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INTRODUCTION

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The resurgence of populism across Europe and North America marks not a passing disturbance in otherwise stable democracies. What has emerged in the early twenty-first century is not a simple revival of nineteenth-century agrarian populism, nor a straightforward extension of traditional right- or left-wing movements. Rather, we confront what may be called the New Populism: a hybrid political formation that challenges inherited ideological divisions, reorders institutional loyalties, destabilizes representational norms, and redefines the relationship between popular sovereignty and concentrated capital. This New Populism is a structural reconfiguration of political life.

The contributions to this special issue proceed from the premise that New Populism is neither an aberration nor a purely pathological deviation from liberal democracy. It is a response—however contradictory—to transformations in political economy, culture, technology, and institutional legitimacy that have unfolded over decades. As such, it demands careful study rather than reflexive dismissal. Much of the existing literature already points in this direction, yet both critical theory and pragmatism offer particularly valuable resources for advancing the analysis. The former illuminates the structural forces and ideological mechanisms that shape contemporary political movements; the latter asks how democratic institutions might respond constructively to new social energies without succumbing to authoritarian consolidation or oligarchic capture.

This issue does not presume simple answers. Instead, it approaches the New Populism as a complex realignment of social, political, and cultural forces—a terrain where grievances, identities, power structures, and economic interests intersect. The authors will try to answer important questions among those: Can institutions be reconstructed to restore legitimacy? Can economic inclusion be broadened without abandoning pluralism? Can democratic deliberation survive in a digitally fragmented public sphere? Can popular sovereignty coexist with global interdependence?

The challenge before us is not to return to a vanished liberal consensus, nor to romanticize populist insurgency. It is to understand the structural transformations that have produced this moment and to imagine democratic futures capable of reconciling popular agency with constitutional stability, economic inclusion with global responsibility, and critique with constructive action.

Only through such sustained inquiry can we hope to navigate the reordering now underway—and to shape it rather than merely endure it.

Chapters

THE ORIGINS OF NEW POPULISM: A RESPONSE FROM CRITICAL THEORY AND AMERICAN PRAGMATISM

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ABSTRACT: This article first examines the origins of New Populism and then applies the combined perspectives of Critical Theory and American Pragmatism to demonstrate how these two philosophical traditions can help address the challenges posed by contemporary populism. It argues that New Populism should not be understood merely as a reaction to economic hardship or cultural backlash but rather as the outcome of interconnected structural transformations affecting contemporary liberal democracies. Four principal sources of its emergence are identified: the crisis of neoliberal legitimacy, cultural dislocation and identity politics, digital disintermediation and the transformation of political representation, and growing distrust of democratic institutions. Together, these developments have weakened traditional forms of democratic mediation, intensified social polarization, and fostered personalized and affective modes of political mobilization.
The article further argues that neither Critical Theory nor American Pragmatism alone is sufficient to address these challenges. Critical Theory provides the conceptual tools necessary to diagnose the systemic contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, the colonization of the lifeworld, and the changing dynamics of power and legitimacy. American Pragmatism, particularly in the work of John Dewey and Richard Rorty, complements this perspective by emphasizing democratic experimentation, institutional responsiveness, participatory governance, and practical problem-solving. The paper concludes that a productive convergence of these traditions offers a more comprehensive framework for both understanding and responding to contemporary populism. Such an approach combines critical diagnosis with democratic reconstruction, seeking to restore democratic legitimacy through institutional innovation, inclusive participation, and renewed forms of democratic cooperation.

Keywords: New Populism; Critical Theory; American Pragmatism; Democratic Legitimacy; Neoliberalism; Institutional Trust; Political Representation; Democracy.

I Introduction – What Is New Populism?

At its core, New Populism operates through a moral and symbolic division: society is cast as a struggle between a virtuous, authentic "people" and a corrupt, self-serving "elite." Yet this opposition is not anchored in a stable class analysis. The elite in question may encompass technocrats, cosmopolitan professionals, transnational institutions, media establishments, academic authorities, and established political parties. In many instances, cultural elites are foregrounded as antagonists even more prominently than economic oligarchs, reflecting a strategic shift from purely economic grievances to broader cultural and institutional critiques.

Four defining features distinguish this new configuration. First, the People-versus-Elite framing relocates political legitimacy away from intermediary institutions and directly into the immediate will of the people, creating a sense that traditional checks and balances are obstacles rather than safeguards. Second, crisis consciousness permeates the discourse: the present is narrated as a moment of existential threat—whether economic stagnation, cultural dissolution, demographic transformation, or the erosion of national sovereignty—demanding urgent and decisive corrective action. Third, the Leader–People fusion personalizes representation, as charismatic figures present themselves as the unfiltered voice of the people, substituting institutional mediation with direct identification between leader and electorate. Finally, ideological hybridity allows seemingly contradictory positions to coexist: economic nationalism alongside selective welfare commitments, cultural conservatism alongside anti-corporate rhetoric, and skepticism toward globalization alongside selective embrace of state power. Taken together, these patterns suggest that New Populism is less a fixed ideology than a style and strategy of political mobilization that emerges within a broader crisis of liberal-democratic governance. It thrives on symbolic contrasts, immediate affective resonance, and institutional bypassing, challenging inherited categories of political analysis and demanding that scholars reconceptualize the dynamics of contemporary democratic life.

To understand New Populism, one must look beyond simplistic explanations that reduce it either to economic grievance or to cultural anxiety. Its emergence is better understood as the product of overlapping structural

transformations that have reshaped both the material and symbolic conditions of contemporary democratic life. New Populism arises at the intersection of political economy, cultural change, and institutional discontent, responding simultaneously to dislocations in wealth, authority, and identity. It is neither a mere reaction to hardship nor a superficial cultural backlash; it is a complex formation rooted in the broader dynamics of late modernity.

In this article, I will focus on several key origins of New Populism, among which I identify the crisis of neoliberal legitimacy, cultural dislocation and the politics of identity, digital disintermediation and the transformation of representation, and institutional distrust. In the later sections, I turn to critical theory and pragmatism, which, as I argue, together can help us understand the structural transformations we are witnessing and provide tools to respond to the challenges they generate. In the conclusion, I will argue that only a productive convergence between critical diagnosis and institutional reform rooted in pragmatic philosophy insides can offer a viable pathway for reconstructing democratic legitimacy under contemporary conditions.

II. The Crisis of Neoliberal Legitimacy

One of the central origins of New Populism lies in the long arc of neoliberal governance, a political-economic regime that has reshaped social, economic, and institutional life across Europe and North America since the late twentieth century. Neoliberalism, broadly understood, prioritizes market logic as the organizing principle of society, emphasizing deregulation, financialization, trade liberalization, privatization, and the insulation of policymaking from popular pressures.[1] Governments operating under this paradigm have increasingly delegated authority to technocratic institutions, supranational organizations, and regulatory agencies, ostensibly to maximize efficiency, reduce bureaucratic inertia, and ensure macroeconomic stability. While these policies have often generated aggregate economic growth and expanded global trade, they have simultaneously intensified precarity, hollowed out industrial regions, and concentrated wealth in the hands of a small elite.[2]

The social and political consequences of these transformations are profound. As economic gains have accrued disproportionately to the top decile, many citizens have experienced stagnating wages, declining job security, and the erosion of long-standing welfare provisions.[3] Formerly secure industrial and service sectors have become sites of chronic instability, producing what has been described as "disembedding": the detachment of individuals and communities from the economic and political structures that once provided stability, recognition, and participation.[4] Regions that had historically anchored political loyalty and social cohesion—often former industrial heartlands—have witnessed not only economic decline but also a fraying of civic trust and a growing sense of alienation from state institutions.

New Populism, in part, emerges as a counterpoint to this neoliberal disembedding. It positions itself as an interpreter and mediator of economic, social, and cultural anxieties, reasserting claims of national sovereignty, economic protection, and cultural rootedness against a perceived global technocratic order. Unlike classical leftist or labor-based movements, which might seek to redistribute economic power through institutional reform

[1] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[2] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

[3] Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Anthony B. Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[4] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944); Bob Jessop, "The 'Return' of the National State in the Current Crisis of the World Market," *Capital & Class* 34, no. 1 (2010), 38–43.

or structural change, New Populist formations often operate within the very structures shaped by neoliberal capitalism, harnessing the resources, legal frameworks, and market logics that define contemporary governance while rhetorically challenging their implications.[5] This duality—opposing neoliberal elites rhetorically while accepting the institutional and material constraints of the neoliberal order—constitutes one of the defining paradoxes of the movement.

