as a political *resource*, one which elites can draw upon when engaging with other elites.

This should hardly sound shocking to anyone who has long studied democratic institutions. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba pointed out over fifty years ago that the American citizen is not politically active, but at best "potentially" so, noting that it is precisely our inactivity that facilitates elite rule.[130] E. E.

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[129] Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy" *Constellations* 1.1 (1994): 11-25.

[130] Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 346-47.

Schattschneider's *The Semisovereign People*, offers perhaps the best account of the way in which elites mobilize ordinary citizens at particular moments to pursue their interests. He famously describes political activity as a street fight.[131] While the fight may begin between two individuals (i.e., elites), they may choose to involve members of the audience in order to change the dynamic of the conflict. By involving some onlookers and excluding others, the fighters can strategically influence the outcome. As Schattschneider puts it, "Private conflicts are taken into public arenas precisely because someone wants to make certain that the power ratio among the private interests most immediately involved shall not prevail."[132] If, for instance, a political actor feels she is unable to prevent a land development project from being approved by the city council, she may invite environmental groups to get involved. Her opponent may then invite even more citizens into the fray with promises of new job opportunities. In this fashion, a conflict can expand to include more and more participants. Yet, the influence exercised by these new participants is entirely dependent on the elites at the helm; their involvement itself is contingent upon the way in which elites frame and publicize the issue. As such, the ordinary citizen's relation to political activity is limited, passive, and, above all, perfunctory, an ostensibly mechanical response to signals given by political elites.

Recent work by Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, as well as Steven Schier, further supports Schattschneider's analysis. In their book, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*, Rosenstone and Hansen

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[131] E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's view of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1960), 1-3.

[132] Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, 38.

explain the process of 'mobilization' whereby elites rally particular segments of the population in order to achieve their goals. Though citizens ultimately decide whether to get involved based upon their levels of interest and ability, elites create the context for their involvement based upon whom they choose to mobilize and when.[133] Schier further describes this as a practice of 'activation', arguing that this process only gives the illusion of mass participation. He explains that, "Washington operatives use strategic activation of their people as an example of direct rule by the people, conflating a faction of the public mobilized by an elite with majority opinion. This is not misleading if their people in the aggregate resemble the people. They usually do not."[134] Instead, consistent with observations offered by Reich, Schattschneider, and Rosenstone and Hansen, he finds that those most often called to participate are those with the time and resources to do so, as well as interests compatible with other political elites: the wealthy.[135] This leads Schier to harshly observe that "America's era of activation is ultimately an era of self-delusion. We trumpet popular participation, yet we have raised the costs of participation and reward those who overcome these costs by activating fragments of the public."[136] Rather, as Skocpol notes "The most privileged Americans can now organize and contend largely among themselves, without regularly engaging the majority of

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[133] Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Pearson, 2002), 6.

[134] Steven Schier, *By Invitation Only: The Rise of Exclusivist Politics in the United States* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 15.

[135] Schier, *By Invitation Only*, 201; Rosenstone and Hansen, *Mobilization*, 18-19; and Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People,* 33-5.

[136] Schier, *By Invitation Only*, 40-1.

citizens."[137] Consequently, Skocpol concludes that "early-twenty-first-century Americans live in a diminished democracy, in a much less participatory and more oligarchically managed civic world."[138]

As Schattschneider points out, these conditions trouble the contemporary viability of democratic theory as it now stands. He writes,

> The idea that the people are involved in politics by the contagion of conflict does not resemble the classical definition of democracy as "government by the people." The difference between the idea of popular "involvement" in conflict and the idea that people actually "govern" is great enough to invite a re-examination of the classical theory of democracy.[139]

He further adds that this theoretical labor "might even help us get rid of the impossible imperatives that haunt the literature of the subject and give everyone a sense of guilt."[140] In concluding, Schattschneider argues that the best solution is to adopt a new definition of democracy, one which, like Schumpeter's, emphasizes elite competition and minimizes the contributions of ordinary citizens. While it may lend itself to a conceptual clarity desperately needed in the social sciences, as argued in the previous chapter, this redefinition offers little to the ordinary citizen seeking to orient herself politically. Specifically, it fails to grapple with the fact that one is situated in a political culture that still promotes popular sovereignty and political equality above all other values despite a persistent failure to realize either. In short, it refuses to come to terms with a political system at odds with its ideological

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[137] Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 178.

[138] Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*, 11.

[139] Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People,* 129.

[140] Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People,* 131.

foundation. The act of redefinition merely saws off the legs of the table without giving any thought to whether it can still support what is placed upon it. When it's intended to uphold our conceptions of legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability, this becomes exceedingly problematic. Instead of satisfying ourselves with a more accurate appreciation of what 'democracy' really is, we need a new way of orienting ourselves toward politics that can give us a better sense of the value we derive from our relation to it. Accordingly, we are in need of a post-democratic approach.

III. Democratic Obstacles to Post-Democratic Theory

What constitutes a *post-democratic* approach? First introduced by Jacques Ranciere in 1995, the term did not start to gain serious scholarly attention until 2004, which saw the publication of Crouch's book-length treatment of the concept, entitled simply *Post-Democracy*, and a short piece by Richard Rorty in the *London Review of Books*.[141] Since then, a host of other thinkers, including Jurgen Habermas, have started to employ, and at times interrogate, the term.[142] Even still, sustained discussions of what we mean when we say “post-democracy” remained almost exclusively limited to Europe until as late as 2015, which saw the first workshop on post-democracy in North America at Brown University.[143]

In this chapter, I will defend a new interpretation of post-democracy, one which directly explores how ordinary citizens experience post-democratic life by elaborating on both the conditions of post-democratic political subjectivity and conceptual consequences of adopting a post-democratic orientation toward politics. After briefly showing how this account improves upon the approach to political subjectivity offered by democratic realism, I will move to a discussion of the self-

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[141] Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 [1995]); Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004); Richard Rorty, "Post-Democracy: Richard Rorty on anti-terrorism and the national security state" *London Review of Books* 26.7 (2004): 10-11. See also Colin Crouch, *Why Post-Democracy?* (London: Fabian Society, 2000) and Kate Nash, "Post-democracy, politics and philosophy: An interview with Jacques Ranciere" *Angelaki* 1.3 (1996): 171-178.

[142] See Jurgen Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012).

[143] This workshop eventually lead to a series of short papers by Andre Willis, Eduardo Mendieta, James Martel, and Marc Stears, all found in *Juncture* 22.3 (2015): 201-219.

reflexive concerns peculiar to post-democracy; specifically, the way in which a post-democratic orientation invites a re-assessment of one's relationship with political authority and activity by disrupting previous, democratic assumptions about legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability. Finally, I will turn to the competing conceptions of post-democracy offered by Ranciere, Crouch, Rorty, and Habermas. By showing how all four accounts remain wedded to a democratic orientation toward politics, I will demonstrate the ways in which my interpretation fundamentally breaks with how we've previously conceptualized post-democracy; namely, by arguing that a serious appreciation of what post-democracy entails necessarily leads one to embrace a therapeutic approach to both political thought and involvement.

WHAT IS POST-DEMOCRACY?

At its most literal, post-democracy means that a particular society has *moved beyond* democracy. In this broad sense, post-democracy would apply to any society which previously embraced some form of democratic political practice, ranging from life in Athens under the rule of the Thirty Tyrants to Germany following the collapse of the Weimar Republic, as well as including any society which had, at some point, engaged in democratic experimentation. Post-democracy, if understood as such, would be a fairly empty designation, as it would hardly say anything substantial about that society's ongoing relationship with democratic politics. Instead, such an interpretation would lump together those societies for which democracy was but a

passing flirtation with those for which the idea still looms large in its discourse and/or memory; in short, its collective political unconscious.

Rather, that one would even think to call a society "post-democratic" implies that democratic principles — popular sovereignty and political equality — continue to play a significant role in that society's political imaginary. Yet, what would qualify as significant? Is it sufficient to have a party or movement which espouses democratic values, even if it is in a context that is overwhelmingly hostile to them? A collective fondness for a democratic golden age, memorialized through clandestine acts of resistance or public, state-sanctioned holidays? While the satisfaction of such criteria would certainly imply some level of democratic influence, conceptualizing post-democracy in this way prevents it from saying anything essential about a given society. To consider a society "post-democratic" simply because it admits of *some* relationship to democratic principles would qualify societies otherwise characterized as fascist, theocratic, or, simply tyrannical, in turn, diluting the term's conceptual purchase.

If it is to be more than an ascriptive afterthought, post-democracy must be used to describe a fundamental feature of a given society. Thus, post-democracy names a society in which democratic principles exert an authoritative or decisive influence over the collective political imaginary; one in which democratic ways of thinking and speaking are hegemonic or, at the very least, co-original with some other dominant set of values (e.g., liberalism, socialism, etc.). These are societies in which political claims are not only made but accepted on the strength of democratic justifications; those in which one encounters a near-universal assent to democratic

values, even if some conceptions of democracy embraced by that society are far from universalist (e.g., limitations on suffrage, *who* constitutes the demos, etc.). The key is whether a society predominantly couches its defense of political preferences and procedures in democratic language.

However, it is difficult to imagine a society so conceptually committed to democracy while, at the same time, self-consciously non-democratic. Such a society would either be perpetually on the verge of revolution or so collectively disillusioned as to have fully given up on itself, now wearily accepting illegitimate rule as the established political convention. In particular, the Helots and the Eastern Bloc come to mind. However, these societies tend to be either the product of foreign occupation or tyrannical rule; those societies for which, as Bernard Williams puts it, the "Basic Legitimation Demand" is not met.[144] In other words, those societies in which those in power fail to offer any justification for their rule outside of their practical monopoly on violence. To extend the designation of "post-democratic" to these instances would be to, again, needlessly stretch the term, making it synonymous with "oppressed," "subjugated," or "conquered" and ultimately redundant. Moreover, it has the potential to lead us to conflate the call for self-determination with the call for democratic sovereignty.

Therefore, a society is post-democratic when its *political practices — despite being generally understood as democratic — fail to realize either popular sovereignty or political equality*. In short, a society mistakenly convinced of its own democratic credentials. This immediately raises the question of who gets to decide

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[144] Bernard Williams, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory," *In the Beginning Was the Deed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007), 4-5.

whether such an attribution is mistaken. In principle, the judgment could be made by anyone, whether an outside observer or an inhabitant, but this is not to suggest that its criteria are entirely subjective. For instance, we may take issue with someone describing her society as post-democratic if it is solely because she dislikes a recent policy decision or the outcome of an otherwise democratic procedure. Rather, it helps if one is able to empirically show the specific ways in which a given society's political practices fail to achieve either popular sovereignty or political equality; if one can, for instance, point to practices that favor the rich or arbitrarily exclude particular groups of people.[145] This then leads to the question of who gets to decide on the relevant practices, whether a society should be judged according to republican, deliberative, or liberal criteria (or some other entirely different formulation, though, most likely, a messy, ambiguous amalgamation of several traditions). Here, the inhabitant would seem to have a privileged perspective on what those criteria should be, but this hardly means that she has the final word on whether they are satisfied.

Two additional features of this definition must be made explicit. First, rather than assuming that post-democracy must be preceded by either a maximally or genuinely democratic moment, this definition exclusively attends to the interplay between a self-professed democratic culture and its non-democratic political practices, eschewing judgment, in either direction, as to whether our political practices were ever sufficiently democratic in the first place. In this sense, the distinction offered by James Martel in his short piece, "Are we 'post-democratic' - or

[145] As was done, for instance, in Chapter Two.

have we not (yet) been democratic at all?" would be irrelevant.[146] This interpretation is uninterested in the reality of a democratic past, only the influence it exercises — whether through the weight of its memory or the force of its imagining — over our shared cultural norms.

Second, within any society, the belief that it is post-democratic is necessarily held by only a negligible minority. What distinguishes the experience of post-democracy from other forms of non-democratic (i.e., authoritarian rule) is the sense that democracy has failed in a cultural context that otherwise refuses to seriously consider this possibility. In other words, it requires a persistent, democratic culture which maintains that the state can be, or is already sufficiently democratic, even when confronting the reality of a post-democratic political context. Attempts to suggest otherwise (including this one) are dismissed as defeatist or, when confused with a critique of democracy itself, virulently derided.

As such, post-democracy names a hazy period of collective political misrecognition. If a society, as a whole, were to come to the explicit, collective realization that democracy has failed, it would no longer be post-democracy, but something different, entirely dependent on which norms eventually inform the subject's understanding of her relationship to political activity and authority (e.g., theocratic, technocratic, despotic, etc.). While this is certainly a possibility, it is hardly a foregone conclusion. Rather, it may just as easily be the case that the vast majority of citizens will respond to increasing evidence of their own political insignificance with even greater levels of cognitive dissonance, by either diluting their own

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[146] See James Martel, "Are we 'post-democratic' - or have we not (yet) been democratic at all?" *Juncture* 22.3 (2015): 210-15.

understanding of democratic practice to fit present circumstances or doubling down on the imminent possibility of a democracy-to-come. In this case, a democratic culture could persist alongside non-democratic political conditions for some time, perhaps indefinitely.[147]

Still, while inherently non-democratic, it is important to emphasize the ways in which (pseudo-)political practices still contribute to a peculiar political dynamic unique to post-democracy. Despite being unable to function as a means of either popular sovereignty or political equality, elections, referendums, and other instances of mass involvement do have significant consequences for sovereign decision-making. In this sense, post-democracy does not describe an *unqualified* form of authoritarian rule, but one which empowers elites based upon their ability to decipher and manipulate broader public trends — neither rational nor self-determining — for their own ends. Those able to achieve their political preferences are those best able to build a constituency, not by convincing citizens with well-formulated preferences of their own to side with them, but by surgically crafting one from the evolving cacophony of desires, prejudices, hopes, and fears that constitutes the broader public. They may remain faithful to this constituency or simply discard it after it has served its purpose (e.g., securing an electoral victory); in either case, the ability to conjure up 'popular' support by means of opinion polling, data modeling, and advertising campaigns remains absolutely essential. Post-democratic elites are,

[147] If one takes Jacques Ranciere's position, it always has. See below in “Competing Conceptions of Post-Democracy”.

as Crouch puts it, "something more resembling shopkeepers than rulers, anxiously seeking to discover what their 'customers' want in order to stay in business."[148]

However, even this may be giving the public too much credit; most consumers at least have a vague idea about the product they're purchasing. We might better characterize post-democratic elites as entrepreneurs, speculators, or even social engineers; unlike the shopkeeper, subject to the preferences of an agent that, at least in some sense, knows what it wants, political elites act upon a habitually passive and, at best, reactive public, basing their actions, not upon what the public tells them directly, but from what they can learn about its behavior. Subsequently, post-democratic political practice is largely a matter of manipulating variables, not persuading individuals.

We should further note, however, that post-democracy does not imply the impossibility of non-elite political influence, only just that it remains extraordinary. There will always be those who cannot be characterized as 'elite' in any sense but still find a way to contribute to political decision-making (e.g., dedicated activists). Yet, this hardly gives us reason to designate a political context democratic, nor should it allow us to ignore the ways in which political decisions are still overwhelmingly made in accordance with elite preferences. Moreover, when we recognize just how many of these 'democratic' gains are quickly diluted or effaced by an elite opposition, they tend to become largely symbolic, rather than substantive, victories. Without a sufficient level of political equality, the achievements of a few otherwise ordinary citizens are perfectly consistent with post-democracy, acting both

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[148] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 21.

as the 'exceptions which prove the rule' as well as contributing to the mythos that sustains post-democracy itself.

WHY POST-DEMOCRACY?

Still, the realization that one's polity fails to live up to democratic norms is not exactly novel. So why the need for a entirely new term? Why not simply settle for neoliberal, which already connotes limited political participation under late capitalism, or post-political, which emphasizes the subtle foreclosure of meaningful political conflict by elite consensus? To begin, neoliberal fails to evoke the enormity of adequately grappling with the unavailability of democratic practice, instead approaching widespread civic passivity and domination by financial elites with the emotional detachment — feigned or otherwise — of Riesman's infamous "inside-dopster."[149] Moreover, while neoliberalism might name one manifestation of post-democracy, it hardly exhausts them. As for post-political, though also not mutually exclusive with post-democracy, it does not account for elite disagreements that have historically yielded radical or profound political changes, despite being non-democratic in origin. Post-democracy signals the absence of democratic practice, not the cessation of politics.

The strongest contender for an alternative comes from democratic realism or, more specifically, calling oneself a democratic realist rather than describing one's

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[149] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001), 180-184. As Riesman writes, "Concerned with being 'right,' fearing to be taken in, or to be thought guilty of wishful thinking (which he equates with any introduction of humaneness into his judgments), the inside-dopester deprives himself of one of the best yardsticks he could use actively to control his experience, namely his own reactions as a sensitive participant in the political life of his time" (*The Lonely Crowd*, 182-3).

own society as post-democratic. Admittedly, the post-democratic account of democratic possibility largely relies on the elite theories of democracy offered by Schumpeter, Schattschneider, and others, but differs in two major respects: specifically, the way in which it attends to both the gap between democratic theory and political practice and the consequences of said gap for ordinary citizens.

First, while democratic realists treat the 'problem of democracy' as a *conceptual* misunderstanding, maintaining, with E. E. Schattschneider, that "we are in trouble because we are confused about what is supposed to happen in a democracy," most post-democratic theorists, save Ranciere, recognize this 'problem' as a *practical* failing, instead focusing on the ways in which superficially democratic practices contribute to the manifestation of non-democratic forms of sovereignty.[150] In this sense, the bulk of post-democratic theory remains faithful to a classical, rather than procedural (in the Schumpetarian sense) understanding of democracy.[151] It may be that so-called democracies have never actually been 'governments by the people', but post-democratic theory allows us to recognize this point without ignoring the substantial role played by democratic values in our collective political imaginary; in short, without treating popular sovereignty and political equality as if they can simply be exchanged for a more 'accurate' or realistic set of values (e.g., technocratic expertise, non-violent transfers of power, or even the minimal dignity of a plebiscite).

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[150] E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's view of Democracy in America* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1960), 133.

[151] See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Ruskin House, 1954), ch. XXI-XXII.

Second, because post-democratic theory acknowledges the persistent ideological significance of democratic values, it explicitly attends to the affective repercussions of our failure to realize them. In other words, it directs our attention to the ways in which a deeper awareness of elite domination should trouble the political self-conceptions and dispositions of otherwise democratically-oriented citizens. Democratic realists, by and large, neglect to consider this point; rather, they seem to presuppose that ordinary citizens are simply too indifferent to care. As Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba put it, "because politics has little importance for them, few citizens are motivated to think about their influence or their political activities."[152] Schattschneider further explains, "People reconcile their democratic faith and their undemocratic behavior by remaining comfortably unaware of the inconsistency of theory and practice."[153] In fact, on Almond and Verba's account, it is this indifference that ultimately facilitates elite domination in the first place; they write, "The inactivity of the ordinary man and his inability to influence decisions help provide the power that governmental elites need if they are to make decisions."[154] As such, it is presumed that the subjective effects of elite domination are minimal; if citizens were really inclined to think critically about their relationship to political activity, the argument goes, they would have never allowed themselves to be so relegated in the first place. Alternatively, post-democratic theory recognizes, on the one hand, that inactivity is not necessarily a sign of a indifference and, on the other, that even if a

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[152] Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *Civic Culture* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 348.

