Maximalist Expectations in an Age of Anti-Populism

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The digital library JSTOR lists 786 individual results for the keyword "crisis of democracy" in items published since 2010, yet empirical studies are reluctant to confirm the "crisis of democracy" purported to be currently washing over Western societies (Kocka and Merkel 307-37; Landemore 25-52). The phrase itself has been a central ideologeme in conservative and reactionary thought since the early 1920s, if not exclusively so. In fact, Carl Schmitt devoted one of his most brutal essays to it in 1923. Schmitt, whose popularity in the humanities is at an all-time high (Figure 1),[1] argued that as long as democracy retained what he perceived to be its core function, the "exclusion or extermination of the heterogenous," it could not properly be said to be undergoing a crisis. The real problem was that democratic representatives were all too amenable to "relative truths" and were consequently reluctant to "spill blood" (Schmitt 14, 77; my translation). For Schmitt, democracy was acceptable as long as it remained based on truths that were absolute, that is, assertions that we would consider to be neither relative nor alternative, and which could hence be mobilized to legitimize political violence.

The reactionary implications of this conception of the "crisis of democracy" became entrenched in twentieth-century political discourse. For instance, when Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki reintroduced the phrase "crisis of democracy" for modern audiences on behalf of the Trilateral Commission (1975), they deplored the "excess of democracy" of the Civil Rights Movement, rather than a dysfunctionality at the core of the democratic system. According to them, the democratic "surges" of the 1960s and 1970s threatened the "governability" of democratic societies: "expertise, seniority, experience, and special talents" should be allowed to "override the claims of democracy" (113).

1 Our research group is working on the development and implementation of low-tech, low-threshold Digital Humanities protocols. On account of their cost and technical prerequirements, DH tools often have exclusionary effects, despite (and because of) the unprecedented amounts of funding they mobilize. Here however, and although the data is empirical, these illustrations draw on Google's own basic algorithms. They are akin to scholastic graffiti and merely serve illustrative, allegorical purposes.

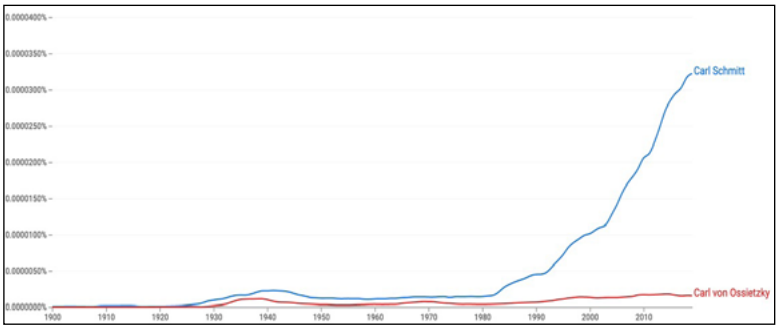

Figure 1. *Respective Prevalence of Two Intellectuals of the German Nazi Era in Anglophone Publications, 1900-2019* (Lexical frequency of <Carl Schmitt> and <Carl von Ossietzky>. Dataset: Entire Google Books corpus in English, smoothing factor 4).

As historians have demonstrated time and time again (Christofferson 27-85; Halimi 189-305; Chamayou), this second crisis of democracy was declared to have taken hold of Western societies precisely when large segments of the population began to demand not only better democratic representation (formal demands) but also that specific normative expectations be met by the democratic process (normative demands). These normative demands included better wages, a heavier taxation of financial gains, a fairer judicial system, the effective end of racial segregation, and a fairer distribution of the tangible symbolic capital granted by higher education. This "maximalist" model (Merkel 13), which included concrete outputs in its conception of democracy, was eventually contained by the amorphous mass of regressive policies which came to be known as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism was a conservative reaction to a fundamental transformation of what citizens expected of a democracy, not just a business model (Figure 2).

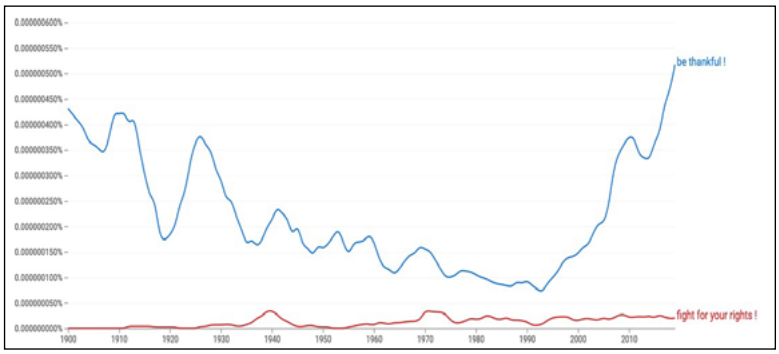

Figure 2. *Respective Prevalence of Two Conative Phrases in Anglophone Publications, 1900-2019* (Lexical frequency of <be thankful!> and <fight for your rights!>. Dataset: Entire Google Books corpus in English, smoothing factor 4).