Several scholars have emphasized how this paradox manifests in both policy and discourse. For example, economic nationalism and protectionist rhetoric frequently coexist with the acceptance of international financial norms and market-driven regulations. Leaders may advocate for selective welfare expansion, often targeting culturally proximate groups, while simultaneously pursuing fiscal policies that maintain macroeconomic orthodoxy.[6] Similarly, populist discourse may foreground opposition to technocratic institutions, yet rely heavily on the same bureaucracies and financial systems to implement policy. In effect, New Populism mobilizes popular sovereignty against elite authority without fundamentally overturning the structural logic of neoliberal capitalism, thereby creating a tension between rhetorical antagonism and material dependence.

The cultural and symbolic dimensions of this crisis are equally important. Neoliberal governance has often been associated with technocratic rationality and managerial expertise which, while seemingly neutral, frequently marginalize public deliberation and local knowledge. Wendy Brown says "stakeholders and governance networks have … been separated off from the powers and the unbounded field of deliberation that would make them meaningful as terms of shared rule."[7] By privileging abstract economic efficiency over lived experience, neoliberal institutions inadvertently foster a sense of political alienation, whereby citizens perceive themselves as subject to decisions made by distant and opaque elites. New Populism thrives precisely in this space, framing "the people" as morally virtuous actors whose practical knowledge and cultural identity are dismissed by detached technocrats. In doing so, populist leaders transform economic and political discontent into a moralized struggle over legitimacy, authority, and sovereignty.[8]

It is also important to recognize that the crisis of neoliberal legitimacy is historically situated and temporally extended. As Streeck observes, the financialization of economies, coupled with deregulated labor markets, did not produce an immediate political backlash.[9] Rather, the cumulative effects of precarity, inequality, and institutional detachment gradually eroded trust, creating the conditions for sudden and seemingly unpredictable political realignments. This helps explain why New Populism often appears as a rupture—emerging "out of the blue" in electoral contexts—despite being rooted in decades of structural transformation.

In short, the emergence of New Populism highlights a central tension in contemporary democratic governance. On the one hand, it is a reaction to real material and institutional failings; on the other, it is rhetorically constructed in ways that simplify complex social problems into binary moral terms: people versus elite, nation versus global order, tradition versus cosmopolitan modernity. The challenge for scholars, policymakers, and citizens is to understand the structural roots of these movements without reducing them to pathological phenomena or

[5] Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Günter Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism: Constitutional Perspectives* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020).

[6] Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash," HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series, no. RWP16-026 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School, August 2016).

[7] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 128.

[8] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2019).

[9] Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 2014), 179-180.

dismissing them as irrational. Only by engaging both the material and symbolic dimensions of neoliberal disembedding can democratic societies hope to respond constructively to the populist challenge, balancing popular agency with institutional stability and social inclusion.[10]

III. Cultural Dislocation and the Politics of Identity

While economic grievance constitutes an important foundation for the rise of New Populism, it alone cannot account for its depth, breadth, or appeal. Contemporary populist movements are as much about culture, identity, and recognition as they are about material deprivation. Over the past several decades, societies across Europe and North America have experienced profound and rapid cultural transformation. Migration flows, demographic shifts, increasing social diversity, and the expansion of rights for historically marginalized groups—particularly in the domains of gender, race, sexuality, and religious pluralism—have reshaped the symbolic landscape of public life.[11] Simultaneously, ongoing reassessments of historical narratives, including debates over colonial legacies, racial inequality, and national memory, have created a climate in which the meanings of tradition, citizenship, and belonging are in flux.

For many citizens, these changes are not experienced as enrichment, but rather as erosion: the displacement of familiar social hierarchies, the destabilization of communal norms, and the reconfiguration of cultural authority. What fallows, as Wuthnow argues in his analysis of cultural change, transformations in moral order involve changes in the shared meanings and norms through which social life is organized.[12] Similarly, scholars of social identity emphasize that perceived threats to status, recognition, and belonging can become important drivers of political mobilization, alongside material and economic concerns.[13] Identity, in this sense, becomes a site of political contestation: when cultural practices, symbols, and values are perceived as contested or devalued, individuals may experience "status anxiety" or cultural insecurity, motivating support for movements that promise to restore symbolic coherence and moral order.[14]

New Populism translates these anxieties into a moralized political language, framing cultural change not as a neutral evolution but as the imposition of elite preferences. Media, academic, and bureaucratic authorities may be constructed within populist discourse as representatives of a hegemonic order, while diverse grievances are articulated into an antagonistic frontier separating "the people" from an institutionalized "other." In this process, questions of recognition, belonging, and cultural identity can become condensed into broader struggles over who constitutes the legitimate political community.[15] In effect, cultural dislocation is moralized, and political mobilization becomes a vehicle not merely for economic redistribution but for the defense of collective identity and social meaning.

Scholars have observed how these dynamics manifest in empirical contexts. In Western Europe, the rise of parties such as the French Rassemblement National or the German Alternative für Deutschland is linked less to acute economic deprivation than to perceived threats to national identity and cultural continuity.[16] In the United

[10] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William H. Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 330; Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 7-8.
[11] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 42.
[12] Robert Wuthnow, *Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 215-264.
[13] Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 37-38; Rogers Brubaker, "Why Populism?," *Theory and Society* 46, no. 5 (2017), 357–385.
[14] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash,* 33-34.
[15] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 74-75; See also: Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[16] Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican, 2018), 271-272; Cas Mudde, "Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe Re-

States, the appeal of Donald Trump's rhetoric similarly relied on promises of restoring the political and social centrality of segments of the white working and middle classes who perceived themselves as marginalized by demographic and cultural shifts, even when their material circumstances did not necessarily correspond to their sense of marginalization.[17] In both cases, the populist narrative moralizes identity, portraying recognition, belonging, and social coherence as imperiled by elite or cosmopolitan agendas.

Importantly, New Populism operates not merely through symbolic appeal but also through institutional and discursive strategies. Populist actors exploit media, social networks, and political institutions to amplify perceptions of cultural dislocation, framing policy debates in moralized, zero-sum terms that recast pluralism as a form of competition for survival. The "cultural threat" narrative is reinforced by selective historical memory, the elevation of particular symbols, and the foregrounding of elite culpability in shaping social norms, creating a cyclical dynamic in which cultural anxiety fuels political mobilization, and political mobilization further intensifies perceptions of cultural threat.[18]

Ultimately, the politics of identity in New Populism underscores that grievance is multidimensional, encompassing economic, cultural, and symbolic dimensions simultaneously. Effective analysis therefore requires attention to how structural transformations shape lived experience, how symbolic anxieties are mobilized politically, and how institutions can be reconfigured to engage these challenges without sacrificing pluralism or democratic norms. The populist mobilization around identity thus serves as both a warning and a heuristic: societies that ignore the moral and cultural dimensions of dislocation risk producing political formations that challenge not only policy outcomes but the legitimacy of democratic governance itself.

IV. Digital Disintermediation and the Transformation of Representation

Alongside economic and cultural transformations, the rise of digital communication has profoundly reshaped the landscape of political representation and public discourse. Over the past two decades, social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and more recently TikTok and X (formerly Twitter)—have disrupted traditional channels of political mediation, challenging long-standing hierarchies of information and authority. Historically, newspapers, broadcast networks, and party apparatuses acted as gatekeepers, filtering and contextualizing information, setting the agenda, and shaping public understanding of political issues.[19] In the digital era, these intermediaries have been weakened: political actors now have direct access to millions of constituents, while algorithms, virality, and engagement metrics increasingly determine which messages reach the public.

Manuel Castells argues that communication power in network societies is transformed by global digital networks, which expand the capacity for "mass self-communication" while remaining shaped by the technological and organizational structures through which communication flows.[20] This shift has not merely increased the speed of communication but it has transformed the nature of representation itself. Representation becomes increasingly performative and personalized as political actors use digital media to communicate through multiple, interconnected channels, potentially circumventing traditional media gatekeepers and altering established

dux," *Political Studies Review* 7, no. 3 (2009), 330–337.
[17] Justin Gest, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16-20.
[18] Brubaker, "Why Populism?", 362; Laclau, *On Populist Reason,* 73-83.