[153] Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, 109.

[154] Almond and Verba, *Civic Culture*, 346.

majority of citizens are indifferent, the conditions are such as to still warrant a more sustained examination.

POLITICAL SELF-UNDERSTANDING IN THE SHADOW OF POST-DEMOCRACY

What does it mean to be a post-democratic subject? In posing this question, we move from a *democratic* orientation, focused primarily on democracy's absence, to a *post-democratic* one, attentive to the greater implications of a post-democratic present. If post-democracy results from the perceived failure of political practices to live up to democratic norms, a post-democratic political orientation is one which internalizes that perception, treating the political negligibility of ordinary citizens, not as a wake-up call or as a reminder of democracy's imperfections, but as a brute fact. This is not to suggest that democratic principles would cease to have meaning, that it would somehow lose all value, but that it no longer makes sense to conceive of a political context chiefly, much less exclusively, through a democratic lens; that appeals to 'democracy' only appear unintelligible, ironic, or mystifying. Moreover, it is to take seriously the possibility, more likely than not, that democratic political conditions will not return, assuming they ever existed in the first place.

In this sense, whereas post-democracy describes a particular situation, a post-democratic orientation constitutes the attitudinal disposition unique to that situation, one which grapples seriously with the absence of democratic political practices. As such, it is entirely possible to consider one’s context post-democratic without being oriented toward post-democracy. For instance, an individual might maintain a democratic orientation toward post-democracy, preferring instead to

concentrate on ways of (re-)vitalizing democratic practice. We could imagine individuals adopting liberal, fascist, or anarchist orientations toward post-democracy as well, in some cases, treating post-democracy itself as a largely insignificant feature of contemporary politics.[155]

However, to the extent that post-democracy depends on a persistent hegemonic democratic political imaginary, we would imagine that most people confronting the issue of post-democracy harbor democratic political commitments. For the otherwise committed democrat, adopting a post-democratic orientation, unsettles a host of concerns previously resolved through democratic theory's criterial reliance on widespread political participation. In particular, the question of state legitimacy, one's membership in a political community, one's responsibility toward the state, and one's culpability for its crimes, all of which are essential for understanding oneself in relation to political activity and authority.

Take, to begin, the question of political legitimacy. Unable to democratically legitimate the state, the post-democratic subject is left to either find new legitimating criteria or face up to the fact that she is governed by a sovereign power that lacks legitimacy. For those pursuing the first option, liberalism is the most likely substitute. In exchange for the freedom of both speech and contract and the rights to property and due process, a fair number of individuals would probably be fine with giving up on the hope of exercising political influence. Yet, this must be a liberalism that does not rely on any sort of democratic guarantee or remedy; a liberalism, *contra* Shklar,

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[155] For example, the fascist and the anarchist might both see post-democracy as simply a stage of democratic decay, symptomatic of the need, on the one hand, for authoritarian leadership or, on the other, giving up on the project of sovereignty altogether.

divorced from democracy.[156] There are undoubtedly other mechanisms for promoting a liberal polity, whether through the efforts of a virtuous aristocracy, benevolent despot, or philosopher king, or, as is increasingly evident, a *modus vivendi* between oligarchs, that may actually prove more effective than democracy at maintaining liberal norms. Still, post-democracy's propensity for spectacle, demagogues, and the politicization of private life may just as quickly turn to threaten liberal norms; clearly, in numerous instances, it already has.

There are, of course, other criteria one could use to legitimate the post-democratic state. While one could hypothetically appeal to any consideration as authoritative, some more popular options might include a Hobbesian cessation of violence, a paternalistic consideration of a population's well-being (e.g., the enforcement of health codes, environmental and consumer protections, etc.), or an ability to foster economic prosperity. Two somewhat less contingent measures include identifying with the state based upon certain existential criteria (e.g., one's ethnicity, religion, or, circularly, one's nationality or the intrinsic authority of the state's founders or its sacred texts). Yet, regardless of which criteria the post-democratic citizen finds compelling, it means admitting that state legitimacy no longer depends upon the ability to govern oneself.[157] It is not a matter of choosing, but of accepting the choices made by others.

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[156] See Judith Shklar, "Liberalism of Fear" *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[157] The one exception would be those who do still influence political decision-making; they may still legitimate the state based upon their *own* participation, but not upon the idea of collective participation.

The other possibility, of course, is to recognize the state as lacking any claim to legitimacy. Just because the criteria of popular sovereignty and political equality are not satisfied does not mean that one must give up on them. Yet, this means having to seriously wrestle with the realization that the state's use of violence may be morally indistinguishable from unjust or criminal acts in a society that otherwise respects that authority. This process may be more difficult than one at first realizes. Perhaps it is possible to shrug off a speeding ticket with an easy dismissal or sort of *noblesse oblige*, but it seems more difficult to do so after being subject to property seizure, harassment by law enforcement, incarceration, or the loss of a loved one at the hands of the state. And while some may occasionally make the Thoreauvian gesture of defiance, even he regularly paid his taxes.

What, then, of the question of membership? What relation does the individual have to the post-democratic state? Strictly speaking, post-democratic conditions dictate that the vast majority of citizens are excluded from any sort of *political* community, properly understood; unable to exercise any sort of significant political influence, they can at best imagine themselves as part of a national community, largely, if not exclusively, based on their status as citizens. For many, this may be enough. Yet, it is important to remember that this is an association based on a legal *status*; without the possibility for democratic political action, their membership in a national community would be purely passive. They would not constitute a 'we', but merely an 'us', united solely by the shared experience of being governed.

This can further give the impression that one's membership in a national community is ultimately insignificant. Unable to look to her neighbors as partners in a

collective political project, an individual may begin to feel detached from her neighbors, at least in the sense of having any kind of shared political destiny. In a profound sense, post-democracy illuminates the political isolation of the governed. This feeling is only exacerbated by the awareness that one is surrounded by self-understood democratic citizens. Not only does this make one feel powerless over sovereign decision-making, aware that the opportunities afforded her for political involvement are entirely in the service of elite preferences, but, like Nietzsche's madman, one finds oneself in a community completely unprepared to consider the greater consequences of their predicament.[158] She asks, "What have we done? How can we atone? How can we endure?" and is met with confused stares and silence, further alienating her from her fellow citizens.

Further, an individual must also grapple with her sense of responsibility to the state — in particular, whether she ought to follow the law or volunteer her service — as well as any feelings of culpability for its transgressions. Both would largely depend upon one's conception of legitimacy, though not entirely. One might not consider the state legitimate, but still avoid breaking the law or dodging military service in order to escape punishment or protect the safety of one's family. Yet, this does not seem to suggest a direct responsibility to the state as much as a responsibility to oneself and others that can best be realized by acting in accordance with the state's wishes. In contrast, one might feel absolved of any responsibility to the state, feeling justified not only in avoiding all forms of service but even in breaking the law, assuming it furthers one's interests and does not put one at

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[158] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1974 [1882]), 181-2.

significant risk of being punished. Thus, an individual might feel comfortable cheating on her taxes, defrauding state institutions, or committing perjury. Moral obligations may keep her from indiscriminately raping and pillaging, but she would lack the sort of political obligation that would keep her from taking advantage of the state at every possible opportunity.

The question of culpability, however, is harder to resolve; one may decide to disregard one's alleged political responsibilities, but it is much more difficult to shrug off the sense that one lacks responsibility for the crimes committed in one's name.[159] A persistent, pervasive democratic rhetoric can make one feel as if one is nevertheless to blame for all of the destructive policy decisions, military incursions, and instances of police misconduct in which one played no part. Even lacking all political power, an individual may feel as if she let these crimes happen and, as such, must either atone or find some way of proving to herself and others that she did all in her power to prevent it. The post-war critique of 'ordinary Germans' has left many of us with the sense that we are *always* to blame for our government's actions, but also leads us to forget that serious efforts to confront the state during the worst of times often exhaust themselves in symbolic acts of martyrdom. As it is for each of the other considerations as well, whether a deeper feeling of culpability is either productive or escapable will ultimately be distinct for each individual.

The sort of gloomy, pessimistic outlook conjured up by a post-democratic orientation raises the question of why anyone would voluntarily adopt such a perspective at all. Why not simply maintain a democratic orientation and choose to

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[159] On this topic, see Eric Anthony Beerbohm, *In Our Name: The Ethics of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2012).

focus on the opportunities for democratic renewal, no matter how minimal or trivial, available at present?

There will, of course, be some for whom this is the best option, the "once more unto the breach, dear friends" types who cannot fathom the idea of giving up on the greater, historical project of democratic sovereignty. Yet, for all but those who require this sort of optimism, a post-democratic orientation can allow for a way of productively engaging with a widespread condition of political insignificance that, at some level, those paying attention have recognized for some time. For the vast majority of individuals unable to influence political decision-making, a post-democratic orientation more comprehensively attends to the consequences of their political insignificance. By first admitting her powerlessness over a non-democratic present, an individual can begin to think through the practical ways in which she can respond to it. In this sense, it offers a means of dealing with the profound disorientation that results from post-democratic life, the confusion and anxiety that accompanies the conflict between a broader cultural consensus over the value of democratic political practice, as well as the private recognition that all attempts, at present, to realize democratic values have proven to be hollow.

Having offered my own interpretation of post-democracy and elaborated on the sorts of reflexive concerns pertaining to one's own political status that it evokes, its now necessary to show how this represents an improvement over (or, at the very least, a departure from) previous interpretations of the concept.

COMPETING CONCEPTIONS OF POST-DEMOCRACY

Despite holding very different and, at times, even opposing conceptions of democratic practice, Ranciere, Crouch, Rorty, and Habermas have all taken to describing our contemporary political moment as 'post-democratic', finding themselves in agreement that democratic theory must be supplemented by an awareness of the remote conditions of contemporary democratic possibility. Yet, each of these thinkers also considers the concept solely in light of their commitment to democratic practice, choosing to exclusively focus on how citizens can resist, if not challenge, their present circumstances. Andre Willis perfectly captures this predisposition when summarizing the collective findings of his recent workshop on post-democracy, writing, "if the concept of post-democracy could be of any use then it would have to expand democratic possibilities from below and shore up democratic institutions from above, while working towards more socioeconomic equality."[160]

While many of us (myself included) are highly sympathetic toward these goals, it is difficult to ignore the ways in which post-democratic conditions trouble — if not thwart — the possibility of a renewed democratic future. By focusing exclusively on the absence of democratic practice, rather than attending to the experience of post-democratic life itself, Ranciere, Crouch, Rorty, and Habermas miss an opportunity comprehensively address the experience of political subjectivity unique to post-democracy. In this sense, they exemplify how an overriding fidelity to democratic politics can present an obstacle to a genuinely post-democratic theory of

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[160] Andre Willis, "Considering post-democracy" *Juncture* 22.3 (2015): 201-202, 202.

politics. After first briefly describing each thinker's approach to the concept, I will illustrate the ways in which the democratic assumptions that underlie their respective accounts limit their ability to offer productive prescriptions to the specific challenges post-democracy engenders.

Ranciere's initial use of the term is directly linked with what he — alongside Slavoj Zizek, Chantal Mouffe, Alain Badiou and others — describes as "the disappearance of politics" or, more generally, post-politics.[161] While genuinely political activity refers to real, irreducible disagreements between different factions, post-politics refers to the superficial achievement of a general consensus over liberal-democratic norms and capitalist modes of economic organization, what Badiou names "capitalo-parliamentarianism." This false consensus then forecloses the possibility for politics properly understood, replacing it with a series of management techniques oriented toward the "administration of social affairs" and reducing political activity to "a multiplicity of 'sub-political' struggles about a variety of 'life issues'" previously considered private concerns.[162] There may still be instances in which certain conflicts emerge, often violently, that cannot be ignored, what Mouffe calls the 'return of the repressed', but these moments tend to be exceptional and quickly contained.

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[161] Ranciere, *Disagreements*, 102. See also Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject* (New York: Verso Press, 1999); Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso Press, 2000); Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (New York: Verson Press, 2001); Erik Swyngedouw, "Interrogating Post-Democratization: Reclaiming Egalitarian Political Spaces" *Political Geography* 30.7 (2011): 370-380.

[162] Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 430; Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political* (New York: Routledge Press, 2005), 50.

Thus, Ranciere employs post-democracy "to denote the paradox that, in the name of democracy, emphasizes the consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action." In other words, it names the replacement of authentic democratic action by "the organization of bodies as a community and the management of places, powers, and functions." True democracy, by contrast, never seeks to order the world but only disrupt it.[163] By presenting "the total of 'public opinion' as identical to the body of the people," post-democracy consistently confronts the demos with a simulacrum of itself, creating a context in which "everything is on show and where there is thus no longer any place for appearance."[164] Thus, it forecloses the possibility of the demos's emergence. As such, "Postdemocracy is the government practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy *after* the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combination of social energies and interests."[165] It is, in short, the conflation of democracy with the state or, as Ranciere would put it, the political with the police order.[166]

While Crouch similarly identifies post-democracy with the rise of post-politics, his position is decidedly less radical than Ranciere's. Rather than completely

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[163] Ranciere, *Disagreement*, 99-102.

[164] Ranciere, *Disagreement*, 103.

[165] Ranciere, *Disagreement*, 102.

[166] Ranciere, *Disagreement*, 28-9. Strangely enough, this brings Ranciere's position closer to that of the democratic realists in that they both consider the contemporary 'problem of democracy' to be conceptual rather than practical. While the democratic realists believe we expect too much from democratic practice, Ranciere argues that, in conflating democracy with the state, we expect too little.

dismissing all institutionalized political procedures as antithetical to democracy, Crouch considers the state a possible vehicle for democratic action, assuming citizens are able to make use of it. Thus, post-democracy does not signify the state's attempt to prevent democratic possibility, but the practical inability of the demos to effectively use the state as a means of governing itself. When we look to the mid-twentieth century, Crouch argues, we see workers' unions and other popular associations able to limit the power of economic elites and realize their collective preferences through electoral means.[167] Yet, following the democratic vitality of the post-war years,

> Elites soon learned how to manage and manipulate. People became disillusioned, bored, or preoccupied with the business of everyday life. The growing complexity of issues after the major initial achievements of reform made it increasingly difficult to take up informed positions, to make intelligent comment, or even to know what 'side' one was on. Participation in political organizations declined almost everywhere, and eventually even the minimal act of voting was beset by apathy.[168]

Hastened by the rising power of transnational corporations, a fleeting sense of class consciousness, the professionalization of party politics, and privatization of public services, popular demobilization then allowed elites to once again assert their power with minimal constraint, culminating in global deregulation of financial markets during the last decades of the 20th century.

In this sense, Crouch's post-democracy is further differentiated from Ranciere's by Crouch's positing of a specific historical dimension; while Ranciere's post-democracy results from any attempt to formalize democratic procedures,

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[167] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 7-8.

[168] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 9.

Crouch believes that post-democracy necessarily follows a period of genuine democratic practice. Thus, Crouch proposes that

> the idea of post-democracy helps us describe situations when boredom, frustration and disillusion have settled in after a democratic moment; when powerful minority interests have become far more active than the mass of ordinary people in making the political system work for them; where political elites have learned how to manage and manipulate popular demands; where people have to be persuaded to vote by top-down publicity campaigns.[169]

Further, because Crouch still recognizes the potential for democratic action within the state, he goes into considerably more detail as to how elites are able to subvert its democratic potential.

> [W]hile elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given to them. Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests.[170]

Hence, post-democratic political practice depends upon mass participation, even if only in a purely instrumental sense. Without some defensible level of voter turnout and a sustained public discourse (no matter how irrational or trivial it may be), these political practices would be exposed as entirely superficial instead of just severely lopsided, making it impossible to maintain the veneer of democracy that distinguishes post-democracy from other forms of elite domination. Post-democracy may preclude democratic citizenship, but it still requires willing participants. Thus,

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[169] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 20.

[170] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 4.

Crouch describes how elites continue to foster mass involvement by politicizing a host of minor or technical concerns, contributing to a form of 'hyper-democracy' that actually works to sustain post-democratic conditions.

> Where there is very little real disagreement among parties over major policy directions (a fundamental characteristic of post-democracy), politicians have to start exploring every little avenue they can in order to claim that they have found a difference from their opponents — anything from each other's personal morality to the desirability of particular medical treatments, numbers of police on the streets, or ways of teaching children to read. Excessive politicization, or hyper-democracy, is therefore paradoxically an aspect of post-democracy.[171]

Here, Crouch's conception moves closer to Ranciere's, both emphasizing, as previously noted, the proliferation of post-political or 'life-style' concerns under post-democracy.

Rorty gives us yet another interpretation of post-democracy, one more closely aligned with Crouch's historical model than Ranciere's immanent critique of the 'democratic' state.[172] Yet, instead of attending to domination by economic elites as the root cause of post-democracy, Rorty cites the growing threat to democracy posed by the national security state. Writing in the wake of the September 11th attacks, as well as those in Madrid in 2004, he argues that

> If terrorists do get their hands on nuclear weapons... It will be a fact that all the democracies will have to place themselves on a permanent war footing. The measures their governments will consider... are likely to bring about the end of many of the socio-political institutions that emerged in Europe and North America in the two centuries since the

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[171] Colin Crouch, *The Knowledge Corrupters* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 147.

[172] Curiously enough, the decision to entitle Rorty's essay "Post-Democracy" was made by the editors of the *London Review of Books*; Rorty never uses the term himself. Still, he seems to have agreed with the decision, offering us a latent understanding of the concept. See Danny Postel, "Last Words from Richard Rorty" *The Progressive* (June 2007): http://www.progressive. org/mag_postel0607.

> bourgeois revolutions. They may return the West to something like feudalism... In short, a return to something like the Ancien Regime, with the national security establishment of each country playing the role of the court of Versailles.[173]

Rorty goes on to suggest that this transition would "gradually reduce the effectiveness of the various institutions that have made it possible to influence the actions of democratic governments," leading to "neither military dictatorship nor Orwellian totalitarianism, but rather a relatively benevolent despotism, imposed by what would gradually become a hereditary nomenklatura."[174] "After a few generations," Rorty laments, "utopian fantasies of an open society might be cherished only by a few readers of old books."[175]

In contrast with Crouch and Rorty, Habermas turns to 'post-democracy' to describe a broad condition of political detachment rather than a particular form of domination, whether by economic elites or a state security apparatus; focusing on the general lack of a European political consciousness, Habermas argues that "political elites and the media..." have been "reluctant to win over the populations to a common European future."[176] Instead of helping to construct a European *demos* "on the persuasive power of good arguments," they've taken to "pandering to the populism which they themselves have cultivated by obfuscating a complex and unpopular topic."[177] As a result, a "dangerous asymmetry has developed... between

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[173] Rorty, "Post-Democracy," 10.

[174] Rorty, "Post-Democracy," 10.

[175] Rorty, "Post-Democracy," 10.

[176] Habermas, *Crisis*, 50.