Hence, I want to argue that three distinct, yet historically contiguous, "crises of democracy" overlap in current scholarly discourse—not in *all* scholarly discourse, but in a massively preeminent one. The first two "crises of democracy" have been conservative narratives all along: from Schmitt to Huntington, they were reactions to citizens' demands for *more* democratic sovereignty. Liberal democracy eventually incorporated these demands by diverting attention from broader societal issues and instead proposing the sleek governmental administration of highly individualized choices. The third and most recent "crisis of democracy" has resulted from the second: the neoliberal deflection of democratic expectations has given rise to the various upheavals that have marked recent political history and has been hastily subsumed under the term "populism."

This scholarly overlap and historical contiguity, in turn, raise two pressing questions. The first concerns the nature of populism and its legitimacy from an emphatically democratic standpoint. The second concerns the background assumptions at play in dominant scholarly, journalistic, and political discourse. In fact, I want to suggest that the term "populism" is convenient for socially dominant classes precisely on account of its multiple filiations. Once dominant classes frame it as the panacea for the current "crisis of democracy," staunch "anti-populism" kills two democratic birds with one epistemic stone: it simultaneously allows dominant classes to spearhead the fight "for democracy" within the strict limits of symbolic radicalism *and* to silently reject the demands for more democratic power voiced by citizens.

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In the context of the current "crisis of democracy," the term "populism" has been used to describe an almost comically heterogenous group of either progressive or regressive political upheavals: Brexit, Trump, independentist and ecological movements around the globe, Podemos, Black Lives Matter (Tillery). While some of these upheavals are fraught with grave dangers and contradictions, they are nevertheless the expression of popular will. They also convey maximalist, output-oriented expectations of democracy, rather than merely formal ones. The dominant scholarly narratives produced in order to explain these democratic upheavals (Jan-Werner Müllerian "populism as the evil twin brother of democracy" [Ellis], "fake news," "echo chambers," and the like) have often failed to distinguish their own covert normative expectations (acceptable democratic "outputs") from systemic dysfunctionalities (unacceptable systemic "flaws"). In other words, these scholarly narratives are often "maximalist" ones, too, and they have often failed to explain why the "crisis of democracy" is not just a "crisis of *good* democracy." This distinction is crucial, however: if it is not upheld, theorizations introduce underlying normative expectations into their descriptive-interpretive apparatus (Bourdieu 49-84).

Most importantly, these dominant scholarly narratives have not only proven ineffective against right-wing extremism and neoliberalism (a frequent pleonasm, historically speaking), but they have also had disastrous effects on progressive democratic movements around the world. Progressive movements have long put up with strident criticisms allegedly meant to fight right-wing extremism; the former have been routinely accused of discounting the complexities of modern governance, antagonizing social groups, capitalizing on objective inequalities, etc. (Müller, *What Is Populism?*). Simultaneously, the term "populism" has euphemized the violence of a number of current Western governments: they should be considered objectionable because they pursue *extreme right* policies, rather than "populist" ones.

Unsurprisingly, these dominant scholarly narratives have been dismissed by an overwhelming majority of progressive interest groups and activists since 2008. I have yet to read *a single progressive activist statement* in which the triad "populism as the evil twin brother of democracy / fake news / echo chambers" is not derided as the ideological construct of the Euro-American bourgeoisie, if it is mentioned at all. Crucially, however, these progressive activists do not reject such ideological narratives on the grounds that they carry implicit normative expectations per se, but rather because progressive activists and interest groups pursue *different normative expectations* than their peer-reviewed peers. To boot, they make their normative expectations of democracy *explicit*, rather than inadvertently appending them to formal descriptive models. In fact, the range of normative demands put forth by these groups via books, pamphlets, and public addresses is extremely limited and nearly universally shared. Campaigning for the end of racial exploitation or the end of mass homelessness in Western societies, these texts also bear witness to the unprecedented humility of contemporary progressive groups in the face of power:

1. They campaign for more effective and more direct democratic sovereignty.
2. They call for a more equitable distribution of the profits, miseries, and humiliations of capitalism (but they rarely oppose income equality per se).
3. They campaign for the preservation of the possibility of bare existence (a fairer legal system, gender and racial equality, access to basic protections such as health care and minimal income, and an inhabitable planet).
4. They reject the complacent cooptation of real social progress by socially dominant classes that remain indifferent to other forms of exploitation.