[19] Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–177; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 181-184.
[20] Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

relationships between politicians, journalists, and citizens.[21] The cultivation of authenticity—often performative, emotionally charged, and highly mediated—is central to this model.[22] Politicians are incentivized to present themselves as the unfiltered voice of the people, treating immediacy as a proxy for legitimacy and institutional complexity as evidence of elite obstruction or corruption. This digital personalization is a defining feature of New Populism, in which political authority is anchored less in institutional checks and balances than in relational engagement with a self-defined constituency.

Digital disintermediation also transforms the epistemic environment of politics. Social media platforms can function as echo chambers, sorting users into like-minded groups and reinforcing existing political views, thereby contributing to polarization and fragmenting the shared informational environment necessary for democratic deliberation.[23] Within these digital spaces, political identity is continuously performed, affirmed, and policed, producing affectively charged networks of support. Polarization can be intensified not only by exposure to homogeneous views but also by the emotional immediacy and shareability of content, which can privilege outrage, fear, and affirmation over deliberative reasoning.[24] Consequently, digital platforms can amplify symbolic and moral binaries, reinforcing the "people versus elite" framing central to New Populism.

The consequences for democratic institutions are profound. Democratic government depends on institutional mechanisms for translating citizens' preferences into collective decisions, while the democratic process must also address the tension between majority rule and the protection of minority rights and interests.[25] New Populism, amplified by digital communication, challenges this model, valorizing direct engagement over institutional intermediation. In this paradigm, immediacy and unmediated communication are interpreted as authenticity, while traditional mechanisms of deliberation are cast as obstructionist, elitist, or corrupt. The result is not merely a change in style but a structural transformation of representation, in which the moral legitimacy of governance is increasingly evaluated through the lens of digital resonance rather than institutional performance.

Empirical research illustrates these dynamics. In the United States, Donald Trump's use of Twitter as a direct communication channel allowed him to circumvent established patterns of party and media mediation, mobilizing supporters through a highly affective, immediate, and viral discourse.[26] In Europe, movements such as the Italian Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) utilized online platforms to engage citizens directly, combining online and offline participation while challenging conventional party organization.[27] In both cases, digital platforms facilitated the personalization of leadership, accelerated political mobilization, and reinforced identity-based appeals, demonstrating the intersection of technology with populist logic.

Importantly, digital disintermediation does not operate in isolation. It interacts with the economic and cultural dynamics of New Populism, reinforcing grievances while providing the tools to amplify and ritualize them. Algorithmically curated content and digitally networked

[21] Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 207-210.
[22] Gunn Enli, *Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 136-137.
[23] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 63; Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 98.
[24] See: Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); See also: Alice E. Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online* (New York: Data & Society Research Institute, 2017).
[25] Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 95.
[26] Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*. Chadwick's analysis is particularly useful here because it treats political communication as a hybrid system in which older and newer media interact rather than simply one replacing the other.
[27] Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini, "Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo Shakes Italian Politics," *South European Society and Politics* 18, no. 4 (2013): 427–49. The article examines the Five Star Movement's combination of online and offline organization and its distinctive relationship between horizontal participation and centralized decision-making.

media environments can highlight economic precarity, identity threats, or elite transgressions, creating feedback loops in which anxiety and moral outrage are continuously magnified.[28] Leaders who master these digital dynamics are able to translate diffuse anxieties into cohesive political mobilization, bypassing traditional institutional filters while creating the appearance of direct, authentic engagement with the people.

Moreover, as Jodi Dean argues, contemporary digital communication is increasingly structured by what she terms "communicative capitalism," in which the circulation of messages, expressions, and participation does not necessarily enhance democratic deliberation but can instead be subsumed into circuits of capital accumulation.[29] Under such conditions, the very forms of engagement that appear participatory may reinforce fragmentation, distraction, and depoliticization, aligning closely with the dynamics observed in New Populism.

Ultimately, the digital transformation of political communication represents a structural reconfiguration of representation itself. By collapsing the distance between leader and follower, privileging immediacy over deliberation, and embedding moralized binaries within algorithmically mediated networks, New Populism reshapes both the practice and perception of political legitimacy. For scholars and policymakers, understanding these dynamics is essential: digital technologies are not merely tools but structural forces that interact with economic, cultural, and institutional transformations, producing new modalities of authority, participation, and contestation.

V. Institutional Distrust

As already mentioned, a defining feature of contemporary New Populism is its exploitation of declining or uneven trust in established institutions, a condition that has become politically significant in many advanced democracies. Over the past several decades, citizens' confidence in traditional pillars of authority—including parliaments, political parties, mainstream media, and other institutions of public authority—has in many contexts weakened, producing a legitimacy gap that populist actors can skillfully mobilize.[30] This erosion, however, should not be understood as a uniform or linear decline in institutional trust. Rather, it reflects broader structural transformations in political, economic, and social life that have altered citizens' expectations of institutions and, in some cases, undermined perceptions of their impartiality, responsiveness, and efficacy.[31]

Political institutions, in particular, have borne the brunt of this legitimacy crisis. Parliaments and established parties have historically served as mediators between citizens and the state, translating diffuse preferences into coherent policies while balancing majority interests with protections for minorities. Yet over recent decades, declining party identification, electoral volatility, and changing forms of political participation have weakened some of the traditional links between citizens and established political organizations.[32] Scandals, perceived policy failures, and the sense that political elites are insulated from everyday concerns have further compounded this distrust, producing fertile ground for populist narratives. In this context, populist leaders present established political institutions not as indispensable sites of deliberation and representation but as self-serving structures that obstruct the direct expression of popular will.[33]

[28] For more see: Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*; Marwick and Lewis, *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*.
[29] Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1, no. 1 (2005), 51–74.
[30] See: Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016), 5–17.
[31] Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit,* 57-82.
[32] See: Russell J. Dalton, "The Social Transformation of Trust in Government," *International Review of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (2005), 133–54.
[33] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 79-96.

Mainstream media have similarly experienced a crisis of trust. The rise of digital information ecosystems, combined with perceptions that traditional outlets are politically biased or insufficiently responsive to audiences, has weakened confidence in established journalistic authorities in some democratic societies.[34] Populist actors exploit this distrust by delegitimizing media coverage that challenges their narratives, framing critical reporting as part of a broader elite effort to suppress the voice of ordinary citizens. By bypassing traditional media through social networks and digitally mediated platforms, populist leaders cultivate a direct and performative relationship with their constituents, portraying themselves as authentic and relatively unmediated in contrast to ostensibly compromised institutional channels.

Universities and expert institutions can become targets of populist contestation in a similar manner when academic elites are portrayed as detached from ordinary people and their everyday experiences. In this form of science-related populism, the supposedly authentic common sense and experiential knowledge of "ordinary people" is contrasted with the allegedly distant, ideologically biased, and morally suspect expertise of academic elites.[35] The delegitimization of expertise in this context is not merely rhetorical; it can reconfigure the epistemic foundations upon which democratic deliberation depends, particularly when disagreement over empirical claims becomes intertwined with broader conflicts over cultural identity and political authority.

Corporate leadership, particularly within globalized economies, also contributes to the climate of institutional distrust. Multinational firms and financial institutions are widely perceived in some contexts as profit-driven, opaque, and implicated in the distributional consequences of globalization, reinforcing populist narratives of elite moral failure.[36] Even when corporate actors engage in socially responsible practices, the symbolic association of wealth and influence with exclusion and privilege can amplify perceptions of systemic injustice, further energizing populist mobilization.

Institutional distrust is not merely a passive backdrop to New Populism; it is actively exploited and amplified. Populist actors present themselves as the authentic embodiment of the people's will, contrasting themselves with institutions portrayed as corrupt, self-serving, or disconnected. As Habermas and Laclau emphasize in different ways, crises of legitimacy can create conditions in which established forms of political authority become vulnerable to competing claims of representation and popular sovereignty.[37] Leaders convert skepticism toward institutions into moral legitimacy for direct and personalized political engagement, recasting authority as contingent on affective alignment rather than procedural performance.