[177] Habermas, *Crisis*, 12.

the democratic participation of the peoples in what their governments 'obtain' for them on the, as they see it, far-off Brussels stage and the indifference, even apathy, of EU citizens regarding the decisions of their parliament in Strasbourg," in turn, rendering the EU "an arrangement for exercising a kind of post-democratic, bureaucratic rule."[178]

DEMOCRATIZING POST-DEMOCRACY?

What, then, is the recommended course of action? Crouch, to his credit, remains cautious, noting that the changes associated with post-democracy "are so powerful and widespread that it is impossible to see any major reversal of them."[179] Still, he does stress that some "actions to try to shift contemporary politics *partly* away from the inexorable drift towards post-democracy are possible."[180] Upon closer examination, however, Crouch's prescriptions necessitate a concerned citizenry whose absence is itself the root cause of the problem he hopes to solve. Specifically, Crouch argues that we must attend to the "growing dominance of the corporate elite" and reform our political practices to encourage greater participation through, for instance, the establishment of citizens' assemblies.[181] Yet, he is also quick to admit that these sorts of reforms seem to presuppose the kind of popular political power post-democracy lacks, noting that the "governmental and part policy-making

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[178] Habermas, *Crisis*, viii, 48.

[179] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 4, 104.

[180] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 104 *Italics added*.

[181] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 104, 113.

machinery, even of left-of-centre parties, has itself become endogenous to the problem of the power of the corporate elite."[182]

Thus, instead of "appealing to the political class itself to improve the quality of our democracy," he concentrates on "what we ourselves need to do to have [egalitarian] issues placed on the real political agenda in the first place."[183] Here, Crouch is not so much interested in re-democratizing post-democracy, but making the most out of post-democracy. He begins by asserting that ordinary citizens need to pay attention to and support new movements. The "vigorous, chaotic, noisy context of movements and groups," Crouch writes, is essential for our "future democratic vitality."[184] Yet, a problem emerges when considering *how* best to support these movements. As Crouch points out,

> On the one hand, it would seem that in post-democratic society we can no longer take for granted the commitment of particular parties to particular causes. This would lead to the conclusion that we should turn our backs on the party fight and devote our energies to cause organizations... On the other hand we have also seen that the fragmentation of political action into a mass of causes and lobbies provides systematic advantages to the rich..."[185]

As a result, the concerned citizen is left with the choice to either "conspire further in the triumph of post-democracy" by supporting lobbying organizations or "to cling to the old model of the monolithic party" and "sink into nostalgia for an irretrievable past."[186]

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[182] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 110.

[183] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 110.

[184] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 120.

[185] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 111.

[186] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 111.

In the end, Crouch advocates for essentially doing both. While professional lobbying may contribute to the growth of post-democracy, he considers it essential for pursuing egalitarian aims; "[e]ven if the causes supported by egalitarians are always weaker there than those of the large corporation, they are weaker still if they stay out of the lobby."[187] Because it remains the most effective organization for *mass* mobilization and participation, he argues that citizens must find a way to push parties back in the right direction — toward the public good — through withholding support at crucial times.[188] As such, citizens need to work "critically and conditionally" through the party in order to ensure its continued existence in a way that can facilitate further democratic political participation.[189]

Although unable to directly challenge post-democracy, Crouch hopes that these piecemeal measures may eventually contribute to an active citizenry itself able to realize political reform and end elite political domination. However, the challenge of post-democracy is not that concerned citizens lack an effective strategy for exerting political influence; it is that citizens are not sufficiently *concerned* in the first place or, rather, whatever concern they experience fails to encourage the sustained commitment to political activity ultimately necessary for democratic practice. As such, it is unclear whom he hopes to advise. Even if some private citizens do stay informed about new and emerging political movements and possibilities, the vast majority of them are not in a position to utilize this information in a way that could

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[187] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 122.

[188] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 114.

[189] Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 122.

productively influence sovereign decision-making. The professionalized, top-down nature of the modern party and cause organization tempers their involvement from the start, reducing citizens exclusively to donors and voters, limiting any meaningful form of political participation. Withholding votes or campaign contributions may send a signal if done strategically and in mass, but even these collective actions require a level of political organization that cannot be assumed under post-democratic conditions. Simply put, post-democracy lacks the robust citizenry able to make use of these tactics in the first place.

The recommendations advanced by Rorty and Habermas appear equally infeasible, if not more so. In order to combat the growing deference to questions of national security, Rorty skeptically suggests that citizens should attempt to promote governmental transparency; "[t]he only thing I can think of that might make a difference is a willingness to challenge the culture of government secrecy," specifically "in the areas of nuclear weaponry and intelligence-gathering."[190] He adds, "[t]hey could also demand that their governments join efforts to update the laws of war, and to create something like a code of international criminal justice."[191] Still, Rorty is hardly optimistic; the same popular inefficacy that haunts Crouch's prescriptions renders Rorty's demands equally unrealistic. He admits as much when, in concluding his essay, he points out

> [in] a worst-case scenario, historians will someday have to explain why the golden age of Western democracy... lasted only about two hundred years. The saddest pages in their books are likely to be those in which they describe how the citizens of the democracies, by their craven

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[190] Rorty, "Post-Democracy," 11.

[191] Rorty, "Post-Democracy," 11.

> acquiescence in governmental secrecy, helped bring the disaster on themselves.[192]

Here Rorty characterizes ordinary citizens as actively inviting post-democracy, giving us even less reason to pin any hopes for democratic renewal on the demos itself.

In directly engaging with the underlying problem of popular detachment, Habermas focuses on the need to develop a widely-shared European political consciousness, pointing out that "the more that national populations realize, and the media help them to realize, how profoundly the decisions of the European Union pervade their daily lives, the more their interest in making use of their democratic rights also as EU citizens will increase."[193] Instead of pushing for ordinary citizens to accomplish this on their own, however, he argues that this broader European political orientation will ultimately depend upon the efforts of European elites. In a section entitled "The hesitation of the political elites at the threshold to transnational democracy," Habermas argues that they "must abandon their accustomed combination of public relations and incrementalism steered by experts and brace themselves for a risky, and above all inspired, struggle within the broad public."[194] "Paradoxically," however, this would mean that elites

> would have to strive for something in the common European weal that runs counter to their own interest in maintaining power. For, in the long run, the scope for action at the national level would become narrower

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[192] Rorty, *Post-Democracy*, 11.

[193] Habermas, *Crisis*, 49.

[194] Habermas, *Crisis*, 51-2.

> and the importance of the appearances of national potentates on the political stage would diminish.[195]

In other words, the broader political awareness Habermas holds to be essential for overcoming post-democracy depends upon elites voluntarily divesting themselves of political power.[196] Rather, when looking to the recent Brexit and the broader Eurosceptic movement, it seems much more likely that enough elites will continue to exploit feelings of antipathy toward the EU for their own political and economic advantage, shunning the greater prospect of a genuinely European democracy.

In contrast with Crouch, Rorty, and Habermas, Ranciere's distinct understanding of democracy as a disruption of sovereign power, rather than its popular appropriation, leads him to describe post-democracy, not as something to be overcome, but as a set of conditions to be consistently challenged. The state exists, Ranciere argues, to prevent the possibility of genuine (i.e., democratic) politics; the goal, then, is to be open to emerging instances of political action.

> We will not claim, as the 'restorers' do, that politics 'simply' has to find its own principle again to get back its vitality. Politics, in its specificity, is rare. It is always local and occasional. Its actual eclipse is perfectly real and no political science exists that could map its future... How some new politics could break the circle of cheerful consensuality and denial of humanity is scarcely foreseeable or decidable right now.[197]

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[195] Habermas, *Crisis*, 52.

[196] This is to say nothing of the other obstacle Habermas identifies to democratic practice — economic disparity — that he does not address in this work; see Habermas, *Crisis*, 12.

[197] Ranciere, *Disagreement*, 139-40.

Erik Swyngedouw further builds upon Ranciere's work to offer a series of prescriptions oriented toward facilitating this sort of political disruption, what he calls "[t]raversing elite fantasies," which

> requires the intellectual and political courage to imagine the collective production of space, the inauguration of new political trajectories of living life in common, and, most importantly, the courage to choose, to take sides, to declare fidelity to the egalibertarian practices already pre-figured in some of the evental place-moments that mark contemporary insurgencies.[198]

Lest we subscribe to the "end of history" thesis, these disruptions are inevitable and, hence, will allow some means of contesting post-democracy. Still, to employ Sheldon Wolin's phrasing, they are inherently fugitive, leaving us, for the most part, persistently stuck within the confines of post-democracy.[199] Even Ranciere himself seems skeptical, ending *Disagreements* by observing that "there are good reasons for thinking that [a new politics of the subject] will not be able to get around the overblown promises of identity... or the hyperbole that summons thought to a more original globalization or to a more radical experience of the inhumanity of the human."[200] In other words, that it is just as likely that radical, disruptive political action will continue to be overdetermined by a logic of group essentialism that frustrates the production of new, possibly emancipatory claims to universality. As such, the best ordinary citizens can hope for are brief moments of contestation that seem to exhaust themselves in their expression; otherwise, post-democracy will very much continue to remain the order of the day.

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[198] Swyngedouw, "Interrogating," 378.

[199] Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy" *Constellations* 1.1 (1994): 11-25.

[200] Ranciere, *Disagreement*, 140.

The invitation to treat post-democracy as an opportunity to re-discover or invent new forms of democratic participation probably strikes many of us as deeply compelling, perhaps even obligatory. Some might further consider the decision to disregard this invitation as cowardly, repugnant, or even unforgivable. Yet, it is difficult to ignore just how chimerical the possibility of productively — much less successfully — contesting post-democracy appears. Even those who have taken up the charge do so with such an air of pessimism that it makes their prescriptions come off as desperate, if not exclusively intended to ward off a growing sense of despondency. At present, it is unclear what, if anything, ordinary citizens can do to impede the post-democratic exercise of sovereign power.

What the experience of post-democracy requires, then, is a shift in focus, a move away from the set of questions grounded in a democratic orientation, those pertaining to political judgment (i.e., what a society should do politically), and toward questions concerning one's own political subjectivity (i.e., what should one's relationship to political authority and activity should be). In particular, it invites us to wonder how one might best endure post-democratic rule, which may be the only form of sovereignty one ever knows. In this sense, its guiding aim would be therapeutic. In the next chapter, I will explore what it would mean to embrace a therapeutic approach to political philosophy and why such an approach is uniquely appropriate to post-democracy.

IV. Post-Democratic Political Philosophy

As discussed in Chapter Three, maintaining a democratic orientation toward post-democracy requires underestimating (or in some cases, ignoring) the very real obstacles to democratic political practice it presents. Subsequently, not only does such an approach end up yielding often self-consciously impracticable political prescriptions, it further encourages individuals to ignore the ways in which post-democratic conditions trouble the model of political subjectivity assumed by democratic thought. No longer a participant in sovereign decision-making, the post-democratic subject remains in need of a new way of conceptualizing her relationship to political authority and activity; in short, a political logic better able to inform her interpretations of political legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability.

Yet, it is paramount that this approach does not fall back into a democratic orientation; specifically, by assuming that the motivation for re-imagining one's political subjectivity should be, either once again or for the first time, to eventually exercise political influence. Rather, one must choose to think through post-democracy on its own terms in order, not to evade it, but to reconcile oneself with it. As such, the post-democratic approach to political philosophy primarily seeks to elaborate a 'guide for the governed', an account of political activity and authority relevant for Aristotle's mechanic, the nominal citizen who lacks political standing.[201] This is not in hopes of legitimating post-democratic sovereignty or producing more obedient subjects, which would seem to be more relevant to the art of governing than the condition of being governed, but of better understanding the post-

[201]Aristotle, *Politics* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998), 1277b-1278a.

democratic experience, clarifying one's feelings toward it, and responding in such a way that mitigates the frustration, anxiety, and alienation that accompanies the awareness of a non-democratic political existence. In short, to find a way to live with it.

In this chapter, I will defend a uniquely post-democratic interpretation of political philosophy, one which foregrounds its ability to help the bewildered democratic subject better recognize and work through the confusions and complications engendered by the politico-cultural contradictions of post-democratic life. In this sense, the practice of political philosophy assumes an essentially therapeutic character. After first exploring why post-democracy invites such an interpretation, I will elaborate on what I mean by a therapeutic approach to political philosophy: an approach which prioritizes the well-being of the *ruled* over the concerns unique to *ruling*. I will conclude by contrasting the post-democratic interpretation of political philosophy developed here with another recent response to "second-class citizenship," Jeffrey Green's Epicurean defense of extrapoliticism.[202] Ultimately, by showing how Green's democratic orientation limits the value of his prescriptions, I will elucidate why therapeutically engaging with post-democracy requires adopting a post-democratic model of subjectivity (presented in chapter five) as one's own.

FEAR AND LOATHING UNDER POST-DEMOCRACY

[202] See Jeffrey Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016), ch. 5.

To be a democratic citizen is to think as a political actor, to think of oneself as able to actively and intentionally influence sovereign decision-making. Thus, politics is not simply a question of how one is governed, but of how one governs oneself, of how a given community, a "we," exercises its collective autonomy. As Joanna Cook et al. point out, this

> by necessity makes the way in which that sovereignty is realized — and thus the subject's relationship to others and to 'the political' — stand out as an explicit object of reflection and anxiety. This is further compounded by democracy's promise that the subject has the capacity to change the political, should she wish. 'What am I for the political?' and 'What is the political for me?' are thus questions that continually recur for the inhabitant of a democratic system, unlike those living in more feudal or patrimonial systems, where, although such reflection is of course possible, the particular forms of political subjectivity involved deflect sustained reflection away from the constructed notions of the political.[203]

Thus, the democratic citizen, in addition to adopting a particular disposition toward politics, is predisposed to think of herself as *inherently political*, to consider her political status existentially significant. Her relationship to politics, in other words, is not something superfluous or tangential to her sense of self, but constitutive of it.

Of course, not all self-understood democratic citizens feel as deep an attachment to politics; it is not difficult to find those who profess to cherish democratic practice, yet fail to give actual political activity a second thought. We might call these individuals *Humean citizens*.[204] David Hume, the 18th century

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[203] Joanna Cook, Nicholas J. Long, and Henrietta Moore, "Introduction: When Democracy 'Goes Wrong'," *The State We're In: Reflecting on Democracy's Troubles* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 7-8.

[204] Or, as Jason Brennan broadly describes the apathetic or uninformed, "hobbits." See Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2016).

philosopher, famously critiqued the early modern social contract tradition on the basis that citizens do not base their attachment to the state on any actual or ongoing contract between them, but on the ways of life to which they are habituated.[205] "Time and custom give authority to all forms of government, and all successions of princes," he argues, "and that power, which at first was founded only on injustice and violence, become in time legal and obligatory."[206] For the Humean citizen, the absence of democratic political practice proves to be insignificant because what's salient is not the ability to exercise political influence, but the societal practices to which she is accustomed. Her relationship to political authority and activity is not predicated on a particular *political* self-understanding, but on a cultural one. Hence, rather than ruminate on the consequences of post-democratic sovereignty, she would find "no maxim… more conformable, both to prudence and morals, than to submit quietly to the government which we find established in the country where we happen to live…".[207]

While we can certainly imagine the Humean citizen responding indifferently to post-democracy, doing so would still require either an ironic disposition toward politics or an extreme level of compartmentalization. On the one hand, she could continue to embrace the democratic imaginary with which she's familiar, doing so with full knowledge that it remains radically counter to her political reality. Yet, in a

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[205] David Hume, "Of the source of allegiance," *A Treatise of Human Nature* in *Political Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 51-59.

[206] David Hume, "Of the objects of allegiance," *A Treatise of Human Nature* in *Political Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 73.

[207] Hume, "Of the objects of allegiance," 66.

context that puts such a pervasive emphasis on political identity, this sort of detachment can make one appear insincere, if not disingenuous. For instance, it would require only discussing politics disingenuously or, if voting, to only do so sarcastically. The post-democratic subject is so regularly treated as if *she were* a democratic citizen that it would make any sort of consistent, ironic response into a kind of endless satire at the expense of those around her. On the other hand, she could just try to ignore it and go on, as best as she can, pretending that she lives in a democracy. Still, the success of such a response would depend on both her capacity for self-deception and the extent to which her political preferences are shared with those in power (thus able to sustain the fantasy of her own political empowerment).

Rather, I contend that a democratic political imaginary is so tied to post-democratic life as to make it impossible to disentangle the real exercise of political power from social custom. In other words, post-democratic subjects are habituated to thinking of themselves as influencing sovereign decision-making, even if they've never actually done so. In fact, it is precisely this ubiquitous "call to politics" that makes the prospect of post-democracy so traumatic. It consistently reminds the individual that the failure to realize popular sovereignty and political equality is, rather than something to be nonchalantly sloughed off, precisely that: a *failure*. Moreover, it is not merely a societal failing, but *her own*. As a democratic citizen, she should be able to exercise political influence, to prevent the corruption of democratic practice, or, at the very least, to right the ship when corruption becomes evident. Yet, the open persistence of a non-democratic status quo highlights her inability to do so, revealing her general political negligibility. The myriad of ways in which she

continues to be addressed as a democratic citizen, invited to take responsibility for conditions and decisions she's unable to affect, only exacerbates her feelings of defeat and disappointment. She is, in short, reminded daily of her powerlessness.

How, then, should we imagine the initial experience of post-democratic subjectivity, of internalizing democracy's absence while enveloped in a culture that tirelessly evokes and celebrates its presence? Despite such experiences being inherently unique, conditioned by other politically-relevant factors (e.g., gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.) that may, often unpredictably, soften or intensify one's response to post-democracy, we can identify three broad consequences of adopting a post-democratic orientation: frustration, anxiety, and alienation.

Habituated to thinking of herself as a democratic citizen, we should expect the post-democratic subject to become frustrated over her inability to influence political outcomes or, subsequently, to realize democratic ideals. The consistent discursive emphasis on democratic values and the availability of mechanisms that should, ostensibly, allow for their realization (e.g., free elections, free speech, right to organize, etc.) only serve to compound these feelings, impeding the subject's ability to 'move on' from the mirage of democratic possibility. While unpleasant in itself, the greater consequences of this frustration, however, will inevitably depend on the way she conceptualizes its roots. If she blames the state, capitalism, the wealthy, or another external, empowered institution or group, real or imagined, for rendering her politically insignificant, this has the potential to breed deep feelings of institutional distrust or resentment, perhaps even the sense that she is being persecuted. If she instead (or additionally) finds fault with her fellow citizens, holding their ignorance or

apathy responsible for their collective failure, this may lead to a more general feeling of antipathy toward her society, even her neighbors. Additionally, she may direct her blame inward, at her own inability to effect political change, and become disappointed in, if not ashamed of, herself.

While the post-democratic subject experiences frustration over her failure to be a political actor, she further suffers anxiety over what appears to be an uncertain future, one in which she lacks any influence over sovereign decision-making. Though the democratic citizen may become anxious over a particular political decision or election, it remains tempered by the sense that they continue to have a 'seat at the table'; as such, the demos always has the ability to intervene before (or, at the very least, once) the state does anything truly terrible. Yet, under post-democracy, that assumption is no longer tenable. Rather, it requires the post-democratic subject to confront the fact that the state is not beholden to her at all, either as an individual or a member of the demos. While there are still some checks on state power (e.g., elite influence, 'the bureaucracy', etc.), these checks are still radically divorced from her, acting in their own interest; at best, all she can hope for is that their interests overlap. All of this contributes to a deep-seated disquiet concerning sovereign power. And while post-democratic sovereignty hardly guarantees that something horrible will happen, it does leave the individual with the impression that she would be unable to prevent it, leading her to feel distressed, insecure, and trapped.