The divide between activist and dominant anti-populist responses to these upheavals could not be more glaring. This divide also correlates with the major parameters of social inequality: dominant discourse

in the United States and in Europe (conveyed by an overwhelmingly White, male, middle- and upper-class, academically trained population endowed with a maximum amount of symbolic capital) campaigns for a democracy that is "not populist" and is based on "truth" or, at the very least, based on information that is "not fake" (see also Lordon). These objectives are laudable and good, if compatible with the most ruthless forms of exploitation and injustice. On the other hand, progressive activists (who are almost always more diverse and poorer in all forms of capital) argue that such a democracy would not guarantee social justice, a dependable livelihood, an inhabitable planet, or more political agency.

Dominant scholarly, journalistic, and political responses to "populism" seem more hopeful: they invoke the golden age of "pre-post-democracy." That hallowed time, ironically, is also that in which skilled workers, ethnic and sexual minorities, and the college-educated middle class united in global protests—the hallowed time, precisely, which raised the specter of "ungovernability" denounced by Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki (30). Yet what roadmap to pre-post-democracy do the critics of current "populism" propose? The formalist leveling of progressive and regressive protest (Mudde; Mudde and Kaltwasser), the reign of epistemic expertise (Collins et al. 1-10), the support of what Huntington called "special talents" through corporate funding (see also Blair), the administration of truth in politics via the regulation of "fake news" (Deutscher Journalisten-Verband), and the delegitimization of democratic unrest (Müller, *What Is Populism?*). These responses to "populism" match the responses Huntington gave to his own "crisis of democracy." These current anti-populists are at their most neoliberal when they purport to fight neoliberalism's democratic consequences. The intellectuals of the "populist left" are just as nonchalant, however, contemplating the emancipatory potentials of Carl Schmitt and Jacques Derrida (Mouffe 41-45, 137-38), or Paul de Man and Mao Zedong (Laclau 78-88, 172), all the while demoting the modest material and judicial demands of Western populations to the symbolic construction of "a People" (Laclau 149-79).

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In any progressive framework, these conceptual models are bound to remain self-defeating. However, progressives may draw on a massively powerful institution to adjust their tactics and advance their claims. Empirically speaking, the University (capitalized, as the Church and the Army still are) is the crucial institution of democratic life in Western societies. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 66% of Americans under 30 had "some college education" as of 2018—a vastly higher active engagement rate for the same age group than all other institutions traditionally considered to be the pillars of modern democracy. As a common institutional experience, as a multiplicator of cognitive disposi-

tions (Figure 3), as a training ground for contention and consensus, the University is not only immensely powerful, it is arguably *the* single most powerful institution in highly developed, nominally post-industrial Western societies.

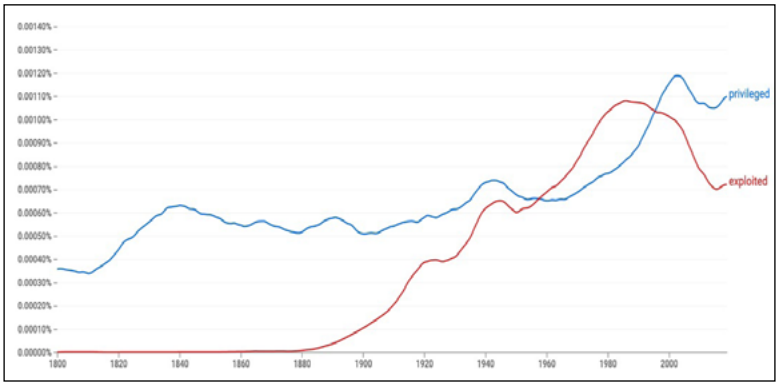

Figure 3. *Privileged and/or Exploited: Shift from Socially Dominated to Socially Dominant Actant Perspective, Lexical Decorrelation After 70 Years of Parallel Growth, When Both Terms Could Be Treated Intersectionally* (Lexical frequency of <privileged> and <exploited>. Dataset: Entire Google Books corpus in English, smoothing factor 4).

The institutional power of the University could be leveraged to pursue more constructive, more genuinely critical, and more carefully concerted goals than fulminating against "populists" left and right. We could begin by mitigating the high brutality of good intentions and getting our "crises of democracy" straight. While we are at it, we could also make a few normative, maximalist, output-oriented demands of our own, whatever they may turn out to be. Mine are as follows. Let us establish a more precise use of "populism" as a political signifier. As it stands, while it does provide some insights into certain political mannerisms, the concept euphemizes right-wing violence, contributes little to our understanding of the present historical situation, and impedes the progressive politics that a majority of academics emphatically support. Instead, let us demand that the material preconditions of access to higher education are met for everyone, so that citizens may acquire the critical and reflexive tools they need in order to fight collectively, autonomously, and effectively for their rights. Casting the current historical situation in materialist terms, rather than in rhetorical ones, and exposing the democratic expectations sometimes conveyed by the current "crisis of democracy," would not only provide essential signposts for effective political action and scholarly pursuits, it would also deflect the risk of repeating the conservative mislabeling of crises past, present, and future.[2]

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