The dynamics of institutional distrust are further reinforced through interactions with economic, cultural, and digital factors. Economic precarity and cultural dislocation can amplify perceptions of institutional failure, while digital platforms accelerate the circulation of distrust, intensifying polarization and reinforcing moral binaries.[38] Distrust in one domain—such as political institutions—can spill over into others, producing generalized skepticism toward media, universities, and corporations alike. Populist leaders leverage this cross-domain distrust, presenting themselves as uniquely capable of navi-

[34] See for example: Jonathan M. Ladd, *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).
[35] Niels G. Mede and Mike S. Schäfer, "Science-Related Populism: Conceptualizing Populist Demands toward Science," *Public Understanding of Science* 29, no. 5 (2020), 473–81.
[36] Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 141; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 430.
[37] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 68-75; Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William H. Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 371-372; Ernesto Laclau, On Populist Reason (London: Verso, 2005), 100-111.
[38] See: Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

gating a world of failing institutions, while simultaneously framing criticism as elitist, illegitimate, or conspiratorial.

Addressing populism, therefore, requires restoring credibility and responsiveness to institutions, not simply delegitimizing populist actors. Structural reforms—enhancing transparency, accountability, and participatory mechanisms—must be complemented by symbolic interventions that reaffirm the normative and public value of democratic institutions. Only by rebuilding legitimacy across these domains can democracies withstand the destabilizing effects of populist mobilization while sustaining pluralism and social cohesion.[39]

In sum, the erosion or fragmentation of institutional trust constitutes an important structural enabling condition for New Populism. By framing established institutions as corrupt, detached, or morally compromised, populist movements convert skepticism into political momentum, presenting themselves as direct and authentic representatives of the people. Institutional distrust is therefore both a symptom of broader societal transformations and a mechanism through which populism mobilizes support. Understanding and addressing this dynamic is essential for reconciling popular agency with the stability and legitimacy of democratic institutions.

VI. Critical Theory and Pragmatism: A Necessary Convergence

The development of New Populism creates a significant theoretical and practical challenge. Having in mind the historical developments discussed above, it can be argued that any serious attempt to understand—and respond to—such challenges must move beyond a single-framework analysis. Neither structural critique alone nor policy-oriented problem-solving in isolation is sufficient. This is why this paper argues for a productive convergence between critical theory and pragmatism.

Critical theory provides an indispensable capacity to diagnose structural conditions. From the early work of the Frankfurt School to later developments in the writings of thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, it has emphasized the ways in which economic systems, cultural forms, and institutional arrangements are intertwined in the reproduction of power.[40] In the context of New Populism, this perspective is particularly valuable. It demonstrates that populist mobilization is not simply a spontaneous expression of popular will, but is embedded in broader configurations of neoliberal capitalism, ideological production, and digital infrastructures.

Pragmatic philosophy adds a complementary lens. Rooted in the work of thinkers such as John Dewey and developed in contemporary democratic theory, pragmatism emphasizes problem-solving, experimentation, inquiry, and the evaluation of consequences.[41] Rather than seeking totalizing explanations, it asks how institutions can be adapted to better address concrete challenges. In the context of New Populism, this orientation is crucial: it shifts the focus from diagnosing systemic contradictions alone toward identifying workable pathways for democratic engagement, institutional renewal, and policy innovation.

Both critical theory and pragmatism can therefore contribute to understanding the origins of New Populism as well as possible responses to it. While historically distinct, they offer complementary insights into the dynamics of power, legitimacy, and democratic transformation.[42] The following analysis focuses on the particular origins of New Populism identified above and considers

[39] Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016), 5–17.

[40] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

[41] See for example: John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, The Later Works, 1925–1953, vol. 12, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991); Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

[42] Marcin Kilanowski, T*he Rorty-Habermas Debate: Toward Freedom as Responsibility* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021).

how critical theory and pragmatism illuminate both their underlying causes and possible democratic responses.

a. The Crisis of Neoliberal Legitimacy

From a critical-theoretical perspective, the contemporary conjuncture can be understood as a crisis of legitimacy rooted, in part, in the structural contradictions of advanced capitalist societies. As Jürgen Habermas argues, the stability of democratic systems depends not only on formal procedures but also on the capacity of political institutions to maintain legitimacy under conditions in which economic and administrative systems must be reconciled with democratic expectations.[43] Legitimacy, in this sense, is neither purely formal nor purely instrumental; it concerns the relationship between effective governance, political justification, and the communicative processes through which citizens can regard authority as legitimate. When institutions are perceived as ineffective, unresponsive, or normatively detached, legitimacy may begin to erode.

This diagnosis builds upon foundational insights of the Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno argued that the Enlightenment project, while oriented toward emancipation, contains an internal tendency toward domination when reason is reduced to instrumental calculation.[44] Under such conditions, rationality can cease to function primarily as a medium of critical reflection and instead become associated with efficiency, control, and system maintenance. In the context of neoliberal governance, this perspective helps illuminate the political consequences of privileging market rationality, technocratic decision-making, and policy frameworks insulated from democratic contestation.

From this vantage point, the crisis of legitimacy concerns not only communication and representation but also the relationship between democratic decision-making and increasingly autonomous economic systems. Herbert Marcuse's notion of "one-dimensional" society further deepens this analysis by suggesting that advanced industrial societies can integrate individuals into prevailing systems of production and consumption in ways that constrain critical consciousness and alternative political imaginaries.[45] Contemporary populism can therefore be interpreted, in part, as an eruption of conflicts that had previously been contained, although such conflicts remain shaped by the structures they contest. Such insights of critical theory foreground the structural tension between democratic ideals and capitalist realities that has been described and analyzed by other authors. As Wolfgang Streeck argues, tensions between capitalism and democracy have become increasingly pronounced under contemporary forms of economic governance, while Thomas Piketty demonstrates how persistent concentrations of wealth can generate extreme inequality and threaten the egalitarian foundations of democratic societies.[46] These analyses reinforce a core critical-theoretical insight: the coexistence of formal democratic institutions with substantial material inequality can generate profound tensions concerning political equality and legitimacy.

At the same time, critical theory emphasizes the ideological dimension of legitimacy. The stability of neoliberal governance has depended not only on material arrangements but also on discursive frameworks that present economic decisions as technically necessary or beyond meaningful political contestation. When lived experience diverges too sharply from such narratives, when promises of mobility, security, and fairness are perceived as unfulfilled, the ideological foundations of legitimacy may weaken. Populist movements can exploit precisely

[43] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 196-197.
[44] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.
[45] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 8-10.
[46] Wolfgang Streeck, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 2014), 51; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 377.

this gap, translating diffuse dissatisfaction into politically mobilizing claims.

From a critical-theoretical standpoint, the key contribution is therefore diagnostic and demystifying. It reveals that the crisis of legitimacy cannot be reduced to isolated policy failures but must also be understood in relation to systemic tensions between democratic norms, political equality, and capitalist dynamics.

Pragmatism approaches the same phenomenon from a different, though complementary, angle. Rather than beginning with structural contradictions, it emphasizes the practical and epistemic functions of democratic inquiry and deliberation. Rooted in the work of John Dewey and developed through subsequent pragmatist debates, this approach understands democratic life as a process of inquiry, reason-giving, communication, and collective problem-solving.[47] This shift has important implications. Pragmatism resists the tendency to interpret legitimacy crises as necessarily requiring comprehensive systemic transformation. Instead, it emphasizes experimentation, institutional learning, and the possibility of reform through the reconstruction of existing practices.

When looking through pragmatic lens institutions can consequently be understood as evolving arrangements and sites of inquiry that may be redesigned in response to experience and changing conditions.[48] Thus improvements in specific policy domains—such as housing affordability, healthcare access, or labor protections—can affect citizens' experiences of government and therefore contribute to the restoration of political confidence, even when broader structural inequalities persist.

Moreover, pragmatism challenges a strict separation between procedural and substantive dimensions of democratic legitimacy. Fair procedures remain essential, but democratic institutions must also be capable of producing consequences that citizens can reasonably regard as responsive to shared problems. If democratic procedures consistently produce outcomes perceived as unjust, ineffective, or disconnected from social needs, confidence in those procedures may itself become vulnerable.

From a pragmatist perspective, however, what is ultimately at stake is not only distributive fairness but the social fabric within which democratic cooperation becomes possible. Legitimacy depends partly on whether institutions sustain forms of cooperation, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility that connect individuals to one another as members of a democratic public. These forms of collective association are both an objective of democratic practice and a condition of its continuation.