Ultimately, this combination of frustration and anxiety contributes to the sense that one is alienated, not only from political activity, but from one's fellow citizens as

well. On face, the recognition that one lacks political influence distances the post-democratic subject from both sovereign power and the various institutions connected to it. No longer able to see them as an extension of her will or, at the very least, subject to it, she may come to see the power held by those institutions as arbitrary and illegitimate, estranging her from the forces that structure and condition her daily existence. Furthermore, a post-democratic orientation can separate her from her neighbors as well. On one level, she can no longer imagine a connection with others based on their shared participation in political activity; they have ceased to be 'fellow citizens'. On another, living amongst a population seemingly blind to their own political status, continuing to revel in the fantasy of democratic practice, can leave her feeling even more isolated. The consistent talk of democratic participation and civic responsibility, whether in public discourse or private conversation, has the potential to disaffect her further, turning her into a sort of Cassandra figure surrounded by blithe Trojans (except, of course, that the post-democratic subject's claim is not prophetic, but manifest). All of this serves to isolate the self-aware post-democratic subject, leaving her both politically and epistemically alone.

None of this paints a post-democratic orientation in a particularly flattering light. Excluding those instances in which a post-democratic regime explicitly threatens individual liberty or shows contempt for expertise, it would be much easier to approach post-democracy from a liberal or technocratic perspective, indifferent to the absence of democratic practice. This indifference, however, may be harder to cultivate than one realizes. In addition to growing up in a culture that ubiquitously celebrates democratic values, many self-aware post-democratic subjects continue to

embrace democratic principles, despite being pessimistic about their realization. In short, one does not simply give up on democracy. Thus, while one must decide to adopt a post-democratic orientation, the democratic sympathies underlying that decision are not always a matter of choice. Whether the post-democratic subject chooses to engage with her feelings of frustration, anxiety, and alienation directly, by throwing herself into democratic activism, or by trying her best not to think about it, these feelings will continue to affect her until she works through them. Thus, what the post-democratic subject needs is therapy.

PHILOSOPHY AS THERAPY

The idea of philosophy as a form of therapy is at least as old as Socrates, who interpreted the aim of philosophy as making "your first and chief concern... the highest welfare of your souls."[208] Following Socrates, it has been associated with figures as diverse as the Stoics, Augustine, Boethius, Montaigne, Rousseau, Emerson, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Cavell.[209] Broadly speaking, what distinguishes this loose assemblage of thinkers as a philosophical tradition is the way they consider both 'the philosophical problem' as a source of deep, often existential worry and, subsequently, the practice of philosophy

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[208] Plato, "Apology" *Four Texts on Socrates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998), 30a-b.

[209] See Michael Ure, *Nietzsche's Therapy: self cultivation in the middle works* (Lanhham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); Robert E. Sanchez and Robert D. Stolorow, "*Psyches Therapeia*: Therapeutic dimensions in Heidegger and Wittgenstein" *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 5.1 (2013): 67-80; Alice Crary and Rupert Read, *The New Wittgenstein* (New York: Routledge, 2000); & Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are* (New York: Oxford UP, 2017).

as a means of responding to that worry, specifically by addressing its conditions of possibility.

For the most part, people philosophize because they love or enjoy the practice, not because the problem at hand distresses them to the point they feel as if they need to. For instance, the majority of people who purposely read Descartes do so out of an interest in epistemology or early modern thought, not because they're experiencing a crisis brought on by a deep concern with the nature of reality. Though there are certainly exceptions, even (or perhaps especially) those who practice philosophy for a living are more consistently motivated by a general passion for reading, writing, and teaching the subject rather than an anxious fixation on a particular problem or set of problems.

Still, there are instances in which one turns to philosophy out of a sort of desperation, a feeling that the world has become unfamiliar or unstable in a way that makes it difficult to continue on as one previously had. These are moments when an individual undergoes a profound realization that disrupts her prior ideas about both the world and her relationship to it, leaving her bewildered, unsettled, and unsure of how to respond. Socrates experiences this upon receiving Chaerephon's news that the Oracle of Delphi proclaimed no one wiser than he; Boethius, upon becoming aware of his impending execution; Kierkegaard, upon recognizing the irreconcilability of modern life with Christian virtue; Nietzsche, upon realizing the greater implications of the loss of God; and Emerson, by the feelings of grief and detachment following the death of his son. Without some sort of resolution, these problems can estrange

one from the world one inhabits, often leading to feelings of disquiet, dread, even the wholesale rejection of the world, i.e., nihilism.

A therapeutic approach to philosophy, then, aims to alleviate such feelings by restoring a sense of familiarity with the world; specifically, by finding a way to successfully process the philosophical problem in a way that enables the individual to move beyond it. This involves adopting a new framework that facilitates a successful reconciliation with the world in a way that one's problems come to be seen as less vexing or arresting, or even ill-considered, as if they had just not been judged in the right light. James Peterman, writing on Wittgenstein's own form of philosophical therapy, describes this as "bringing about a proper attitude toward the world" or "being in agreement with the world."[210] As Wittgenstein himself explains,

> the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed complete clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should completely disappear. The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. — The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question.[211]

Thus, the aim of philosophical therapy is not to solve the problem, at least in the sense that one solves a math problem or a crossword puzzle, but to dissolve the problem, to make the problem no longer appear problematic; analogously, to no longer consider the crossword puzzle worth doing.

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[210] James Peterman, *Philosophy as Therapy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), xiii, 29.

[211] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), §133.

We see this in Cavell's response to the problem of other minds, of whether one can ever truly know another to be like oneself. Through a philosophical engagement that allows him to see it as an issue, not of epistemic certainty, but of attunement, of withholding oneself, Cavell's interpretation of the problem radically shifts. He writes, "But all this makes it seem that the philosophical problem of knowledge is something I impose on these matters; that I am the philosophical problem. I am. It is in me that the circuit of communication is cut; I am the stone on which the wheel breaks."[212] This allows Cavell to show that "it is we who have fallen away from the world and the other. And we have done so by trying to force them to come to us, by making the world and the others as such objects of knowledge. The truth of skepticism is that of our self-alienation, not of our ignorance."[213] Still in dissolving the problem of other minds, Cavell recognizes the challenge of collectively realizing a shared community, but this problem, unlike that of philosophical skepticism, admits of a solution; for Cavell, it is our willingness to be responsive to one another (the post-democrat, who, in contrast with Cavell, has come to accept that the "eventual human community" will be either politically irrelevant or, in his words, "nowhere," must look for another).[214]

Further, it is essential to recognize that the therapeutic value resulting from philosophical practice comes not from any new framework *per se*, but the process one takes to practically internalize that framework. In Freudian psychoanalysis, this

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[212] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim to Reason* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 83.

[213] Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are* (New York: Oxford UP, 2017), 84.

[214] Stanley Cavell, *This New, yet Unapproachable America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 74, 108.

process is called *working-through*, “the process by which a person transforms a relatively theoretical insight into their unconscious motivations into a practical understanding of how they permeate aspects of their lives.”[215] Much in the same way one cannot simply decide to no longer feel anxious, this new, salutary understanding must be learned through exploring both the conceptual and practical consequences engendered by this paradigm shift and adapting one's life accordingly. As Peterman emphasizes, "It means living that truth, being at home in it. So to solve philosophical problems requires that one live those solutions. It requires not simply being aware of the truth but also changing one's life. In this context it requires a deep and difficult alteration in one's mode of thinking and expressing oneself."[216] Thus, one suffering an existential crisis cannot simply pick up a copy of *Being and Time*, read it cover to cover, and expect to feel better. Rather, one must work to actively embrace new perspectives on mortality, affectivity, and worldliness that further lead to practical changes in one's life, often in ways that one could not have previously expected. In order to reconcile himself with the pronouncement of the Oracle, Socrates becomes the 'gadfly' that attempts to wake the city of Athens; in responding to the absence of God in modern life, Kierkegaard attempts to become a new kind of Christian subject, whereas Nietzsche tries to exorcise the idea of God completely.

In this sense, philosophical practice, like any other sort of therapy, necessitates some degree of active self-transformation. What is first considered

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[215] Jonathan Lear, *Freud* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 258.

[216] Peterman, *Philosophy as Therapy*, 28.

merely in the abstract must be made concrete through a willingness to modify one's life in light of what one now perceives as true, good, or right. Thus, it is best to understand a therapeutic approach to philosophy as an ethical project, one which seeks to realize a human good — the well-being of the individual — through the cultivation of a new ethos better suited to the world in which one finds oneself. Ideally, the philosophical text functions as a guide for recognizing the problematic assumptions one may have about the world, as well as offering a means of developing a new framework with which to replace them. Still, this is much easier said than done. Even in making a serious effort to philosophically reorient oneself, one may not always be successful, but instead be unable to find a way of being "in agreement the world" while also being agreeable to oneself. Like all other forms of therapy, there are no guarantees that one's problems will be resolved or even abated.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AS THERAPY

How, then, should we conceptualize a therapeutic approach to *political* philosophy? James Glass, in his account of Rousseau, suggests that "the doing of therapy for the political philosopher means to think of the therapeutic task as a political event, to assume that the 'sickness' of psyche lies intimately involved with the general degeneration of the culture itself."[217] As with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's turn to *schizoanalysis*, Glass's account calls for a politicization of psychoanalysis in order

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[217] James Glass, "Political Philosophy as Therapy: Rousseau and the Pre-Social Origins of Consciousness" *Political Theory* 4.2 (1976): 163-84, 181. See also Marshall Berman, "Liberal and Totalitarian Therapies in Rousseau: A Response to James M. Glass" *Political Theory* 4.2 (1976): 185-94.

to transform psychoanalytic therapy itself into a form of political activity.[218] In contrast, Gertrude Steuernagel, interprets the therapeutic approach as an invitation to integrate certain psychological insights into our normative accounts of politics. Writing on Marcuse and Jung, she observes

> To conceive of political philosophy as therapy means to be alive to the complex and often intricate demands of internal and external reality. It means being willing to fit the type of political recommendations to the reality we are confronted with rather than trying to impose a series of principles on a community or group of individuals.[219]

In other words, it is to attune one's sense of political judgment with the nature of the human psyche, to psychologize political activity.

Despite their differences, both Glass and Steuernagel subordinate the therapeutic task to the question of politics; therapy either becomes a means of ameliorating a corrupt society or instrumental for developing better prescriptions for doing so. In prioritizing the question of politics over 'the welfare of one's soul', Glass and Steuernagel's interpretations thus break with the greater tradition of philosophy as therapy. The issue is no longer that one is unfamiliar with the world and must find a new way of reconciling oneself with it, but instead that one is familiar with an evil or broken world and must find a way to change it. The goal then becomes cultivating the best disposition for bringing about a new or different kind of world; in short, to exercise political influence. While there is nothing wrong in principle with Glass and

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[218] See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[219] Gertrude Steuernagel, *Political Philosophy as Therapy: Marcuse Reconsidered* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 11-12.

Steuernagel's conception of *political* therapy, it ultimately holds little appeal for the post-democratic subject, who is neither able to play the role of the politically-motivated analyst or realize psychologically-informed political prescriptions.

What is required, then, is a means of engaging in political *therapy*, a way of finding agreement with a political context out of joint with one's previous assumptions and expectations. There is some precedent for this sort of approach, found largely among the Romans. During the collapse of the Republic, a large swath of the ruling class similarly had to grapple with the unanticipated experience of political inconsequentiality, particularly during the more brutal periods of the Empire. As a result, Ciceroian appeals to save the Republic soon gave way to other, more self-reflexive responses to life under despotism. For instance, Seneca's *De Otio* defends resigning from political life if one either lives in an unjust commonwealth or simply has more important tasks, such as philosophy, to which to attend.[220] Tacitus's *Agricola*, detailing the life of his father-in-law, offers an account of how best to serve a violent, tyrannical Emperor without either getting oneself killed or compromising one's integrity.[221] Epictetus's cosmopolitan model of citizenship, wherein one trains oneself to ignore the authority of the citadel by focusing on one's greater relationship to the *cosmos*, attracted a widespread following throughout the empire.[222]

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[220] Seneca, "On the Private Life" *Moral and Political Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 165-180.

[221] Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009).

[222] Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1995), especially § 24 & § 235.

Michel Foucault famously describes the Romans as collectively responding to "a crisis of the subject, or rather crisis of subjectivation… a difficulty in the manner in which the individual could form himself as the ethical subject of his actions, and efforts to find in devotion to self that which could enable him to submit to rules and give a purpose to his existence."[223] No longer able to assume the Senatorial powers (or other positions of political influence) held by their fathers and grandfathers, they had to re-calibrate their political self-conceptions; however, because the Empire remained such a fundamental part of their lives, simple withdrawal was not a realistic option. Rather, one had to "elaborat[e] an ethics that enabled one to constitute oneself as an ethical subject with respect to these social, civic, and political activities, in the different forms they might take and at whatever distance one remained from them."[224] Thus, even if, like Seneca, one ultimately decides upon withdrawal, it must be a principled or reasoned withdrawal, one which responds to the prevailing assumption that one should always participate in political activity, despite its hazards. By providing some measure of direction and virtue in otherwise uncertain and/or wicked times, this sort of philosophically-guided self-reflection allowed individuals to, as the title alludes, care for themselves.

More recently, Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* gives us an exemplary account of this approach to political philosophy. In it, he describes how Plenty Coups, a chief of the Crow Nation, reimagines the practice of counting coup and, by extension, the warrior way of life native to the

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[223] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the* Self (New York: Random House, 1986), 95.

[224] Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 94.

Crow, in light of the United States Federal Government's ban on intertribal warfare. Following the ban, as well as the extermination of the buffalo, the Crow lost the ability to engage in the activities essential to their identity *as Crow*. Consequently, nothing seemed to make sense or matter anymore; as Plenty Coups describes it, "After that, nothing happened."[225] Taking the Crow's perspective, Lear writes,

> My problem is not simply that my way of life has come to an end. I no longer have concepts with which to understand myself or the world… I have no *idea* what is going on. This is not primarily a psychological problem. The concepts with which I would otherwise have understood myself — indeed, the concepts with which I would otherwise have shaped my identity — have gone out of existence.[226]

In other words, the Crow's form of life became unintelligible, leaving them both disoriented and hopeless.

In response, Plenty Coups provided a narrative, one which recounted a dream of a receptive Chickadee, that "gave the tribe imaginative tools with which to endure a conceptual onslaught."[227] Despite having no idea what the future would bring, the Crow resolved to adapt to whatever changes they would be forced to endure, to become who they needed to become in order to survive, even if that meant diluting or altering their traditions. As such, "they explicitly recognized in an official council that their buffalo-hunting way of life was coming to an end, and they decided to ally with the white man against their traditional enemies."[228] Lear credits

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[225] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006), 2.

[226] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 48-49.

[227] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 78-79.

[228] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 73.

decisions like these with ultimately leading to better outcomes than those experienced by other tribes less willing to accept their catastrophic predicament (i.e., the Sioux under Sitting Bull).

Through his efforts, Plenty Coups embraced what Lear describes as a vision of radical hope. Broadly, radical hope is

> committed to the bare idea *that something good will emerge*. But it does so in recognition that one's thick understandings of the good life are about to disappear. It thereby manifests a commitment to the idea that the goodness of the world transcends one's limited and vulnerable attempts to understand it… Precisely because Plenty Coups sees that a traditional way of life is coming to an end, he is in a position to embrace a peculiar form of hopefulness. It is basically a hope for *revival*: for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible.[229]

By accepting that the Crow's way of life was no longer tenable, Plenty Coups gave the Crow people a way of moving forward. At that point, it was still unclear what that way forward would be, what Crow life would look like under profoundly different conditions, but, by encouraging the tribe to be receptive to a future that still admitted of *some* good, he opened up the possibility for a future worth having. For Plenty Coups, this possibility depended upon a willingness to be receptive to an emergent good; specifically, by attuning oneself to a present that appears both strange and undesirable. While this sort of instrumental optimism hardly guarantees that one will find a *better* life, it can help to avoid a life marred by bewilderment and despair.

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[229] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 94-95.

THERAPEUTIC RESPONSES TO POST-DEMOCRATIC LIFE

In order to respond to the "crisis of subjectivation" besetting the post-democratic subject, a philosophical intervention into post-democratic life must be motivated by a similar appreciation of radical hope. Clearly, the devastation suffered by the Crow people differs dramatically from the loss experienced by the post-democratic subject; for instance, post-democratic subjects are not threatened with genocide. Yet, like the Crow, post-democratic subjects find themselves weathering a "conceptual onslaught" of their own, one in which democratic conceptions of the good are becoming increasingly irrelevant to their contemporary political experience. As such, they must find a way to reconcile themselves with a political context that — while both uncertain and unwelcome — they have few options but to endure. To do so, it becomes necessary to cultivate a new form of political subjectivity that not only acknowledges the brute fact of post-democracy, but facilitates a therapeutic engagement with it. In short, a political self-conception oriented toward working through the frustration, anxiety, and alienation inherent in post-democratic life.

Over the last decade, no one has made more productive strides in this direction than Jeffrey Green. Though not explicitly engaged with the concept of "post-democracy," Green explores and addresses contemporary conditions of political inequality in a way that brilliantly illuminates the greater consequences of these conditions for non-elites. While his earlier work, *The Eyes of The People*, develops a theory of ocular democracy appropriate for a citizenry largely reduced to the role of spectator, his most recent work, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, gives us a broader account of plebeian democracy, one which describes the ubiquitous

experience of "second-class citizenship."[230] In particular, Green attends to its more affective repercussions, emphasizing how, "Given the scarcity of political offices and the lack of meaningful forms of active engagement, most citizens find themselves politically unheralded — a condition which, especially in liberal democracies with their official doctrines of equal political influence for the similarly talented and motivated, is likely to be, for many at least, a source of anxiety."[231] This anxiety, in combination with the indignation and reasonable envy felt toward the wealthy elites who govern, ultimately contributes to discontent; as Green writes, "there can be no expectation of an ordinary citizen's political existence being a happy one."[232]

Thus, Green stresses the need for "ordinary, second-class citizens to find *solace* in the face of the shadow of unfairness"; specifically by, at times, adopting a "*critical indifference* toward active and engaged political life."[233] In other words, individuals shouldn't feel obligated to always participate in politics and should feel comfortable occasionally taking a break. He grounds this indifference on

> an ancient, though largely forgotten, democratic tradition which associates the egalitarian mindset with the tendency to periodically *not to care* about politics — both in the sense of criticizing political life as disrespectful of human equality and, even more, in the sense of celebrating certain practices that draw on political ideals even as these are deployed in a non-political direction.[234]

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[230] See Jeffrey Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010) and Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, Ch. 2.

[231] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 135.

[232] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 130.

[233] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 11, 131.

[234] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 131.