In this respect, the argument applies most directly to Rorty, although important qualifications are necessary in relation to Dewey and Putnam. Rorty emphasizes solidarity as a contingent achievement of shared vocabularies and processes of redescription. In line with his anti-foundationalism, the aim is not to ground politics in universal metaphysical truths but to expand solidarity and improve the conditions under which democratic cooperation becomes possible.[49] However, whether the "welding" of people into a community is historically contingent or not depends on the practices through which people come to recognize one another as participants in a common project[50].

Dewey, by contrast, provides a thicker account of democratic association. For Dewey, democratic life is rooted in associated living, communication, and the experimental resolution of shared problems.[51] Putnam similarly emphasizes the social dimensions of objectivity, rationality, and human flourishing, challenging a rigid separation between facts and values.[52] Therefore, while

[47] See: John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*; Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); More on that: Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality,* 29-34.
[48] John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry.*
[49] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); See also: Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*.
[50] Marcin Kilanowski, "Abandoning Truth Is Not a Solution: A Discussion with Richard Rorty." *Diametros*, no. 61 (2019), 34–50.
[51] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems,* ed. Jo Ann Boydston, The Later Works 1925–1953, vol. 2, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).
[52] Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Rorty captures the importance of solidarity as a contingent achievement, Dewey and Putnam provide stronger resources for explaining why democratic solidarity matters as a condition for meaningful collective action. Regardless of their differences, they all point out that mutual recognition and cooperation are essential.

On the basis of pragmatists insides it can ba said that the practical objective is consequently to design institutions that are more responsive, transparent, and participatory while fostering mechanisms of feedback, accountability, and cooperation. Democracy is not merely a procedural system but, in Dewey's formulation, a mode of associated living. As Dewey writes, "Everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication" creates divisions that undermine democratic life.[53]

The interplay between critical theory and pragmatism is therefore crucial. A productive convergence between them requires recognizing that legitimacy crises are simultaneously structural and practical: they arise from systemic conditions but are experienced and mediated through institutional performance. Responding to the crisis of neoliberal legitimacy consequently requires a dual strategy. On the one hand, it demands critical reflection on structural conditions such as inequality, depoliticization, and the dominance of market logics. On the other hand, it requires pragmatic efforts to rebuild trust through effective governance, institutional responsiveness, and democratic experimentation. Only by integrating these approaches can democratic systems address both the roots and the manifestations of contemporary populist discontent.

b. Cultural Dislocation and the Politics of Identity

Another important origin of New Populism identified above is cultural dislocation. From a critical-theoretical perspective, such dislocation should not be understood as an isolated or purely subjective phenomenon but in relation to broader socioeconomic transformations. Jürgen Habermas conceptualizes an important dimension of this dynamic through the distinction between system and lifeworld.[54] As economic and administrative systems expand, they can increasingly affect domains of social life previously coordinated primarily through shared norms, traditions, and communicative practices. Habermas describes this process as the "colonization of the lifeworld," whereby systemic mechanisms intrude into communicatively structured domains of social reproduction.

This insight can be connected to earlier Frankfurt School analyses of culture and domination. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that cultural forms are shaped by broader structures of economic and social power. In their analysis of the culture industry, culture becomes increasingly standardized and commodified, contributing to forms of integration into existing social orders.[55] Herbert Marcuse extended this critique by arguing that advanced industrial societies generate forms of conformity that restrict critical reflection and alternative political possibilities.[56]

Contemporary cultural dislocation nevertheless differs in important respects from the earlier model of integration. Rather than simply producing uniformity, contemporary transformations can generate fragmentation and polarization. The erosion of stable employment, the decline of local communities, and the weakening of intermediary institutions create conditions in which individuals may experience both material insecurity and symbolic loss. Identities that were once taken for granted become contested, while new forms of belonging emerge in response to perceived threats.

These identities are contested partly because the social conditions that once stabilized them have weakened. Economic precarity, institutional erosion, and rapid cul-

[53] John Dewey, *Essays in Philosophy, Education, and the Arts*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, The Later Works, 1925–1953, vol. 14, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 149.

[54] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William H. Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
[55] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94–108.
[56] Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 8-10.

tural change disrupt established patterns of recognition and belonging. As a result, identities may become objects of political and social struggle, as different groups seek to redefine their place, status, and meaning within an increasingly uncertain social order. Neoliberal economic transformation is relevant to this process insofar as it has reshaped patterns of work, community, social mobility, and inequality, thereby weakening some of the social expectations through which political legitimacy was previously sustained.

Critical theory helps us understand that these developments cannot be reduced to either economic or cultural factors alone. Rather, it foregrounds their co-constitution: economic restructuring reshapes social identities, while cultural narratives provide frameworks through which these changes are interpreted. Deindustrialization, for example, may simultaneously erode material security and undermine identities associated with work, status, and community.

Populist movements may simplify these experiences by creating symbolic oppositions—such as "the people" versus "the elite" or "the nation" versus "globalization"—and transforming diffuse anxieties into politically mobilizing narratives. Critical theory guards against the uncritical acceptance of such narratives. It emphasizes that categories such as "the people," "tradition," and "sovereignty" are not simply pre-given realities but politically constructed and contested representations. Even when rooted in legitimate grievances, such constructions may exclude particular groups or reinforce hierarchical distinctions. The task of critique is therefore twofold: to grasp the economic transformations underlying cultural dislocation and to analyze the ideological forms that develop in response to it, including populist constructions of collective identity.

Pragmatism is highly relevant here too because it focuses on how to respond constructively to cultural dislocation. Rather than adjudicating the ultimate validity of competing identities, it treats cultural tensions as problems that can be addressed through collective inquiry and deliberation. Following Dewey, democracy is understood as a mode of associated living that depends on communication, participation, and the continuous reconstruction of institutions in response to changing conditions.[57] Within this framework, cultural dislocation can signal a breakdown in the relationship between citizens and the institutions that govern them. When individuals feel that their experiences and concerns are neither recognized nor addressed, they may become more receptive to alternative forms of political expression. The task of democratic governance is therefore to create channels through which such concerns can be articulated, debated, and incorporated into decision-making processes. One possible response is the creation of citizens' assemblies and other deliberative forums in which diverse perspectives can be brought into sustained dialogue. Such institutions do not eliminate disagreement, but they may transform some forms of antagonism into deliberation. By fostering mutual understanding and collective problem-solving, they can help bridge the gap between lived experience and institutional action.

For pragmatism, establishing channels of communication is crucial, but outcomes matter as well. Cultural recognition is not merely a matter of symbolic inclusion—of being seen, heard, or acknowledged—but is closely connected to material conditions that shape people's lives. Experiences of misrecognition may be intensified by economic insecurity, unequal access to resources, or the erosion of social infrastructure. Recognition that remains purely symbolic can therefore appear superficial if it is not accompanied by tangible improvements in living conditions. Thus policies that address inequality, provide economic security, and support community life can consequently play an important role in mitigating the sources of cultural dislocation. By reducing material precarity

[57] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education,* ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, The Middle Works, 1899–1924, vol. 9, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 93; Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems,* 325.

and strengthening the conditions for social participation, such policies can restore connections between individuals and the broader institutional order. From a pragmatist perspective, effective responses to cultural tensions should therefore integrate both symbolic and material dimensions. Recognition and redistribution need not be treated as entirely separate domains; both concern the conditions under which individuals can participate meaningfully in democratic life.[58]

The interplay between critical theory and pragmatism is again essential. Critical theory provides tools for diagnosing the structural and ideological roots of cultural dislocation, while pragmatism provides a framework for engagement emphasizing participation, experimentation, and institutional adaptation. Pragmatism resists the binary logic that often characterizes populist discourse by emphasizing the plurality of interests and identities within society. Governance becomes a process of negotiation and compromise in which different perspectives are brought into relation in pursuit of workable solutions. Together, critical theory and pragmatism suggest that the appropriate response to identity-based populism is neither simple rejection nor uncritical accommodation, but democratic reconstruction: an ongoing process of aligning institutions with the evolving experiences and needs of citizens.

c. Digital Disintermediation and the Transformation of Representation

Another origin of New Populism identified above is the transformation of political communication under conditions of digital capitalism. From a critical-theoretical perspective, this change represents a fundamental transformation in the structure of the public sphere. Building on the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, whose analysis of the culture industry emphasized the relationship between communication, commodification, and domination, contemporary theorists have extended similar questions to digital media environments.[59] While the technological forms have changed, the underlying concern remains: media systems are not neutral channels of communication but structures that shape perception, interaction, and power.

In the digital context, these dynamics are intensified by the economic logic of platform capitalism. Scholars such as Christian Fuchs and Nick Srnicek have examined the commodification of digital activity, data, and attention within contemporary capitalism.[60] Algorithms and platform architectures can privilege content that maximizes engagement, including emotionally charged, polarizing, or sensational material. As a result, the visibility of political messages is not determined primarily by their deliberative quality but also by their capacity to capture attention.

This has profound implications for democratic representation. Traditional intermediaries—political parties, professional journalism, and civic organizations—have historically played important roles in structuring public discourse, filtering information, and facilitating political communication. Digital disintermediation weakens some of these functions, enabling more direct forms of communication between political actors and citizens. On the one hand, this can democratize access and amplify previously marginalized voices. On the other hand, it can fragment the public sphere, weaken shared informational environments, and intensify polarization.

From a critical-theoretical standpoint, this transformation reflects a broader shift in the relationship between communication and power. Habermas's conception of the public sphere provides a useful normative reference point for assessing communicative environments in which speed, immediacy, personalization,

[58] Marcin Kilanowski, "Ku społeczeństwu obywatelskiemu: Czego dziś może nas nauczyć pragmatyzm?" *Kultura i Edukacja*, no. 1 (2017), 50–62.

[59] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94–136.

[60] See: Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2017); Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).

and affect can displace sustained argumentation.[61] This concept helps us to understand how political discourse increasingly operates through dynamic and volatile digital networks of communication rather than exclusively through stable institutional intermediaries. Their effects depend upon the institutional, economic, and political contexts in which they operate. Critical theory therefore emphasizes the ambivalence of these developments. The task of critique is to analyze these dynamics without falling into either technological determinism or naïve technological optimism.

Pragmatism - on the other hand - approaches these transformations as a problem of institutional design, democratic practice, and collective learning. Rather than viewing digital media as an external force acting upon democracy, pragmatism would asks how democratic systems can incorporate new forms of communication in ways that enhance participation, inquiry, and deliberation. Rooted in Dewey's conception of democracy as associated living and experimental inquiry, this approach emphasizes the continuous reconstruction of democratic practices under changing social conditions.[62]

From this perspective, digital tools can potentially serve as extensions of democratic inquiry. They may support access to political processes, enabling broader participation in consultations, deliberation, and public debate. Online platforms can also facilitate forms of deliberative engagement and hybrid participation that combine digital accessibility with face-to-face interaction.[63] Such innovations can make governance more inclusive and responsive, particularly for individuals who face barriers to traditional forms of participation.

Pragmatism also emphasizes institutional reflexivity and learning. The design of digital platforms is not politically neutral and can be influenced by law, regulation, institutional design, and democratic oversight. Measures such as greater algorithmic transparency, appropriate content-governance mechanisms, and support for diverse information environments can therefore be treated as objects of democratic experimentation. Such interventions should remain subject to ongoing evaluation, revision, and public justification.

In a Deweyan sense, institutions can function as sites of inquiry in which different configurations of communication, participation, and regulation are tested against their consequences. Rather than seeking definitive solutions, pragmatism emphasizes continuous improvement, responsiveness, and the capacity to revise practices in light of experience. Rorty's account adds an emphasis on the contingent and historically situated character of public vocabularies. Thus it can be said that digital environments do not simply transmit truth or falsehood; they also shape the vocabularies through which political problems are described and contested.[64] The challenge, therefore, is not necessarily to restore an idealized neutral public sphere but to cultivate communicative practices that expand solidarity, enable mutual understanding, and sustain democratic cooperation under conditions of pluralism and disagreement.

The combination of critical theory and pragmatism thus provides a comprehensive framework for addressing digital disintermediation. Critical theory helps explain how platform capitalism and media structures shape political communication, highlighting the risks of commodification, fragmentation, and domination. Pragmatism, in turn, helps formulate practical strategies for redesigning institutions and practices in response to these challenges, emphasizing experimentation, participation, and

[61] See: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
[62] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*; Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry;* Marcin Kilanowski, "Radical Democracy and Revolutionary Reform: Looking for Solutions in Times of Democratic Disruption." In *Populist Constitutionalism and Illiberal Democracies*, edited by Martin Belov (Cambridge: Intersentia, 2021), 31-46.
[63] James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[64] See: Rorty Richard, *Consequences of Pragmatism*; Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

adaptive governance. Together, they suggest that the transformation of representation is not simply a problem to be managed but also an opportunity for democratic renewal—provided that it is approached with both critical awareness and institutional creativity.

d. Institutional Distrust

The fourth origin of New Populism identified in the first part of this paper is institutional distrust. From a critical-theoretical perspective, institutional distrust is not merely a matter of individual attitudes but can also reflect deeper structural and symbolic transformations in contemporary societies. Habermas's account of the relationship between system and lifeworld provides a useful framework for understanding how institutions can become disconnected from citizens' communicatively formed expectations.[65] When institutions appear unresponsive, opaque, or disconnected from everyday experiences, confidence in their legitimacy may erode.

This perspective is rooted in broader Frankfurt School concerns about rationalization and domination. Horkheimer and Adorno emphasized how modern forms of rationality can become detached from emancipatory purposes, while Marcuse argued that advanced societies can integrate individuals into systems that constrain meaningful participation and alternative possibilities.[66] In contemporary contexts, these dynamics can manifest in perceptions that political and economic institutions operate according to logics inaccessible or unaccountable to ordinary citizens.

The increasing complexity of policymaking, the influence of economic elites, and the use of technocratic language can contribute to a sense of distance between institutions and citizens. Even when institutions perform their formal functions effectively, their symbolic legitimacy may weaken if they no longer appear to represent fairness, inclusion, or collective purpose. This dual dimension underscores the depth of the challenge: rebuilding trust requires attention to both material performance and symbolic legitimacy.

Pragmatism is also important for understanding how trust can be rebuilt. It suggests that trust is sustained not simply through abstract declarations of legitimacy but through practices in which institutions demonstrate reliability, competence, responsiveness, and willingness to learn. Rooted in the work of William James and Dewey, and developed in different directions by later pragmatists such as Robert Brandom and Hilary Putnam, pragmatism treats many normative and epistemic achievements as emerging from social practices rather than existing independently of them.[67] From this perspective, trust is built through repeated experiences in which institutions demonstrate reliability and responsiveness. It is not secured once and for all but continuously negotiated through interactions between institutions and citizens. This shifts attention away from abstract legitimacy toward the everyday practices through which authority is enacted and evaluated.

Rebuilding trust therefore requires practical and institutional measures. Improving service delivery, increasing transparency, and creating meaningful opportunities for participation can contribute to restoring confidence in institutions. In a pragmatist framework, however, such reforms are not merely technical adjustments. As Ostrom points out they are part of a broader process of institutional inquiry in which actors learn from the consequences of existing arrangements, revise rules and practices, and adapt institutions to changing social conditions.[68] Institutions must therefore be capable not only of

[65] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 368-371.
[66] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 94-108; Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1-18.
[67] See: James William, *Pragmatism*, in *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Penguin Books, 1995); Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*; Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy.*
[68] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*; Elinor Ostrom, *Under-*

implementing policies but also of responding to criticism, incorporating citizen input, and revising decisions in light of their consequences.

Pragmatists emphasize the relational and contextual nature of knowledge, values, inquiry, and human experience. The same is true of trust. Trust depends however not only on institutional performance understood in narrowly procedural terms but also on the broader social environment in which institutional interactions take place. Whether institutions are perceived as trustworthy is shaped by historically accumulated experiences, social inequalities, patterns of exclusion, and the quality of everyday relations between citizens and public authorities.