This tradition, for Green, finds its fullest expression in the work of Epicurus, who taught "that in general a happy life is best secured outside of politics."[235] This is in part due to the distress generated by political activity itself, but also because egalitarian political principles are best realized in the activities and friendships found outside of formal political activity.[236] In other words, at least for the ordinary citizen, a *truly* political life is lived outside of politics, by routinely treating others as equals. Hence, Green's position is not apolitical or antipolitical, but extrapolitical, a way, not of avoiding or preventing politics, but of transcending them.[237]

As Green makes clear, however, this indifference is not intended to be permanent, "but only to prevent the discontent likely to characterize their [ordinary citizens'] political lives from extending beyond politics and unduly undermining their overall capacity for well-being and peace of mind."[238] Because, an extrapolitical life is meant to be lived in tandem with a political one, not replace it, the relief Green provides appears oriented towards, not second-class citizens, but political elites.[239] This is further demonstrated by the examples Green employs: those involving Achilles, Otanes (a Persian statesman), and Plato's prototypical democratic.[240] Despite facing setbacks, all are regularly able to exercise a considerable degree of

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[235] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 134.

[236] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 147.

[237] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 131.

[238] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 11.

[239] One can, in fact, imagine former President George W. Bush defending his extended stays at the ranch on such grounds.

[240] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 150-161.

political influence. As Green consistently (and rightly) emphasizes, the vast majority of ordinary citizens are not simply disadvantaged, but politically irrelevant; thus, it remains unclear why they would need a way of *momentarily* transcending politics rather than a way of grappling with a *perpetual* exclusion from it. As such, Green's account, while exemplary in its willingness to reckon with the greater implications of political inequality, does not provide an adequate response to a life of persistent political powerlessness.

One could break with Green and imagine ordinary citizens finding some solace by *fully* committing to an extrapolitical life — a private life that seeks to realize political values (e.g., equality) through one's personal relationships, actions, and habits — and adopting a lasting "critical indifference" toward political life properly understood. Yet, by subtly equating extrapolitical power with sovereign power, this would only encourage one to maintain the fantasy of a democratic political existence (by locating it outside of sovereign decision-making) and avoid actively confronting the real conditions of political powerlessness they face. Given the alternatives, it is perhaps unsurprising that Green ends his book by inviting the reader to have a drink, to "follow Horace when he embraces wine as something 'to bestow fresh hopes, and powerful to wash away the bitterness of care'…".[241] Given the state of things, we may need more than one.

Unless ordinary citizens are to simply anesthetize themselves, post-democracy requires initiating a conversation about political insignificance in a way that moves beyond treating it simply as a disadvantage or drawback and instead

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[241] Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*, 164.

recognizes it as *the* defining feature of one's political existence. To this end, there is no thinker more helpful than Thomas Hobbes. While far from the only philosopher to discuss political powerlessness, Hobbes stands alone in his willingness to inhabit it fully, not in order to critique it as something inferior to a properly political life, but to sketch a robust, edifying account of an alienated political existence on its own terms. In the next chapter, I will develop a Hobbesian-inspired model of political subjectivity intended to help the post-democratic subject work through the frustration, anxiety, and alienation associated with post-democratic life; in short, a therapeutic reading of Hobbes intended for a post-democratic audience.

V. Post-Democratic Political Subjectivity

In this chapter, I will articulate a distinctly Hobbesian approach to post-democracy, one intended to help individuals begin to alleviate the frustration, anxiety, and alienation that stems from post-democratic life. Specifically, by offering a somewhat unorthodox reading of Hobbesian servitude, I will develop a model of post-democratic political subjectivity that can provide a foundation for grappling with and, ideally, working through an awareness of one's own political powerlessness. After first illustrating how post-democracy constitutes a species of political domination, I will introduce Hobbes's account of servitude by way of contrasting it with his account of subjecthood. In doing so, I will show how the Hobbesian subject's self-understanding encourages an unfounded optimism toward sovereignty — one which mirrors the democratic citizen's own — while the servant's better prepares individuals for an explicit and, hence, productive engagement with the more distressing consequences of post-democratic sovereignty. I will then explore how the servant's perspective can inform a post-democratic political logic that addresses questions of legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability. I will end by stressing the need for a practical realization of one's post-democratic identity as part of the therapeutic process, one which I will further elaborate in Chapter Six.

POST-DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL DOMINATION

What does it mean to be dominated? Drawing upon both Max Weber and William Connolly, Philip Pettit explains that "One agent dominates another if and only if they have a certain power over that other, in particular power of interference on an

arbitrary basis."[242] In order to suggest that the post-democratic subject should consider herself dominated by the state, it is necessary to show that the state constitutes an agent with the power to interfere with her on an arbitrary basis. To be an agent, Pettit explains, the entity must be able to act intentionally; agents of domination "cannot just be a system or network or whatever," but must either "be a personal or corporate or collective agent."[243] Understanding the state as a series of interrelated institutions, it clearly has the potential to function as both a corporate and collective agent with the capability to dominate others. A post-democratic orientation further allows us to interpret the state as beholden to various elite interests, even if they are, at times, in conflict with one another.

While the state's capacity to interfere with its citizens is self-evident, the idea that it acts on an arbitrary basis when doing so demands further demonstration. As Pettit explains,

> What is required for non-arbitrary state power... is that the power be exercised in a way that tracks, not the power-holder's personal welfare or world-view, but rather the welfare and world-view of the public. The acts of interference perpetrated by the state must be triggered by the shared interests of those affected under an interpretation of what those interests require that is shared, at least at the procedural level, by those affected.[244]

In other words, a sovereign power acts arbitrarily when it ignores the collective needs and beliefs of those it governs. It could be argued that, even when political power is largely a matter of elite competition, elected officials, by design, must

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[242] Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (Oxford UP, 2010), 52.

[243] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 52.

[244] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 56.

appeal to the interests and opinions of their constituencies, and thus necessarily track "the welfare and world-view of the public."

Yet, this assumes, first, that these elected officials are responsive to the *actual* concerns of their constituencies, as opposed to engaging in fear-mongering; second, that the interests or ideas championed are not "sectional or factional in character," or worse, simply intended to exploit their constituency's divisiveness over minor issues; and, third, that these interests and ideas eventually play a role in influencing sovereign decision-making instead of merely remaining empty rhetoric.[245] Under post-democratic conditions, it is not at all clear that these assumptions can be made. Furthermore, if one is committed to a genuinely democratic political logic, it is not enough for sovereign power to instrumentally track the public's interests for the purposes of re-election; rather, the state must act as an extension of an active public. Otherwise, it would be disingenuous to characterize sovereign decision-making as being triggered by a *shared* interpretation of what those interests require (i.e., consideration through a democratic practice), instead of simply a series of periodic opportunities for elite competition.

Yet, Pettit does emphasize that the question of political domination, though a matter of interpretation, is not "*essentially* value-laden."[246] Rather,

> the identification of a certain sort of state action as arbitrary and dominating is an essentially political matter; it is not something on which theorists can decide in the calmness of their studies... what has to be established is whether people really are dominated, not whether domination is visible from within some privileged evaluative standpoint. As the facts of the matter, including facts about local culture and

[245] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 56.

[246] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 56.

> context, determine whether a certain act counts as interference, so the facts of the matter determine whether a certain act of interference counts as arbitrary.[247]

Thus, the question of domination cannot be decided from a third-person perspective, but only by those actually experiencing the interference in question.

This consideration is further troubled by the observation, expounded upon in chapter two, that most individuals living under post-democratic conditions either do not recognize their political practices as insufficiently democratic or, if they do, maintain the belief that such malfunctions are only temporary or irregular. Obviously, if an individual believes that the state is democratic enough, then even if she is demonstrably misinformed or uninterested in an accurate characterization of her relationship with sovereignty, she will not experience post-democratic sovereignty as a form of domination, much in the same way those who refuse to accept the idea that smoking is dangerous will not experience the act of smoking as a form of self-harm. Yet, to the extent that the democratic values of popular sovereignty and political equality are considered important -- as they tend to be in political contexts enamored with democratic discourse -- *and* the individual cares enough to investigate whether these values are being realized through political practice, post-democratic sovereignty would certainly appear as a form of domination. Even if, through embracing democratic realism, one were to assume that all of the value placed on popular sovereignty and political equality is 'just talk', granting a measure of cognitive dissonance that would allow most to feel as if they were not dominated,

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[247] Pettit, *Republicanism*, 56-7.

such an arrangement would still constitute an experience of domination for the democratic 'true believers'.

Still, it is important to note that just because post-democratic sovereignty acts arbitrarily does not mean it will not occasionally or even regularly act in a manner consistent with one's interests. In other words, the fact that one is dominated hardly means that one will find fault with the way in which sovereign power interferes in their lives; one may even find greater fault in the state's unwillingness to interfere further (e.g., by not passing laws to prevent other, non-governmental forms of domination). As such, unless one is singularly concerned with democratic political possibility, domination does not necessary lead to dissatisfaction, only to the *de facto* inability to influence how one is governed. What remains essential for a post-democratic orientation is that the alignment of one's personal preferences with elite interests is seen as neither causal nor correlative, but coincidental, making it both contingent and unpredictable.[248]

To all but the most committed authoritarians, it would be odd not to find post-democratic domination, at the very least, undesirable. Still, just as one does not deal with an illness by ignoring it, an aversion to domination should not keep the post-democratic subject from considering how it structures her relationship with sovereignty. In order, then, to develop a more robust picture of post-democratic sovereignty, it is essential to turn to the foremost modern theorist of political domination: Thomas Hobbes

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[248] While, in the absence of democratic political procedures, it is clear why the relationship is not causal, the conditions are under which public opinion is measured, both in the way polls can manipulate issue salience and one's recorded opinion on an issue, make any claims concerning correlation highly suspect.

HOBBESIAN INROADS INTO POST-DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Despite the fact that he describes sovereignty as an absolute right to dominion, some may have reservations with treating Hobbes as a theorist of domination, in particular because Hobbes's account of subjecthood breaks decisively with Pettit's emphasis on arbitrary interference.[249] As even the most casual readers of Hobbes are aware, subjects come together to form a covenant to authorize the sovereign's absolute power "for their peace and common defence."[250] This follows from Hobbes's argument that sovereign power is only effective when it is both overwhelming and unrestricted, able to make use of all of the commonwealth's resources, including its inhabitants, as it sees fit; anything less would inhibit the sovereign's ability to protect individuals against a violent, untimely death, undermining the ostensible purpose of the commonwealth in the first place. To the extent that the sovereign intentionally and exclusively pursues this aim, sovereign authority would not be experienced as a form of domination, but rather as a kind of mediated autonomy in which the sovereign non-arbitrarily tracks the "welfare and world-view" of those governed by ensuring their safety and security. For this reason, the Hobbesian subject constitutes a less-than-perfect model for post-democratic political subjectivity.

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[249] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVI.4

[250] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, II.XVII, 109.

Yet, readers of Hobbes are often quick to forget that he offers not one, but two distinct models of political subjectivity.[251] Across his three major works of systematic political thought (*The Elements of the Law*, *On the Citizen*, and *Leviathan*), Hobbes consistently differentiates between the *subject* and the *servant*. While the former democratically institutes an artificial commonwealth with other subjects, forming a covenant "of every man with every man," the servant joins the natural commonwealth when conquered by another, submitting in order that the servant may "avoid the present stroke of death... that so long as his life and the liberty of his body is allowed him, the victor shall have the use thereof, at his pleasure."[252] While scholars are typically quick to privilege the former, anyone with a basic awareness of world history would be well aware that most states are founded on the basis of violence, not universal consent. As Hume explains,

> Were you to preach, in most parts of the world, that political connexions are found altogether on voluntary consent or a mutual promise, the magistrate would soon imprison you, as seditious, for loosening the ties of obedience; if your friends did not before shut you up as delirious, for advancing such absurdities... Almost all the governments, which exist at present, or of which there remains any record in story, have been founded originally, either on usurpation or conquest, or both, without any pretense of a fair consent or voluntary subjection of people.[253]

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[251] Technically, one could make the case that he actually offers three models of political subjectivity, but it is questionable as to whether the "child" is inherently political or, rather, a private form of dominion.

[252] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.13, XX.10

[253] David Hume, "Of the Original Contract" in *Political Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 167-8.

By describing the commonwealth born of violence as "natural," Hobbes can reasonably be interpreted as having a similar view. Thus, despite the often exclusive attention given to the subject, Hobbes's readership seems to be primarily made up of servants.

Moreover, Hobbes's account of servitude offers a model of political subjectivity that more readily fits with Pettit's understanding of domination as a form of arbitrary interference. Though the servant covenants with the sovereign as well, technically authorizing all future exercises of sovereign power, the conditions under which she does so so radically distinguish her from the subject as to illuminate the flimsy, if not wholly imaginary, connection between sovereign authority and the servant's "welfare and world-view." Because she covenants only to avoid the immediate threat of death or imprisonment, the sovereign's authority rests, not on the servant's ongoing interest in security (as it does for the subject), but her desire to avoid the loss of her life or freedom *in one particular instance*. Future sovereign decisions, which may have nothing at all to do with the servant's well-being (much less world-view), would only be seen as non-arbitrary because the servant, at one time, had no other choice but to submit. Unless we're similarly willing to recognize the rightful authority of the kidnapper or other violent criminals, it is difficult to classify servitude as anything other than domination.

Furthermore, in equating the servant and subject in terms of political status, Hobbes illuminates the extent to which the subject's awareness of her domination is a function of belief rather than actual sovereign decision-making; in short, it is not a matter of *how* the sovereign interferes, but of the way in which the non-sovereign

individual *interprets* that interference. If, for instance, the subject no longer recognizes the sovereign's actions as being in the service of her safety and security, then the subject, regardless of the covenant made, would experience the sovereign's authority as a form of domination. As David Gauthier points out, "If we regard the subject similarly [to the servant]... then Hobbes's account begins to assume a totalitarian dimension... Indeed he invites the rejoinder, urged strongly by Locke, that the sovereign is the enemy of the subjects, and an enemy given the strength to overpower and destroy them by their own act in creating him."[254] What, then, ultimately distinguishes subject from servant is the former's faith that this simply is not the case, while the latter never had any reason to imagine that it would be otherwise.

These competing interpretations of sovereign authority thus lead the servant and subject to develop two distinct dispositions toward political authority and activity. In a nutshell, though the Hobbesian subject's participation in the founding allows her to imagine herself as the author of her own domination, treating the commonwealth as an instrument in the service of her self-preservation, the servant operates under no such illusions. Having been forcibly incorporated into the commonwealth, the servant is unable to recognize her domination as either an extension of her will or necessarily being in her best interest, except, of course, her immediate interest in avoiding death or imprisonment. This leads the servant to adopt a set of inferences

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[254] David Gauthier, *The Logic of Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969), 116-7. Gauthier later goes on to argue that, for this very reason, Hobbes made a mistake in politically equating the two. Yet, it could just as easily be that the theory of authorization Gauthier wants to ascribe to Hobbes is just a distraction from Hobbes's deeper point concerning the domination inherent in political life.

that are fundamentally distinct from those held by the Hobbesian subject; in particular, while the latter holds that the individual's relationship to sovereignty is intentional, shared, mediated by community, and guaranteed by consent, the former considers it accidental, solitary, unmediated, and guaranteed by violence. As such, while the Hobbesian subject exhibits a fundamentally hopeful disposition vis-a-vis political activity and authority, the Hobbesian servant's disposition is primarily informed by an underlying fear of sovereign power. Insofar as Hobbes emphasizes that "the rights and consequences of sovereignty are the same in both [commonwealths]," this should lead us to be weary of embracing the subject's hopeful disposition when unable to share her faith concerning the sovereign's intentions.[255]

In this sense, the relationship between the Hobbesian servant and subject mirrors the contrast between the self-understood democratic citizen and post-democratic subject under post-democratic conditions. Whereas the democratic citizen maintains the belief that political practices continue to satisfy or, at least, approximate democratic criteria, the post-democratic subject recognizes her inability to realize either popular sovereignty or political equality. As such, Hobbes's account of servitude not only provides a model of political subjectivity better able to inform an understanding of post-democratic political life, but further illustrates the way it productively departs from an overly stubborn democratic orientation toward politics. In other words, their shared awareness of domination gives the post-democratic subject good reason to discard the fantasy of a sovereign power either responsive to

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[255] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XX.3

her preferences or invested in her wellbeing, instead favoring a sober confrontation with the bleak realities of post-democratic life. After further developing this claim by diving deeper into dispositional implications of each of Hobbes's models of political subjectivity, this chapter will conclude by showing the way in which an account of Hobbesian servitude can inform a distinctly post-democratic approach to questions of legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability.

COMPETING DISPOSITIONS TOWARD SOVEREIGNTY

How, then, does the servant's political self-understanding lead to a different disposition toward sovereign power from that of the subject? What first distinguishes the servant from the subject is the degree to which they each consciously decide to join the commonwealth. For the subject or, rather, subject-to-be, the formation of the commonwealth follows from her realization that a life well lived is impossible under an indefinite state of war, which only offers the "continual fear and danger of violent death" and an existence famously described as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."[256] In order to escape these miserable conditions, she gathers her neighbors and convinces them that their only hope for security lies in their willingness to collectively give up their natural rights and agree to submit to a single sovereign power, who "may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defence."[257] The artificial commonwealth

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[256] Hobbes*, Leviathan*, XIII.9

[257] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.13

thus appears as a novel, self-generated solution to the threats posed by an anarchic world.

For the servant, however, the natural commonwealth results, not from a conscious effort on her part, but from her abduction by another. After being taken prisoner, her captor offers to spare her life and allow her to keep her corporeal liberty on the condition that she recognizes the captor's absolute authority over her, explicitly promising to obey all commands and "not to run away, nor do violence" to her newfound master.[258] If she refuses, her captor may either kill or imprison her, reducing her, in Hobbes's technical sense of the term, to a slave.[259] Thus, whereas the subject's choice to join the commonwealth is intentional, the servant's is accidental, contingent upon both her capture and the subsequent opportunity given to remain both free and alive. As such, the natural commonwealth presents itself, not as the resolution of a perennial problem, but as the best possible outcome following a series of unfortunate events.[260]

Overall, this contributes to quite a different perspective on the servant's relationship to sovereignty. In not being the product of her design, but something forced upon her, the commonwealth will always be alien to her; though she belongs

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[258] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XX.10

[259] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XX.12

[260] One could argue, as Jean Hampton does, that regardless of *how* one joins the commonwealth, it ultimately represents an improvement over continuing to live under a state of war. Yet, it is hardly a given that the servant's violent subjugation will appear as such to her, who may have failed to find fault in her anarchic context or, even if she did not, preferred it to life under a sovereign power. See Jean Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 172.

to it, the commonwealth is not hers. As a result, she remains acutely aware that her contribution to the commonwealth is inessential, that its existence is distinct from her own. Additionally, the servant is consistently reminded that, had she only evaded capture, her situation could have been different. For the Hobbesian subject, there is always the possibility that she could have decided to remain under a state of war, but the fact that she actively chose to form the artificial commonwealth would seem to paint the outcome as a logical, if not an inevitable one. The natural commonwealth, rather, takes the form of an aberration, a product, not of ingenuity or destiny, but of a misstep. In light of these considerations, the servant considers the sovereign neither necessary nor as an extension of herself, but as an extrinsic, inescapable burden that she has no choice but to obey.