This insight resonates particularly strongly with Putnam's critique of the rigid separation between facts and values. In *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, Putnam argues that factual judgments are not entirely value-free because inquiry itself depends upon normative assumptions concerning relevance, rationality, coherence, and human flourishing.[69] Applied to institutional trust, this suggests that assessments of institutional trustworthiness cannot be reduced to supposedly objective indicators such as efficiency, transparency, or procedural compliance alone. Citizens evaluate institutions through interpretive frameworks shaped by moral expectations, collective experiences, and perceptions of recognition or marginalization. A formally well-functioning institution may therefore fail to generate trust if broader social conditions undermine individuals' sense of dignity, inclusion, or reciprocity. Conversely, trust can emerge even under conditions of institutional imperfection when social relations foster solidarity and shared expectations of good faith. From such a pragmatist perspective, trust should therefore be understood as an emergent social practice situated at the intersection of institutional arrangements and lived experience.

This underscores the limitations of approaches that seek to restore trust solely through technocratic institutional reform. While procedural improvements remain important, they cannot succeed independently of broader efforts to address structural inequalities, social fragmentation, and the normative conditions that shape public life. Trust, in this sense, is not merely a response to institutional performance but also reflects the wider moral and social ecology within which institutions operate.

Richard Rorty's perspective adds another dimension by emphasizing the contingent and historically situated character of political legitimacy. Institutions do not command legitimacy simply because they correspond to universal or ahistorical principles; rather, their legitimacy is sustained through historically developed practices and vocabularies through which citizens understand themselves and their political community.[70] Rorty's anti-foundationalism shifts attention toward the practical and conversational dimensions of democratic life. From this perspective, institutions remain legitimate insofar as citizens can regard them as part of a shared project of coexistence and problem-solving. Trust therefore depends less on abstract justification alone than on the capacity of institutions to maintain inclusive forms of communication and cultivate a sense of belonging among diverse social groups. This also means that distrust cannot be understood solely as the consequence of institutional failure in a technical or administrative sense. Distrust can reflect deeper ruptures in social solidarity and the erosion of shared vocabularies through which citizens interpret political life. When groups feel excluded, misrecognized, or unable to see their experiences represented within public discourse, institutional legitimacy may weaken even when formal procedures remain intact.

In Rortyan terms, democratic stability depends not on philosophical agreement about universal principles but on sustaining shared political practices and vocabu-

standing Institutional Diversity (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[69] Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, 27.

[70] Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 77.

laries through which citizens can redescribe themselves as members of a common political community.[71] Rebuilding trust would therefore involve more than restoring administrative efficiency or procedural compliance. It would also require reconstructing the linguistic and normative frameworks through which citizens relate to political authority and to one another. Public trust grows when institutions foster conditions in which individuals can recognize themselves as participants in shared democratic practices rather than merely as objects of distant administration.[72]

Critical theory and pragmatist thought together provide a nuanced understanding of institutional distrust by emphasizing its relational, social, and historically situated character. Both approaches reject narrowly procedural or technocratic understandings of legitimacy and draw attention to the ways institutions are embedded in broader structures of power, communication, and social cooperation. Transformations in capitalism, governance, and public discourse can therefore undermine trust not only by weakening institutional performance but also by eroding solidarity, inclusion, and the shared frameworks through which citizens relate to political authority. From this perspective, institutional distrust cannot be addressed through technical reforms or rhetorical appeals alone. Rebuilding trust requires both structural change and the cultivation of democratic practices that sustain participation, reciprocity, and mutual recognition in everyday institutional life. Trust emerges not simply from formal compliance or administrative efficiency but from the capacity of institutions to remain responsive to the lived experiences and expectations of citizens. In this sense, critical and pragmatist approaches converge in treating democracy as an ongoing process of inquiry, adaptation, and cooperative problem-solving through which institutional legitimacy is continually negotiated and renewed. Only by combining critical insight with pragmatist approaches to inquiry, adaptation, and democratic cooperation can political systems strengthen their credibility and resilience in the face of contemporary challenges.

VII. Conclusions – What Is at Stake?

The analysis of the origins of New Populism shows that it does not appear as a disturbance within otherwise stable democratic systems. Rather, it signals a deeper reconfiguration of the mechanisms through which democracy is mediated, experienced, and contested. The transformations outlined in the preceding sections—economic, cultural, technological, and institutional—are converging in ways that reshape not only political outcomes but also the very logic of representation itself. What is at stake, therefore, is not merely a shift in policy preferences or electoral alignments, but a redefinition of how democratic authority is constructed and exercised.

At the center of this transformation lies a shift from institutional to personal forms of representation. Traditional democratic mediation—through parties, parliaments, and bureaucratic processes—has increasingly been challenged by more direct, personalized, and performative modes of political engagement. Leaders claim to embody the will of the people rather than represent it through institutional channels. While this shift can enhance immediacy and responsiveness, it also risks eroding the procedural safeguards and deliberative capacities that have historically underpinned democratic stability. Representation becomes less a structured process of negotiation and more a symbolic and affective relationship between leader and constituency.

Simultaneously, New Populism reflects the convergence of economic grievance and identity politics. Material insecurity—stemming from inequality, labor-market transformation, and regional decline—intersects with

[71] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 197.
[72] Kilanowski, "Radical Democracy and Revolutionary Reform", 42-44.

cultural anxieties related to belonging, recognition, and social change. These dimensions are not separate but mutually reinforcing, producing a political landscape in which economic discontent is often expressed through cultural narratives, while cultural conflicts are intensified by material disparities. The result is a moralized and polarized political field in which compromise becomes more difficult and conflicts are framed in existential terms.

At the same time, trust in technocratic governance has eroded. Institutions once associated with expertise, neutrality, and problem-solving capacity are increasingly viewed with skepticism or hostility. This decline in trust reflects both real or perceived failures in addressing citizens' concerns and broader transformations in communication, authority, and legitimacy. The challenge is not simply to restore confidence in technocracy, but to rethink the relationship between expertise and democratic accountability, ensuring that governance remains both effective and responsive.

Taken together, these developments point to a fundamental question: not whether populism will disappear, but how democratic systems will respond to it. Populism, in its contemporary form, is not an anomaly to be corrected but a symptom of deeper structural transformations. Its persistence indicates unresolved tensions within liberal democracy—between responsiveness and constraint, inclusion and pluralism, and immediacy and deliberation. The task, therefore, is not to suppress populist energies but to absorb, channel, and transform them in ways that reinforce rather than undermine democratic institutions.

The risks of failure are significant. If populist mobilization remains unmediated, it may contribute to the erosion of constitutional norms, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, and the consolidation of executive power. Conversely, if democratic systems prove incapable of responding to legitimate grievances, they risk further delegitimation, opening the door to more radical or exclusionary forms of politics. A third possibility—equally troubling—is the entrenchment of oligarchic populism, in which popular rhetoric coexists with entrenched economic inequality, producing a system that is formally democratic but substantively constrained because the real capacity of citizens to influence politics, shape policy, or exercise equal democratic power is limited.[73]

Yet the current moment also contains possibilities for renewal. The pressures generated by New Populism can serve as catalysts for institutional innovation, democratic experimentation, and renewed engagement with questions of representation and legitimacy. As suggested earlier, the convergence of critical theory and pragmatism offers one possible pathway forward: combining structural awareness with practical reform and critique with construction. Through such an approach, democratic systems may be able to adapt to changing conditions while preserving their core commitments.

Ultimately, what is being renegotiated is the very grammar of democratic representation: who "the people" are understood to be, how their will is articulated, and through which institutions it is translated into policy.[74] This grammar is not fixed; it evolves in response to historical conditions, social transformations, and political contestation. The New Populist moment represents one such period of renegotiation—fraught with tension, uncertainty, and risk, but also open to reimagining the grammar of democratic representation. What is at stake is the future of democratic life itself. Whether contemporary democracies can reconcile popular sovereignty with institutional stability, economic inclusion with global interdependence, and responsiveness with responsibility will shape not only the trajectory of populism but also the durability and legitimacy of democratic governance in the decades to come.

[73] See: Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); See also: Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).
[74] Kilanowski, "Radical Democracy and Revolutionary Reform", 33-35.

While searching for responses and solutions, critique alone is insufficient. One of the enduring challenges of critical theory, as often noted by its own proponents, is the risk of diagnostic depth coupled with practical indeterminacy. By revealing the pervasiveness of structural constraints, critical theory can inadvertently foster a sense of paralysis in which meaningful transformation appears either unattainable or indefinitely deferred. It is precisely here that pragmatism offers a necessary counterpoint.