The servant's experience of domination is further differentiated from that of the Hobbesian subject in that it is solitary, depriving her of a greater political community. While the subject, who forms a multilateral covenant with all other subjects, hardly maintains the sort of political friendships celebrated in Aristotle and Cicero, the covenants made with her neighbors not only facilitated the past exercise of political influence, specifically in naming the sovereign, but serve as a persistent reminder that the covenanters are both collectively responsible for the commonwealth and directly responsible to one another. They are, politically speaking, in it together. As such, the subject can look to other subjects and recognize a shared commitment, one which not only binds them in a way distinct from the relationship they may share as friends or even fellow human beings, but also one to which they can appeal when holding one another accountable for both

maintaining the commonwealth and obeying sovereign commands. For instance, the subject should feel justified in requiring her fellow subjects to enlist in military service or to chastise them for breaking the law; their failure to do so constitutes, not the violation of an abstract obligation to the state, but a disregard for the explicit agreement made with their fellow subjects. Even when the commonwealth is dissolving, there must be a *collective* recognition of the sovereign's failure to protect them.

The servant, however, never makes a pact with other servants. Upon capture, she covenants exclusively with the sovereign, leaving her politically isolated. This is not to say, of course, that the servant remains completely alone; we would fully expect her to interact socially, economically, etc. with others. Yet, in neither being preceded by nor aspiring to the exercise of influence over sovereign decision-making, these relationships would be inherently apolitical. In contrast to the covenant the subject shares with his fellow subjects, the servant can only look to other servants as having made a commitment similar to her own. They are not responsible to each other, but only to the sovereign, and subsequently they can distinguish between crimes against the commonwealth and crimes against one another. In other words, the servant's decision to cheat on her taxes or avoid military service is not necessarily anyone else's concern; another servant may still call upon the sovereign to dispense justice, but this follows from that servant's allegiance to the commonwealth, not any direct claim the servant has against the initial offender. All of this makes it unclear whether servants can even properly be described as being united rather than merely lumped together. Their parallel experiences might

lead to a greater affinity for one another, a sort of 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's sense, but without the immediate political relationships to one another that distinguish the artificial commonwealth, all servants share politically is their obedience to a common sovereign.[261]

In addition to depriving her of a greater political community, the servant's direct covenant with the sovereign renders their relationship unmediated. This again stands in contrast with the subject who, at least initially, does not engage with the sovereign at all; she only comes to recognize sovereign power through the covenant she makes with her fellow subjects, which mediates her relationship to sovereignty as a whole. As a result, the artificial commonwealth takes on the appearance, not of sovereign power, but of the political community that instituted it. Nowhere is this more evident than the frontispiece which adorns the 1651 edition of *Leviathan*, which famously depicts the sovereign as constituted by "the multitude so united."[262] This metaphor both reflects and helps cultivate the sense that the commonwealth is, at its core, the unity of its members, encouraging the subject to recognize it as an extension of a collective will shared with her neighbors. By overlaying this image of a constitutive community of subjects over the absolute authority exercised by sovereign power, the artificial commonwealth is able to more easily facilitate the subject's identification with it.

The natural commonwealth, however, fails to take on the identity of a greater political community precisely because, for the servant, that community never

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[261] See Benedict Anderson, *The Imagined Community* (London: Verso, 1991).

[262] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.13

existed. Instead, the servant's solitary, violent subjugation leads her to interpret the commonwealth as an expression, not of a collective desire for peace and security, but of sovereign might. Without the image of a political community to mediate her relationship with sovereignty, the state appears simply as the state apparatus, the sovereign institutions that govern her (e.g., the police, military, administrative bureaucracies, etc.). As such, the sovereign is less able to masquerade as an extension of the community which, at least on the subject's account, it is intended to serve, allowing the servant to more easily distinguish the actions and interests of sovereign power from her own. Just as the accidental quality of her relationship to sovereignty encourages the servant to see it as something alien, the inability to substitute a representation of one's community for the commonwealth itself further cements the idea that it is something distinct from not only herself, but her neighbors as well. As such, the constitutive relationship suggested by *Leviathan's* frontispiece would, at best, seem confusing. Rather, from the servant's perspective, the more likely interpretation would not be that sovereign power originates from the commonwealth's inhabitants, but that the sovereign, like the giant Polyphemus that terrorized Odysseus and his crew, has merely consumed them. In this sense, the sovereign would appear much closer to the monstrous sea creature from which Hobbes takes the name 'Leviathan' in the first place.

Finally, the servant accepts that her relationship with sovereignty is both founded and sustained principally by the sovereign's threat of and capacity for violence. The subject, while recognizing this aspect of sovereignty as well, does so to a lesser degree, instead framing her experience of domination as one to which

she has deliberately consented. Some may still wish to take the hardline Hobbesian position and argue that, because both commonwealths are founded, in the last instance, upon covenants, the natural commonwealth is just as much grounded upon consent as the artificial commonwealth. Yet, such a position would fail to recognize how the contextual differences between the two would color the covenants made. Having actively willed the artificial commonwealth into existence, the subject can treat the possibility of sovereign violence as a distant one, perhaps imperative for holding others to their word, but ultimately unnecessary for guaranteeing her obedience. Moreover, without any prior exposure to sovereign violence, the subject may be able to remain comfortably unaware that it could ever actually be used against her. Like the pollyannaish individual shocked by the state's indiscriminate or unwarranted use of force, the thought may never have even occurred to her.

The servant has no such luxury. Sovereign violence is not tangential to her relationship to the commonwealth, but a precondition for it, making it difficult to ever disassociate the two. The natural commonwealth, in other words, can never shake the connotation made explicit by its other title: the commonwealth by acquisition.[263] As such, the sovereign no longer appears as an entrusted guardian, but, much like the mafioso offering 'protection', as both paradoxically the greatest threat to the servant's well-being and the only means of her self-preservation. This, in turn, renders the servant's consent a secondary consideration, itself derived from her initial experience of 'being acquired', leaving the act of consent, not a signal of her

[263] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVII.15

investment in the commonwealth, but solely an expedient way of avoiding further imprisonment or death. Thus, for the servant, the fact that she has consented hardly seems to matter; what primarily shapes her perception of the commonwealth is the persistent, underlying possibility of enduring sovereign violence once more.

DEMOCRATIC HOPE AND POST-DEMOCRATIC FEAR

Though their contrasting experiences would lead us to assume that the Hobbesian subject and servant would have radically different dispositions toward sovereignty, Hobbes, by the time he writes *Leviathan*, attempts to show that the two are actually more similar than we would otherwise expect. Despite all of their differences, he argues, they are both motivated by fear. Of the natural commonwealth, he writes,

> this kind of dominion or sovereignty differeth from sovereignty by institution only in this, that men who choose their sovereign do so for fear of one another, and not of him whom they institute; but in this case they subject themselves to him they are afraid of. In both cases, they do it for fear...[264]

Leo Strauss offers an explanation as to why Hobbes may have been so invested in joining these seemingly disparate experiences together. Specifically, he interprets this move as Hobbes's as a part of his effort to "more systematically" reconcile "the involuntary as well as voluntary nature of subjection" for the purposes of silencing his democratic critics, who would inevitably favor the artificial commonwealth.[265] In

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[264] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XX.2

[265] Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 67. Notable, in *The Elements of the Law*, Hobbes explicitly associates the artificial commonwealth with a democratic foundation; see Part II, Chap. 2, Sec. 1.

order "to show that democracy can do nothing better than transform itself into an absolute monarchy... he sought a common motive for the founding of the artificial as well as of the natural State," one which he found "in the fear of violent death, which had originally, as it seems, connected only with the natural State."[266] In short, if both commonwealths are the products of fear, there's no reason to prefer a democratic founding to a coercive one.

However, this exclusive emphasis on fear represents a substantive break with his earlier characterization of the two commonwealths. Previously, Strauss explains, his openness toward democratic ideas led him to more definitely distinguish between the two, maintaining that "the motive which leads to the natural State is fear..." while "the motive that leads to the artificial State is hope or trust."[267] This distinction is most apparent in his first systematic work of political philosophy, *The Elements of the Law*, where he explains that,

> he that subjecteth himself uncompelled, thinketh there is good reason he should be better used, than he that doth it upon compulsion; and coming in freely, calleth himself, though in subjection, a FREEMAN; whereby it appeareth that liberty is not any exemption from subjection and obedience to the sovereign power, but a state of better hope than theirs, that have been subjected by force or conquest.[268]

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[266] Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 66.

[267] Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 64.

[268] Hobbes, *The Elements of the Law*, Part II, Chap. 4, Sec. 9. In *De Cive*, he also argues that subjects "perform more honourable services within the commonwealth... and enjoy more luxuries," but his distinction here seems to reflect differences in economic rather than political status. See *De Cive*, Chap. 9, Sec. 9.

Such a description, at odds with Hobbes's later account, seems much more in line with what we would expect from the subject and servant's respective entries into the commonwealth. Though the subject's decision to found the artificial commonwealth does rest upon her fear of others, the commonwealth itself represents a beacon of hope, a chance to extinguish that fear by placing one's faith in a sovereign power capable of guaranteeing her protection. The servant may have similar fears, but the natural commonwealth appears, not as means of overcoming them, but as their realization; it is, short of a violent death, the servant's worst nightmare come to fruition. As such, there seems to be good reason to consider the particular fears which motivate each party qualitatively distinct, to separate the subject's hypothetical fear of a third party from the servant's extant fear of sovereign power itself and, siding with the early Hobbes, distinguish between the two on the basis of hope and fear.

Moreover, this dispositive distinction proves crucial for demonstrating how a post-democratic orientation departs from its democratic counterpart. Overall, the Hobbesian subject exemplifies how a democratic perspective can fundamentally mystify the experience of domination by encouraging the subject to see herself as its author and, subsequently, think of sovereign power as acting in her best interest, even without the ability to exercise any real influence over sovereign decision-making. Transfixed by an initial democratic moment (i.e., the founding), the subject clings to the idea that she still somehow has some latent or tenuous control over her situation, giving her reason to be hopeful. She sees the state as an extension of herself, representative of a greater political community to which she belongs and

owing its very existence to her willingness to acknowledge its authority. In this sense, the democratic narrative that distinguishes her from the servant leaves the subject convinced that, despite all evidence to the contrary, the commonwealth is beholden to her, as if her experience of domination is a mere formality necessary to satisfy the logic of sovereignty but in now way reflective of the facts on the ground.

The servant, like the self-aware post-democratic subject, knows better.[269] Based upon her particular understanding of her relationship to sovereign power, she is able to recognize that the Hobbesian subject's hope, like that of the self-understood democratic citizen living under post-democratic conditions, lacks any and all foundation. Whether natural or artificial, the commonwealth is in no way obligated to the non-sovereign individual; though the sovereign may have a vested interest in her protection, both the level and character of this protection is decided exclusively by the sovereign.[270] As such, the subject and servant's shared experience of domination neither has any substantive connection to their consent -- deliberate or otherwise -- nor any necessary relation to their preferences, whether understood more broadly (i.e., as they pertain to policy) or solely in terms of their

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[269] This, of course, raises the question as why I do not refer to the post-democratic *subject* and a post-democratic *servant*. While perhaps more accurate, to use the term *servant* before introducing Hobbes's account would have unnecessarily muddled up a discussion of an already intricate concept.

[270] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVIII.6-8. One may object here that the sovereign's decision to spare the servant's life actually implies a direct contract between the two of them, one which requires the sovereign to protect the servant as long as the servant obeys. While I personally read Hobbes differently, if the sovereign did take on certain obligations when covenanting with the servant, it is questionable how the servant would ever enforce them. The sovereign's failure to satisfy those obligations might then give the servant the right to revolt, but what good is a right without the capacity to effectively exercise it?

personal security. Rather, it is simply a function of their inability to contest it. As it turns out, the essential difference between the two models of political subjectivity is not, as Hobbes himself makes clear, that the subject has real reason to hope; instead, it is that the subject confidently builds her own cage, while the servant finds one ready-made.

Thus, the early Hobbes gives us insight into not only how the subject and servant differ in terms of their political dispositions, but also why the subject's hopeful self-conception ultimately contributes to an illusory understanding of her relationship with sovereignty, one which attempts to veil her domination with a thin cloak of self-determination. It is precisely for this reason that the post-democratic subject must take pains to break with a democratic model of political subjectivity. The democratic citizen, like the Hobbesian subject, is predisposed to think about her relationship to sovereignty in light of her active role in creating it; while the Hobbesian subject focuses exclusively on her participation in the founding, the democratic citizen sees herself as consistently exercising influence over sovereign decision-making through both formal and informal means. Under post-democratic conditions, however, this is a mistake. What Hobbes's account of the subject shows is that, even when an individual is explicitly aware of being dominated, the belief that she has an active role to play can muddle this awareness to the point that the individual becomes unable to draw the appropriate conclusions from it. In short, that the self-understood democratic citizen's token participation overshadows her real, non-democratic subjugation.

In order, therefore, to avoid the trappings of a democratic mythos, however subtle, the post-democratic subject should try to think like a Hobbesian servant. Specifically, this involves avoiding the impulse to imagine one's membership in the commonwealth as either deliberate or intentional, one's relationship to other citizens as politically-relevant, or sovereign power as either representative of or indebted to the greater community in which one lives. Rather, it means internalizing the realization that one has only an accidental, solitary relationship with a sovereign power both alien and violent. Above all else, it is to recognize that one has no real say over one's own domination by a sovereign power, consistently troubling any hope one might have had over its exercise.[271] This is not to imply that one must always be afraid, ceaselessly anxious over the state's capacity for violence (though some historical targets of state violence have good reason to be), but that the state should always be feared as one would fear any other sort of unpredictable externality — such as a foreign occupation, a natural disaster, a plague, or divine intervention — able to severely disrupt or prematurely end one's life.

A POST-DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL LOGIC

Beyond generally contributing to a pessimistic outlook on sovereign power, what are the greater implications of recognizing the experience of domination as central for post-democratic political subjectivity? Insofar as it provides an instructive model of

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[271] This is not at all to suggest that sovereign power cannot have a positive impact on the life of the post-democratic subject, only that this impact is so divorced from democratic practice as to make it unpredictable and wholly contingent; though it may be a cause for celebration, the realization of one's political preferences should not contribute to any sort of hope in post-democratic sovereignty itself.

domination, how can an account of Hobbesian servitude help inform a post-democratic approach to questions of legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability?

To begin with, the manner in which the servant consents to sovereign power leads us to believe that consent is more a matter of self-preservation than a judicious acknowledgment of the sovereign's legitimate authority; the servant agrees to recognize the sovereign *as* sovereign, not because of any of the sovereign's merits, but because the sovereign has a knife to her throat. Yet, for Hobbes, sovereign legitimacy depends exclusively on whether this consent has been obtained.[272] This leaves us with two options: to either consider the servant's consent as inherently significant, despite the fact that it is given under duress, and thus preserve legitimacy's import, or to recognize the state's claim to legitimacy as essentially hollow, as demonstrating no more than the state's capacity to coerce. While Hobbes no doubt sought to convince us of the former by prioritizing his account of the subject's consent, which could, conceivably, ground the legitimacy of the sovereign, the fact that he ultimately equates the subject's consent with that of the servant should give us pause. Rather, his understanding of consent, at least in the servant's case, seems to paint legitimacy solely as indicative of the servant's desire to remain both free and alive.

Overall, the greater lesson seems to be that a more meaningful understanding of legitimacy (i.e., as an indicator of the sovereign's *right* to govern) has no place in a political context primarily defined by the experience of domination.

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[272] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XVIII.2, XX.11

In other words, legitimacy claims that appeal to something other than the state's overwhelming capacity for violence are politically inconsequential. This is not to say that such claims are, in themselves, insignificant or meaningless; the act of judging the state's legitimacy still allows the individual to clarify, at least to herself, what she considers to be important criteria for evaluating the state as well as how she feels about the state as a whole. Yet, whereas illegitimacy prompts the democratic citizen to engage in political activity, the post-democratic subject, aware of the severe limitations of her political agency, no longer treats the state's illegitimacy as an invitation to act. Unlike an authentically Hobbesian authoritarianism, a post-democratic context still affords the individual opportunities to "act," prescribed means of involvement that fail to significantly influence sovereign decision-making, but the post-democratic subject, like the servant, still finds herself in a position where efficacious political participation is individually costly and statistically improbable. Thus, it does not seem to matter whether she finds the state legitimate or not; all that matters is whether the state is powerful enough to continue to ensure her domination.

Moreover, the inability to hold sovereign power accountable to a higher standard of legitimacy troubles the idea that the post-democratic subject can expect anything from the state at all. For instance, we could imagine a post-democratic subject thinking, "though the state seems to be indefensibly illegitimate, at least I can count on the state to acknowledge my legal standing, maintain a growing economy, or protect me from a violent death." Yet, lacking in political agency, the post-democratic subject is left without any sort of guarantee that the state will continue to

satisfy these sorts of expectations. At some point, either through threat of violence or loss of steam, the direct action considered democracy's failsafe will slow, and the formal mechanisms meant to correct the ship will only serve to circumscribe political possibility and confirm the post-democratic subject's sense of her own political impotence. The only reliable indicator of what can be expected depends upon the level of elite consensus the issue satisfies; how long any idea or policy can maintain that position remains an empirical question. At present (and thankfully), widespread legal personhood, economic growth, and peace seem to enjoy this status. Still, all the post-democratic subject can truly expect from the state -- whether directed by economic elites, populist demagogues, or a revolving door of factions all self-identifying as the *demos* -- is that it will do all in its power to maintain its sovereignty. All else remains speculation.

Whereas the experience of domination diminishes the significance of legitimacy by rendering it moot, it effects a dramatic shift in the way in which the post-democratic subject conceptualizes her membership in the body politic. Under a democratic framework, membership is a question of participation; one is a member to the extent that one possesses the opportunity to influence sovereign decision-making. A post-democratic framework, however, transforms the question of membership into one of subjugation; one is a member to the extent that one consents to being dominated.[273] Yet, in contrast with the Hobbesian subject, this consent does not signal the post-democratic subject's active affirmation of the state.

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[273] For those able to wield political influence, however, membership would still be a question of participation, not in a democratic process, but in the domination of others.

Rather, like the servant, it reflects the conditions of domination she always-already endures, an artifact, not of her faith in sovereign power, but of her desire to avoid imprisonment or death. This would seem to imply that post-democratic membership is entirely a passive experience, simply involving one's submission to the state. At least politically, it does; but doing so then allows the post-democratic subject to more effectively navigate the complex socio-economic environment both fostered and contained by the exercise of sovereign power.

According to Pettit, being dominated does not preclude the ability to make decisions; rather, all it highlights is the inability to contest the power of others to arbitrarily interfere with the decision-making process. As we tend to see in contemporary post-democratic political contexts, not all choices are determined for the non-sovereign individual in advance. If anything, the sort of economic policies that continue to sustain wealth disparities seem to depend on a form of domination far from total, instead allowing the post-democratic subject a wide range of choices. These would still be dominated choices, as elite preferences can still direct the state to interfere with them on an arbitrary basis, but they would be, at least in the immediate sense, un-coerced, hypothetically giving the individual the opportunity to act in her own interest.

As such, the post-democratic subject is not a slave (in Hobbes's sense of the term), bound in chains and unable to make any decisions for herself. Though she has no control over her political environment, she is still able to act within that environment, as well as exploit its particular features. The post-democratic subject can, in other words, still 'tend to her own garden', despite having to adhere to the

limits placed upon it (and her) by the state. For instance, Hobbes stresses that, though subjects and servants do not have an absolute right to property and must relinquish it when ordered to do so by the sovereign power, they can exercise property rights in relation to other non-sovereign individuals.[274] Similarly, the post-democratic subject, despite being dominated by the state, can still make use of aspects of her domination, not in a way that subverts or resists the overall domination she experiences, but in order to make the best of her situation.

Thus, while post-democratic membership might initially appear to solely be a cause for resignation, it also invites the post-democratic subject to embrace a purely instrumental understanding of her relationship with sovereignty. The state, in other words, rather than taking the form of a collective project, exists only as a tool wielded by those able to exercise political influence; for the post-democratic subject lacking such influence, the state constitutes a set of externally-imposed conditions. In contrast with some variants of liberalism, most notably Rawls's own, this instrumental approach to sovereignty relieves the post-democratic subject of the mistaken notion that the state constitutes a means by which she can realize her autonomy.[275] By purging herself of any sort of existential identification with the state, the post-democratic subject remains better able to appreciate the state as something alien to her, consequently better preparing her to anticipate its fundamental unpredictability as well as lack of regard for either her preferences or well-being.

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[274] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXIV.7; in his earlier work, *The Elements of the Law*, he makes the point explicit for servants as well (Part II, Chap. 3, Sec. 4).

[275] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971), 513-520.

Though unable to decide upon these conditions herself, the post-democratic subject can nevertheless attempt to utilize them in order to realize her own ends. This is not to suggest that the state will not, at times, frustrate the post-democratic subject's ability to decide upon personally significant private matters. Depending on the significance and repercussions of those foreclosed decisions, the state can certainly create situations that may prove unbearable. Still, the hope remains that other conditions will either serve to facilitate her ability to pursue her interests or will be exploitable enough, by means of a technicality or novel interpretation, to do so all the same. Of course, as these conditions will inevitably shift, the post-democratic subject must further be ready to consistently adapt herself accordingly. As such, the post-democratic subject finds herself playing a perpetual game of Frogger, ceaselessly dodging oncoming hazards while, in lieu of ever escaping them, searching for brief intervals of peace.

The post-democratic subject's responsibility to sovereign power follows from this logic of instrumentality. While a democratic political logic presupposes that the individual's responsibility stems from her status as a participant, a post-democratic logic recognizes a responsibility to the state solely on the basis of the individual's interest in preserving her life and freedom. In other words, she need only obey the law and/or serve the state (e.g., by enlisting in military service, reporting on the crimes of others, serving on a jury, etc.) to the extent that she considers doing necessary to either prevent the state's collapse or avoid running afoul of sovereign power. She may still decide to follow the law or engage in service out of certain ethical convictions, but, in such cases, she is only coincidentally satisfying any sort

of presumed political responsibility (e.g., she may refrain from murder, but not because she recognizes the state's authority to restrict her from doing so).

As most readers are familiar, Hobbes endorses an extreme interpretation of this responsibility, arguing that almost any act of disobedience violates the individual's interest in maintaining her safety and security. Excluding those instances in which obeying the sovereign's command either explicitly involves self-harm or puts the individual in immediate danger (e.g., killing or maiming herself, confessing to a crime, engaging in military combat), any form of insubordination would seem to weaken the power of the sovereign, thereby troubling the sovereign's ability to provide for the individual's own peace and defense.[276] As such, the individual has an overriding reason to obey even those commands that run counter to her other interests.

Yet, this interpretation appears uniquely indebted to the Hobbesian subject's understanding of her relationship to sovereignty, making it questionable as to whether the servant and, by extension, the post-democratic subject should also understand themselves as having a similar degree of responsibility. Recall that, in covenanting with her fellow subjects to found the commonwealth, the subject sees the willingness, on the part of her neighbors and herself, to recognize the sovereign's authority as foundational for the exercise of sovereign power in general. Thus, the subject's disobedience not only challenges sovereign authority directly, but dissolves her contribution to the greater covenant deemed essential for sovereign authority in the first place. In this sense, it is not so much that the subject's

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[276] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXI.11-16.

disobedience could actually bring down the commonwealth, but that, in disobeying, the subject throws the basis of sovereign power into question in a way that may ultimately have nocuous effects.

The servant's covenant, however, is hardly considered as essential for the commonwealth as a whole. Because the natural commonwealth is founded, not on a collective agreement, but on a multiplicity of bilateral covenants between the sovereign and individual servants, the dissolution of one or even a few of those covenants would not have nearly the same detrimental effects on sovereign power. In other words, whereas a neighbor's disobedience might have signaled to the Hobbesian subject that the covenant undergirding sovereign power was faltering, it suggests to the servant only that the neighbor has broken her particular covenant and, as such, would seem to have no effect on the sovereign's status from the servant's perspective. Moreover, the servant's understanding of sovereignty promotes the awareness that, while the covenant formalizes the sovereign's claim to authority, the real foundation of this claim is the sovereign's capacity for violence. Thus, disobedience, even when unpunished, does not pose nearly the same threat to sovereign power as a whole; only active instances of rebellion, in which private individuals attack the state directly, would challenge the servant's ability to rely on the sovereign for protection.

In drawing upon the model of the Hobbesian servant, the post-democratic subject inherits a more complicated interpretation of political responsibility than the Hobbesian subject. Rather than understanding herself as having a near-absolute duty to obey, she is responsible to sovereign power only to the extent that

disobedience would either invite some sort of violent or coercive reprisal or weaken the state to the point of ineffectiveness or collapse. Ultimately, the judgment as to the consequences of one's disobedience will be contextually dependent and probabilistic. Some crimes will go unnoticed; others will encourage the state to devote a substantial amount of time and resources to pursue and discipline the offender. Additionally, some individuals, by virtue of their class, race, gender, etc. will be in a better position to avoid punishment.[277] In contrast with a democratic political logic, which, broadly speaking, only supports disobedience when it is construed as a form of political participation, non-violent, and used as a last resort, the post-democratic subject has no such *prima facie* responsibility to first attempt to influence sovereign decision-making or refrain from violence; post-democratic domination puts the individual in a position where all she can do is distinguish between the laws she can follow and those she cannot and, taking into account the risks involved, act accordingly.

Finally, while democratic political participation implies a degree of culpability for the negative effects that may result from any given state policy or action, that the democratic citizen must shoulder, as Hans-Jorg Sigwart puts it, "one's part of the moral guilt that politics necessarily involves...", the post-democratic subject should consider herself relieved of any such guilt.[278] Lacking any influence over sovereign power, she is neither in a position to contribute to political decision-making nor

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[277] This is hardly to suggest that these sorts of privileges should be celebrated, but only to recognize the way in which they can and should factor into the post-democratic subject's assessment of her ability to disregard sovereign command.

[278] Hans-Jorg Sigwart, "The Logic of Legitimacy: Ethics in Political Realism," *The Review of Politics* 75: 407-432, 432.

prevent the enactment of decisions already made; both her endorsements and condemnations are purely symbolic. As such, it is difficult to see how the post-democratic subject could be held responsible for the unfortunate, tragic, or atrocious consequences, unintended or otherwise, often linked with political outcomes. This list includes "collateral damage" from military strikes, direct attacks on civilians, the barbarous treatment of the undocumented, discriminatory practices, mass incarceration, economic policies that exacerbate inequality, and environmental destruction. Like a passenger on a run-away train, the post-democratic subject has no ability to stop it from striking others, only the occasional, limited opportunity to warn those who may be in danger.

Hobbes, too, gives us good reason for disassociating the post-democratic subject from the moral implications of both sovereign decision-making and the act of obeying those decisions. To find fault with the non-sovereign individual in such instances would be to invite continuous political instability, brought on by regularly goading non-sovereign individual to challenge or resist the state based on their "private judgments" "of good and evil actions."[279] Subsequently, Hobbes not only exempts non-sovereign individuals from any blame related to either the content of sovereign decisions or their repercussions, but absolves them from any guilt they may feel for actions they, personally, carry out in the sovereign's name. As Hobbes writes, "that whatsoever a subject... is compelled to [do] in obedience to his

[279] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chap. XXIX, Sec. 6. See also Chap. XXIX, Sec. 7.

sovereign, and doth in it not in order to his own mind, but in order to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his sovereign's..."[280]

Yet, as Edwin Curley points out in his edition of *Leviathan*, what makes Hobbes's position here so striking is that it seems in conflict with Hobbes's more general position that the non-sovereign individual has always-already authorized all sovereign actions, including those he may privately find objectionable; in short, one cannot help but bear responsibility, not only when obeying sovereign commands, but for all of the sovereign's decisions.[281] This would then seem to imply a deep reservoir of guilt traceable to that initial moment of consent. Still, the respective conditions distinguishing the Hobbesian subject's covenant from that of the servant are relevant here; in the subject's case, she could have avoided culpability by never covenanting with her neighbors in the first place; the servant only by embracing imprisonment or death. Though Hobbes appears somewhat inconsistent, *if* either's action warrants blame, the deliberate nature of the subject's covenant would seem more damning than the servant's decision to save her own skin.

To the extent that the post-democratic subject similarly lacks any hand in the formation of sovereign power, but rather finds herself always-already dominated, leaving her with the option to either consent or suffer the consequences, it is difficult to saddle her with the sort of far-reaching liability more readily ascribed to the democratic citizen for choosing the former. This is not, however, to suggest that she has no choice but to look favorably upon all state policies and actions; only that she

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[280] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chap. XLII, Sec. 11.

[281] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 339 fn12.

need not consider them her own. For some, this sort of attitude may not sit well. The argument that post-democratic subjects should not feel guilty for decisions ostensibly made in their name challenges, not only the prevailing democratic tendency to stress the responsibility one has to govern (and, thus, govern well), but, moreover, the broader moral responsibilities one often feels toward others. Some may even go so far as to feel compelled to find fault with the servant's decision to consent in the first place, maintaining that right choice would be refusal, despite the consequences of doing so. Thus, especially among the many still harboring remnants of a democratic political logic, there will be those who feel uncomfortable — to say the least — with simply jettisoning the guilt they may feel over sovereign decisions that harm others or, further, the feeling that one has a duty to do something about it.

Yet, whether attempting to alleviate the guilt that stems from the poor decisions made in one's name or the broader feelings of frustration, anxiety, and alienation characteristic of post-democratic life, abstractly theorizing one's relationship to political authority and activity can only do so much. In addition to being thought, post-democracy must be lived. In other words, achieving any sort of lasting therapeutic benefit depends upon realizing one's political subjectivity *practically*, going beyond treating one's political self-conception as a mere thought experiment and using it to make sense of one's lived experience. This requires critically interrogating and, if need be, addressing the narratives and concepts that frame one's inevitable involvement in the superficially democratic political practices that pervade post-democratic life. In short, to continue to think of oneself post-

democratically when most susceptible to understanding oneself otherwise: when expressing one's preferences, voicing dissent, or discussing politics. In the next chapter, I will bring a post-democratic orientation to bear on these activities, which, despite being unable to influence sovereign decision-making, provide opportunities for both attuning oneself to the greater consequences of post-democratic sovereignty and discovering the unique (often intangible), applied insights that enable one's life to take on an edifying and conciliatory intelligibility under political domination.

VI. Post-Democratic Participation

The insights gained through adopting a post-democratic political self-conception are only therapeutic to the extent that they are applied. This requires not only abstractly thinking of oneself as a post-democratic subject, but using this model of political subjectivity to make sense of one's real, lived experience; particularly, one's involvement in (pseudo-)political activities (e.g., voting, protest, deliberation, etc.), those related to, but ultimately insignificant for sovereign decision-making. Doing so enables the post-democratic subject to develop a more coherent understanding of her own political existence, one able to generate a sense of familiarity and, hence, provide some degree of relief under otherwise unsettling conditions. In this chapter, I will begin by briefly addressing two alternative approaches to (pseudo-)political activity under post-democracy before turning to my own, which takes such activities as opportunities to work through the frustration, anxiety, and alienation arising from post-democratic life. After first offering an account of an apocalyptic environmental group, the Dark Mountain Project, I will explore how their recent efforts can inform a post-democratic model of (pseudo-)political involvement. Finally, I will conclude by exploring the broader political implications of adopting a post-democratic self-conception, ultimately characterizing it as a species of political realism oriented toward overcoming the prejudices of a democratic myopia.

THREE APPROACHES TO (PSEUDO-)POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Post-democratic sovereignty distinguishes itself from other forms of domination through its reliance on a democratic political imaginary, one which encourages

ordinary citizens to think of themselves as political actors despite their demonstrable lack of political influence. By consistently involving ordinary citizens in a myriad of negligible ways, all parties — elites, bureaucrats, and the governed — can behave as if the demos really speaks.

How, then, should the self-aware post-democratic subject react to this charade, to consistently being treated and addressed as if she *really is* a democratic citizen? One option would be to withdraw from (pseudo-)political life on principle, rejecting formal activities, like voting, as exploitative and/or patronizing and informal activities, like normatively discussing politics and expressing one's political preferences, as pointless. This has the benefit of allowing one to distance oneself from political concerns, to 'put them out of mind' by 'putting them out of sight'. Moreover, in doing so, one could find solace in the fact that one no longer contributes to the democratic imaginary that sustains post-democracy. If this refusal is recognized as it is intended, others may follow the example and withdraw as well, possibly even hastening the system's transformation or collapse (though this seems, at present, highly unlikely).

Another option would be to compartmentalize the awareness of one's own powerlessness and separate it from the way in which one thinks about involvement in (pseudo-)political activity. Thus, despite being abstractly cognizant of one's political insignificance, one may continue to participate out of habit, social pressure, or some ambiguous sense of obligation. This, too, may be done in hopes of democratizing political practice; that, if one just keeps showing up, things will

eventually change for the better.[282] In the meantime, this position allows one to feel as if *something* is being done, even if that something ends up being politically irrelevant.

The problem, however, with both of these responses concerns their latent reluctance to break with a democratic orientation. As such, they exclusively attend to democracy's absence and not with the reality of a distinctly post-democratic present, preventing the post-democratic subject from dealing with the lived experience of domination at the root of her frustration, anxiety, and alienation. The latter response attempts to deny this new reality completely, preferring to ignore these feelings when they arise. Though this strategy may remain tenable as long as the party one identifies with is in power, it becomes more difficult when in the governing minority and more explicitly subject to sovereign decisions at odds with one's own preferences. Withdrawal at least formally acknowledges a condition of political powerlessness, but it still tries to evade it through a symbolic separation, one which, by giving up any claim to political power, hopes to relieve the feeling of being dominated. In other words, withdrawal tries to bury frustration by championing alienation and alleviate anxiety by encouraging the disposition of a stoic observer, too wise to get caught up in the terrifying banalities of contemporary political life. That is unless, of course, these feelings are considered one's cross to bear, the

[282] Note that, despite sharing the same goal, this strategy and the one described above are actively opposed to one another.

wages of a collective inability to realize democratic values.[283] This distance could provide some relief, but only at the price of a deeper isolation from one's world.

There is, however, a third option. Rather than either unproductively fixating on the absence of democratic practice or actively ignoring it, one can try to address those feelings of frustration, anxiety, and alienation by, first, validating them, and second, shaping one's engagement with (pseudo-)political activity in such a way that these concerns are at the forefront.

How, then, can political involvement be therapeutic? Perhaps the best introduction is by way of example. From 2010 to 2013, the Dark Mountain Project, a network of environmental activists, writers, academics, and artists, held an annual event in the United Kingdom called "Uncivilization". Rather than meeting to discuss what they could do to protect the environment, they instead gathered for a very different purpose. Through workshops, panels, performance art, and ritualized practice, they mourned the destruction of the Earth. As one of the group's founders, Paul Kingsnorth, explains, activism had failed to slow, much less stop, the ongoing destruction of the planet, raising the question of whether such efforts were really worthwhile.

> Everything had gotten worse… You look at every trend that environmentalists like me have been trying to stop for 50 years, and

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[283] Cf. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (New York: Verso, 2005), #5 "Sociability itself is a participant in injustice, insofar as it pretends we can still talk with each other in a frozen world, and the flippant, chummy word contributes to the perpetuation of silence, insofar as the concessions to those being addressed debase the latter once more as speakers… For intellectuals, unswerving isolation is the only form in which they can vouchsafe a measure of solidarity. All of the playing along, all of the humanity of interaction and participation is the mere mask of the tacit acceptance of inhumanity. One should be united with the suffering of human beings: the smallest step to their joys is one towards the hardening of suffering."

> every single thing had gotten worse. And I thought: I can't do this anymore. I can't sit here saying: 'Yes, comrades, we must act! We only need one more push, and we'll save the world!' I don't believe it. I don't believe it! So what do I do?[284]

"Uncivilization" can be understood as one way of responding to this feeling of powerlessness, one which directly confronts its consequences by, as Naomi Klein observes, giving "people a forum in which to be honest about their sense of dread and loss."[285] The festival and, more generally, Dark Mountain allow people the chance to collectively address the question of

> What do you do… when you accept that all of these changes are coming, things that you value are going to be lost, things that make you unhappy are going to happen, things that you wanted to achieve you can't achieve, but you still have to live with it, and there's still beauty, and there's still meaning, and there are still things you can do to make the world less bad?[286]

As Kingsnorth elaborates further, these aren't "a series of questions that have any answers other than people's personal answers to them. Selfishly it's just a process I'm going through… It's extremely narcissistic of me. Rather than just having a personal crisis, I've said: 'Hey! Come share my crisis with me!' "[287]

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[284] Daniel Smith "It's the End of the World as We Know It... And He Feels Fine." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17th, 2014.

[285] Daniel Smith "It's the End of the World as We Know It... And He Feels Fine." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17th, 2014.

[286] Daniel Smith "It's the End of the World as We Know It... And He Feels Fine." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17th, 2014.

[287] Daniel Smith "It's the End of the World as We Know It... And He Feels Fine." *The New York Times Magazine*, April 17th, 2014.

This ‘personal crisis’ experienced by Kingsnorth falls under the broader category of Foucault’s “crisis of subjectivation.”[288] Previously, Kingsnorth understood himself as an environmental activist; as such, ‘environmentalism’ provided an ethical framework through which he could structure his sense of value.[289] In spreading awareness about climate change or protesting overdevelopment, he could feel as if his life had greater meaning, giving him a sense of existential fulfillment. However, this self-conception depended on the modest assumption that his actions would have some level of impact; that, even if his efforts were ultimately Sisyphean, the boulder could be moved. When that assumption proved unfounded, Kingsnorth’s ethical framework became disrupted, leaving him feeling disoriented and distraught. The Dark Mountain Project, thus, can be understood as his attempt to work through those feelings by trying to discover a way to move forward, not by seeking out new forms of environmental activism, but by re-conceptualizing the ethical framework that previously informed his attachment to activism in the first place. In short, a way of reconciling one’s sense of self with an unfamiliar and/or perverted landscape. No longer able to see himself as a participant in political activity, Kingsnorth instead began to think of himself in a new light, as having a duty to bear witness to the Earth’s destruction and, subsequently, to grieve. In doing so, he embraced a new model of ethical subjectivity, one he was not only able to realize, but that further gave his existence a new sense of purpose (however grim that purpose may be).

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[288] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the* Self (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 95.

[289] Unless Kingsnorth was *singularly* committed to environmental change, we would expect his sense of value to depend on other considerations (e.g., familial, professional, etc.) as well.

It is precisely this kind of ethical re-constitution that lies at the core of a therapeutic approach to (pseudo-)political involvement: re-purposing (pseudo-)political activity as a way of transforming one's understanding of oneself rather than the world at large. Instead of trying to realize a particular political outcome (i.e., greater environmental protections), Kingsnorth participated in a host of ostensibly political practices — writing manifestos, organizing gatherings, and spreading awareness — in order to develop a new self-understanding able to accommodate both his existential attachment to environmentalism and his political irrelevance. In other words, he took activities traditionally associated with sovereign decision-making and used them as a means of alleviating his own 'personal crisis'. His deep connections with such practices allowed him to recognize the ways in which life can 'go on' despite the trauma of powerlessness. The realization of his own political insignificance didn't have to radically transform his form of life (i.e., the activities in which he engaged), but only the meaning he gave to it; he could still write, speak, and associate with others — in short, *act* politically — even though he remained unable to influence environmental policy. This renewed sense of purpose helped him overcome his general sense of disorientation by freeing him to once again find himself in the activities that mattered most to him, only now with a newfound awareness of their real value.

Furthermore, by validating the feelings of failure and despair resulting from a lack of political influence, a new self-understanding can help mitigate them. Much in the same way recognizing oneself as perpetually late or a klutz can lessen feelings of anxiety or frustration that may result from being tardy or clumsy, embracing one's

own powerlessness can diminish the severity of feeling powerless. It allows one to 'own' the experience, to call it what it is, and to begin to develop strategies that could allow one to endure. Though perhaps unable to overcome these feelings — to feel, as it were, empowered and optimistic — individuals can find a way to live *with them* that relies on neither cognitive dissonance nor withdrawal, but rather on a sober confrontation with the conditions faced and a willingness to adapt accordingly. Moreover, to the extent that others are found that share this willingness (e.g., the Dark Mountain Project), one may find community in it as well.

While Kingsnorth was not confronting the experience of post-democracy *per se*, he was certainly responding to a version of it (i.e., lack of influence over environmental policy) and, more generally speaking, the feelings of frustration, anxiety, and alienation intrinsic to it. As such, his example illustrates why a therapeutic approach to political involvement should be considered uniquely appropriate for post-democratic life. Though most individuals are not as politically involved as Kingsnorth, to live in a modern, Western "democracy" is to be accustomed to the host of activities and expectations that make up the fabric of democratic life. In providing a way for individuals to process those sorts of feelings through the (pseudo-)political practices with which they are already familiar, a therapeutic approach allows them to engage with the more quotidian consequences of post-democratic sovereignty. In other words, to reconcile one's lived experience within a ubiquitous democratic political imaginary with an awareness of one's own domination; to figure out how to be a post-democratic subject in a world where one is consistently addressed as, and treated like, a democratic citizen.

POST-DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE

What would this look like? Let's examine three possible post-democratic re-appropriations of democratic "political" activities: the expression of political preference, dissent, and political discussion.

The expression of political preference is typically understood to be essential for — if not synonymous with — democratic political activity; popular sovereignty follows from the *demos*'s ability to direct sovereign decision-making by voicing considered opinions. Forms of expression include wearing political attire, sporting bumper stickers, posting yard signs, publishing one's opinions (including on Facebook, Twitter, etc.), drafting/signing petitions, and, of course, voting. Yet, under post-democratic conditions, the expressed preferences of ordinary citizens end up falling upon deaf ears or, in the case of voting, remain constrained by elite preferences, effectively inhibiting the citizen's ability to independently influence sovereign decision-making.

What, then, should we make of these activities? From a democratic perspective, engaging in such activities would seem pointless; if voting doesn't allow ordinary citizens to exercise any sort of meaningful political influence, it isn't at all clear why someone should take the time to do so. From a post-democratic perspective, however, these sorts of activities can take on a new significance, one no longer tied to the exercise of political influence, but to self-realization. By providing ordinary citizens an opportunity to actualize their political identities, identify with genuine political actors, and find solidarity with friends, neighbors, and

countless anonymous others (both online and in person), the expression of political preference can provide real therapeutic benefits under post-democratic conditions; in particular, by alleviating feelings of alienation and anxiety.

Through her participation in culturally significant practices like voting or wearing a t-shirt with a political slogan or symbol, an individual can realize herself as a particular kind of subject. For example, voting for environmental protections gives her the chance to actualize herself as an environmentalist; similarly, wearing an anti-racist t-shirt lets one assume the identity of an anti-racist. It is a way of becoming who one is in spite of one's political powerlessness. All in all, the relationship between identity and activity in these instances is largely arbitrary; one need not vote to consider oneself an environmentalist, nor wear the right clothing in order to be against racism. Still, as in any sort of ritualized practice, the activity takes on the significance with which we impute it. One may consider oneself a Christian without having been baptized, but the practice certainly has the effect of making one feel "official," as well as communicating that identity to others.

By allowing the individual to realize a particular kind of identity, the expression of political preference further lets the individual identify with a particular political movement, faction, or leader. This is not to say that the ordinary citizen is able to influence sovereign decision-making herself in any significant sense, that she assumes the role of a political actor. Rather, it is simply that she's able to declare her sympathies and, in doing so, establish a remote connection with those actually engaging in political activity. Here, the comparison to being a sports fan is illuminating. When a supporter wears a jersey or roots for her team, she does not

actively influence the outcome of the game. She remains merely a spectator. Yet, the act of wearing the jersey or cheering allows her to identify with the team, to express an existential connection with the team's efforts, and to become emotionally invested in the team's victory or defeat. Additionally, it enables her to establish connections with other fans. While hardly replicating the experience of being on the pitch (or even the sidelines), it lets one feel as if they are part of the effort. In this sense, post-democratic political expression amounts to a form of vicarious participation, one that allows ordinary citizens to establish an imagined bond with genuine political actors.

Finally, it gives ordinary citizens the opportunity to feel in solidarity with other non-elites who share their views. From a democratic perspective, this sense of solidarity is instrumentally valuable to the degree that it correlates with increased levels of political participation. From a post-democratic perspective, however, the value lies in helping to alleviate feelings of alienation that stem from a general lack of political community. To wear a political t-shirt, write about politics online, or even vote should be considered a way, not of actually influencing politics, but of signaling to others that they are not alone.[290] It is the practical equivalent of asking "Do you see what I see?", which, in turn, can help relieve the sense that one's judgment or worldview is hopelessly distorted or detached. In the absence of Arendtian public spaces and Habermasian deliberative practices, it offers a way of connecting with others that, despite not being political, helps us to feel less isolated and, subsequently, less uneasy.

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[290] While voting is typically done in secret, its culmination in a count functions as an amalgamated expression. Thus, even if one knows one's side will lose, it's important to signal to those who share your preferences that they are not alone.

Dissent, particularly when voiced collectively, constitutes a special case of political expression. Because dissent typically concerns something that either has or will happen soon, it focuses one's attention on a particular political event or decision rather than the general field of political possibility as such. In doing so, it concretizes the post-democratic appreciation of political insignificance. Whereas the post-democratic subject abstractly knows that she's unable to influence politics, dissent highlights the specific repercussions (e.g., the new war, the new law, the failed response, etc.) of not being able to do so. By confronting her with the consequences of her powerlessness, it gives the individual an opportunity to truly recognize herself as a failed democratic citizen, demonstrating how her dissatisfaction, incredulity, or outrage are exhausted in their expression.

In doing so, dissent becomes an opportunity, not to reverse a course of action or to speak truth to power, but to mourn.[291] This is intended in two senses. First, in a way made explicit by the Dark Mountain Project, it allows the individual to mourn a particular decision or response. In this sense, it provides an emotional outlet to vent one's sense of loss, as well as the frustrations and anxiety that surround it. Second, it gives individuals the chance to mourn their general sense of powerlessness, the

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[291] Recently, a number of thinkers including Judith Butler, David Wallace McIvor, and Simon Stow have turned their attention to the political significance of mourning, conceptualizing it as an activity with the power to heal and redefine community relationships. See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso Press, 2004); David McIvor, *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2016); and Simon Stow, *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, and Resilience* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2016). To the extent these activities are able to achieve these goals, they could also constitute political activities; however, to the extent that their ability to influence sovereign decision-making may be overstated, they would still constitute a form of (pseudo-)political activity.

experience of post-democratic political subjectivity as a whole; to mourn either a democracy lost or one never adequately realized. Through this process, individuals can begin to explore the affective consequences of their domination, the troubling feelings that result from an inability to live up to democratic ideals that not only pervade one's society, but also have personal or even existential significance.

Engaging in political discussion constitutes a further move in this direction, but with the additional advantage of allowing individuals to reckon with the everyday consequences of their political insignificance. This breaks dramatically with a democratic understanding of political discussion, which characterizes it either as a preliminary step to forming a considered preference (that one will then attempt to realize) or as a form of political activity in itself. Rather than focusing on what "We" ought to do when making sovereign decisions, a post-democratic approach to political discussion treats it as an opportunity to consider what it means to lack democratic political practice. In other words, for ordinary citizens to intersubjectively explore the experience of political powerlessness.

On a practical level, such discussions allow individuals to share strategies for responding to the political decisions made by others. In short, to develop ways of enduring or resisting sovereign power. For instance, in the event a law is passed that allows for individuals to carry concealed firearms, those concerned can work to identify public places less likely to attract armed individuals; if the state decides to ramp up the enforcement of immigration policies, individuals can discuss ways to help shield their neighbors from harassment and exile, like, for instance, not calling the police to the scene of an accident if an undocumented individual is involved. This

is not to suggest that all sovereign decisions will admit possibilities for resistance; some, especially budgetary or foreign policy decisions, will leave individuals no choice but to abide. Even still, individuals can talk about ways of making such decisions easier to bear, either through painting them in a different light or finding ways to ignore them.

Moreover, through regularly having these sorts of discussions, ordinary citizens can cultivate a more practical orientation toward the lived experience of post-democratic political subjectivity. In other words, they can develop a deeper appreciation of the more quotidian consequences of political powerlessness. Rather than simply raising questions of legitimacy, membership, etc. in the abstract, discussing political concerns from a post-democratic perspective allows them to take on a fullness only possible when individuals actively think through the real implications of those considerations in conversation with one another. For instance, it is one thing to privately question state legitimacy, it is another to hash out what that means for one's functional relationship with particular institutions like the police, the courts, and other state institutions in a way that is not merely hypothetical, but applied. Similarly, while one may be able to dispassionately maintain a lack of culpability for state actions in general, one may have a more complicated emotional response when discussing the specific consequences of those actions with others, one that draws her attention to the more intractable remnants of her former democratic orientation.

By developing a more robust practical orientation toward the experience of political domination, ordinary citizens can better familiarize themselves with — and

habituate themselves to — the more subtle contours of post-democratic life. This process should help them begin to alter their perspective in such a way that tempers the frustration and anxiety associated with political insignificance; specifically, by becoming used to it. While political discussion serves to combat alienation as well, reminding individuals that they are not alone in their powerlessness, its chief value lies in normalizing this condition, transforming it from a profound and distressing failure to, quite literally, 'politics as usual'. In doing so, it makes one's inability to influence sovereign decision-making a bit less disconcerting, in turn, transforming moments that would previously provoke frustration into those that are more or less expected. By helping the post-democratic subject feel less disoriented and, subsequently, more 'at home', it reigns in the level of uncertainty and unease that contribute to said feelings, enabling her to better cope with the peculiar experience of political powerlessness that distinguishes post-democratic life.

THE POLITICS OF POST-DEMOCRACY

This approach does, however, raise the question: what are the political implications of treating (pseudo-)political activity as a therapeutic practice? In other words, where does prioritizing one's own well-being over the exercise of political influence leave one politically? While a post-democratic model of political subjectivity may initially appear as an *apologia* for authoritarianism, it actually describes a fairly complicated attachment to democratic values — one akin to mourning — that can't simply be reduced to a reactionary dismissal. In concluding my dissertation, I will discuss the ways in which a post-democratic orientation provides a way of thinking about politics

that reveal the limitations inherent in simply focusing on one's political preferences, instead encouraging us to marry preference with context in order to paint a fuller picture of one's relationship with political authority and activity. In this sense, it is best understood as part of the broader, contemporary realist turn in political theory, commonly associated with Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss. Moreover, through reimagining legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability in light of pervasive political domination, a post-democratic orientation offers a more fertile and, hence, progressive approach than its democratic counterpart to *both* political and (pseudo-)political activity.

What, then, are the political ramifications of adopting a post-democratic political self-conception? Categorizing a post-democratic orientation on a political spectrum, whether employing the traditional left-right spectrum or more nuanced, two-dimensional models (e.g., the Political Compass, Nolan Chart, Pournelle Chart, etc.), presents a challenge. This is primarily because the only substantive political preferences implied by a post-democratic orientation are one's sympathies for popular sovereignty and political equality; otherwise, it has no bearing on one's greater political preferences. Thus, one could just as easily be a rightwing post-democrat as a leftwing post-democrat, libertarian or statist, liberal or traditionalist, etc. One could even be an identitarian — white nationalist or otherwise — post-democrat, depending on how one construes *who* ought to constitute the demos that remains, at present, conspicuously absent.

Friedrich Hayek's two-dimensional political spectrum gives us a bit more purchase.[292] In it, he distinguishes between one's preference concerning the scope of the sovereign decision-making, whether one is a liberal (limited scope) or a totalitarian (extended scope), and one's preferred decision-making practice, whether one is a democrat (inclusive) or an authoritarian (exclusive). According to this model, the post-democratic subject, while open to being liberal or totalitarian, would express a clear preference for democratic decision-making practices, despite being pessimistic as to the possibility of their realization. Insofar as what is measured are political preferences, not political *self*-conceptions, such spectrums (including Hayek's) remain of limited value.[293]

Still, one could argue that a post-democratic orientation, despite professing an ostensible respect for democratic values, still, ironically, commits one to an authoritarian position by encouraging a fatalistic political quietism. The idea is that conceptualizing oneself as politically powerless may, itself, contribute to one's own powerlessness, ensuring post-democratic sovereignty through pervasive apathy. This would, first, be to assume that ordinary citizens could exercise political influence any less than they already do under post-democratic conditions. Moreover, this accusation grossly mischaracterizes the post-democratic approach to (pseudo-)political activity. Rather than prescribing political disengagement, it

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[292] Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 166.

[293] In fact, the very practice of asking large groups of people about their political preferences would seem specific to a democratic orientation toward politics, one which assumes that it matters (politically, at least) whether ordinary citizens can describe themselves as having a coherent set political preferences.

counsels a therapeutic engagement that, in many ways, results in the same exercise of political influence as more "sincere" approaches to participation. In short, one's actions remain the same, only their interpretations change. Whether one votes explicitly to consecrate an aspect of one's identity or in the (vain) hope of influencing policy, there is no difference in political effect. Moreover, by highlighting the therapeutic value of such practices, it may actually encourage those who, perhaps due to their own political disaffection, have previously avoided them.

However, one could further argue that a post-democratic orientation limits an individual's *potential* commitment to political activity by encouraging them to think exclusively in terms of (pseudo-)political activity. For example, because the self-aware post-democratic subject privileges the therapeutic value of protest, she may consciously abstain from involving herself further. This would perhaps prevent her from ever getting to a point where she is able to exercise a non-negligible degree of political influence.[294] On the one hand, this charge is warranted; treating (pseudo-)political activity as a therapeutic practice troubles the ability to see it as a kind of training for real political activity. On the other hand, by highlighting the superficiality of many activities otherwise assumed to be politically relevant, a post-democratic orientation forces us to reconsider what sorts of activities truly qualify as political. Subsequently, it also pushes would-be political actors to more seriously reflect on the value of certain activities, as well as whether they themselves are

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[294] For instance, Hahrie Han argues against the idea that political actors must be politicized before participation, instead arguing that many become politicized through it. See *Moved to Action: Motivation, Participation, and Inequality in American Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2009).

willing to make the sorts of commitments necessary for having a chance to influence sovereign decision-making.

Furthermore, by profoundly reconfiguring one's assumptions about legitimacy, membership, responsibility, and culpability, it also frees genuine political actors from the constraints of democratic political norms, allowing them to embrace more creative forms of political action.[295] No longer concerned about state legitimacy and, hence, the legitimacy of formal political practice, the post-democratic actor is free to manipulate such practices (e.g., discourse, elections, etc.), much in the same way elite political actors have for generations. The post-democratic subject's instrumental conception of political membership and responsibility only further encourages this strategic openness to new and/or more Machiavellian ways of exercising political influence. Lastly, in distancing herself from sovereign decisions and the guilt and/or shame that accompany them, the post-democratic political actor relieves herself of any general political responsibility toward fixing the polis and remains free to focus only on those issues which she feels able to address. Thus, in the event she is able to exercise political influence, the post-democratic subject can do so radically unfettered.

Whether addressing political actors or those who will, at best, only engage in (pseudo-)political activity, a post-democratic orientation toward political authority and activity dispenses with the fantasy of a democratic political community in favor of a deeper understanding of one's own political environment. In this sense, it falls within

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[295] See also Jeffrey Green, "Learning How Not to Be Good: A Plebeian Perspective," in *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016).

the greater tradition of political realism, classically associated with Thucydides and Machiavelli, as well as more contemporary works by Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss, and Jeffrey Green.[296] In fact, the post-democratic critique could easily be read as a version of Williams's broader charge against political moralism.[297] In it, Williams argues against any conceptual model of politics which makes "the moral prior to the political" and thereby obscures what is uniquely *political* about political activity; in particular, its often amoral, if not immoral, dimensions.[298] Similarly, a post-democratic orientation encourages one to dispense with the moral presumptions of popular sovereignty and political equality and instead recognize the profound disparities in political influence that have and will continue to affect the exercise of sovereign power. For some, this may constitute a call for a more serious dedication to politics, one which recognizes that voting, protesting, or generating discussion is not enough. For most, however, it will enable them to better conceptualize their relationship with political authority and activity, ideally letting them work through the frustration, anxiety, and alienation pervasive in contemporary post-democratic societies. In either case, to remain wedded to a democratic orientation toward politics, oddly enough, constitutes a sort of conservatism, a dated value-commitment that impedes a more relevant approach to politics. Individuals must instead take the

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[296] See Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005); Raymond Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005); Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008); Geuss, *A World Without Why* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2014); Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness*.

[297] Williams, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory" in *In the Beginning was the Deed*, 1-17.

[298] Williams, "Realism and Moralism in Political Theory," 2.

radical step of recognizing their own fractured relationship to post-democratic sovereignty, inciting their political imagination anew.

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