At the same time, pragmatism is not without its limitations. Its emphasis on feasibility and compromise can risk superficiality or accommodation, particularly if it fails to engage with the deeper structural dynamics identified by critical theory. Without a robust understanding of power, pragmatic reforms may address immediate symptoms while leaving underlying inequalities intact.[75] In this sense, pragmatism requires the critical-theoretical lens to ensure that its solutions are not merely adaptive but also transformative in orientation.

The convergence of these two traditions, therefore, is not a matter of simple synthesis but of productive tension. Critical theory asks: What are the structural conditions that produce this moment? Whose interests are being served? What forms of domination persist beneath the surface? Pragmatism adds: what can be done? Which institutional arrangements are workable? How can democratic practices be improved in practice? Together, they provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding and responding to New Populism than either could provide alone, explaining the complex reality in which we live, identifying the philosophical foundations upon which responses should be built, and indicating what procedures and institutional arrangements should be developed.[76]

This combined approach is particularly well suited to navigating the central dilemmas of the present. It recognizes that populist grievances are often grounded in genuine experiences of exclusion, inequality, and political disempowerment, while also acknowledging that the forms through which these grievances are articulated may at times threaten democratic stability and pluralism. In this sense, New Populists identify real failures within contemporary political and economic systems, even if their diagnoses and proposed remedies remain contested.

At the same time, both critical theory and pragmatism support efforts to reconstruct institutional legitimacy without ignoring the structural constraints imposed by global capitalism, digital infrastructures, and shifting forms of political communication. Importantly, pragmatism should not be reduced to instrumental problem-solving. It also emphasizes the ethical and normative dimensions of collective life, insisting that democratic action must remain guided by values such as inclusion, cooperation, solidarity, and freedom understood as responsibility. Freedom should not be reduced to individual autonomy detached from social life; rather, it should be understood as responsibility toward others and toward the democratic community. As presented in *The Rorty-Habermas Debate: Toward Freedom as Responsibility*, democratic freedom emerges through practices of dialogue, solidarity, and mutual accountability, in which individuals recognize mutual obligations within a shared public sphere.[77] Pragmatist inquiry is therefore not only practical but also reflective and value-oriented, concerned with how institutions can embody and sustain shared democratic commitments under changing historical conditions.

The perspective that emerges from the combination of critical theory and pragmatism presents a mode of political engagement that is simultaneously critical and constructive: capable not only of identifying domination, exclusion, and institutional failure, but also of imagining

[75] Marcin Kilanowski, "The Questionable Role of Experts in Global Governance: Toward a More Democratic Approach." In *Democracy and Globalization: Legal and Political Analysis on the Eve of the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, edited by Charlotte Sieber-Gasser and Alberto Ghibellini, (Cham: Springer, 2021), 215-227.
[76] More on that see: Kilanowski, *The Rorty-Habermas Debate,* 150-160.
[77] Kilanowski, *The Rorty-Habermas Debate*, 175-179.

and testing alternative forms of democratic cooperation. It is through the ongoing interplay between critique and reconstruction, structural conditions and democratic agency, and the continuous effort to align institutional practices with shared democratic values that political systems may yet find pathways toward renewal and renewed legitimacy.

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CONSTRUCTING A DEMOCRATIC CULTURE: POLITICAL THEORY WITHIN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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ABSTRACT: In *Freedom and Culture*, John Dewey maintained that "the problem of freedom and of democratic institutions is tied up with what kind of culture exists; with the necessity of free culture for free political institutions." Recent political developments indicate that existing liberal democracies have not developed a democratic culture, the type of culture that would support the survival and functioning of a democratic polity, so much so that we now confront a deep crisis of democracy. If philosophers are to address this crisis in a direct and concrete way qua philosophers, the medium of public philosophy is one option and this paper is devoted to exploring that option.

As Raymond Williams defined it, culture in its broadest sense is "a whole way of life." The siting of political theory within a democratic culture as a whole way of life creates a double role for political theorists as public philosophers. We can engage with the culture as an array of meanings for specific activities and explore publicly the political dimensions of framework of concepts that determine those meanings, a task for which political theorists are well-suited. Cultural identity is very personal, and as feminists have always understood, the personal is political. At the same time, we are constructing the public sphere in which those discussions actually occur, understood to include institutional settings and normative claims, both formal and informal, within a democratic culture conceived as a whole way of life. As intellectuals, we are active within what is in ideal terms an Enlightenment public sphere, in Habermasian terms, where persons meet to discuss issues of public concern with the outcome is determined by the force of the better argument.

As political theorists we need to articulate and institutionalize the values of dignity, recognition, and equality within our public sphere. Effectively, we are engaged in the project of democracy constituting itself as a culture. But just as there are democratic cultural practices and institutions, there are undemocratic and anti-democratic ones as well. The ferocious attack on DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) is a case in point, as it is an assault on democratic culture itself. Diversity as respect for our pluralism, equity as an obligation imposed by justice; and inclusion as full participation within the community are fundamentally democratic values and give concrete expression to equality of consideration within the democratic community.

Kant's unity of reason implies a unity of praxis and theory. As a practical matter, the institutional framework of our democratic culture will respond pragmatically to the demands of the time. We need not tolerate the intolerant; a democratic culture has a right to defend itself, and that raises the issue of the institutions suitable for that defense. Both Dewey and Habermas understood the importance of institutional structures. Thus, the role of political theory as public philosophy is not just articulating and guiding arguments within the public sphere, but also constructing through our practice the institutions of that same public sphere in which those discussions occur.

Keywords: culture, democracy, public philosophy, public sphere, DEI, hate speech, identity politics

In 1939, John Dewey published a short but rich book *Freedom and Culture*, in which he maintained that "the problem of freedom and of democratic institutions is tied up with what kind of culture exists; with the necessity of free culture for free political institutions."[1] Though his points of reference (Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union) are dated, Dewey's actual discussion and substantive points feel very contemporary. Recent political developments indicate that existing liberal democracies have not developed a democratic culture, the type of culture that would support the survival and functioning of a democratic polity, so much so that we now confront a deep crisis of democracy. If philosophers are to address this crisis in a direct and concrete way qua philosophers, the medium of public philosophy is one option and this paper is devoted to exploring that option.

In my presentation, I shall consider Dewey's thought on the problem of democratic culture as an expression and continuation of the democratic ideals of the Enlightenment with a focus on the Habermasian public sphere as a central location for philosophical activity. In the first section, I look at a particular feature of pragmatist epistemology that is continuous with Kant's critical philosophy and of critical importance for democratic culture and the public sphere. I then turn to Dewey's discussion of culture and the role within it of the democratic public sphere and follow that with a discussion of the fundamental values of diversity, equity, and inclusion within that public sphere, values that are now under assault. In my final section I look at two challenges in the form of

[1] John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), 13.

identity politics, though from very different perspectives that generate different concerns with the self-defense and reconstruction of the public sphere. The philosophical substrate and through-line of this presentation is a Kantian understanding of the intersubjectivity of reason and its critical importance, which is shared by Dewey.

I. Epistemology and Democracy

In his final posthumous-published book *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*, Richard Rorty argues that pragmatism in general and Dewey in particular sought to complete a second phase of the Enlightenment. In its first phase, Enlightenment thinkers rejected the external authority of God and replaced it with the dictum that one ought to think for oneself. In the second Enlightenment pragmatists such as Dewey sought to reject the authority of an external Reality and replace it with an intersubjective consensus among knowers. As he puts it, "By anti-authoritarianism in epistemology, I mean the substitution of intersubjectivity, in the form of free consensus among the members of those curious enough to inquire, for objectivity, where objectivity is understood as a privileged relation to a non-human being, such as God or Reality or Truth."[2] Understood thus, pragmatism is at its core a profoundly democratic philosophy. Though Rorty's version of pragmatism, indebted as it is to John Dewey, is explicitly anti-Kantian, which might explain his rather dismissive attitude towards Charles Sanders Peirce, Hillary Putnam has suggested that at times Dewey can sound quite Kantian.[3] Further, Ruth Anna Putnam has pointed out that Kant's dictum that one must think for oneself is exemplary in regard to moral thought since the Enlightenment. While the maxim appears to violate pragmatist commitments to cooperative inquiry and the social character of morality, she correctly indicates that "thinking *for* oneself does not mean 'thinking by oneself.' In morality, as in science, inquiry is a cooperative enterprise. Subjectivity in the sense of giving too much weight to one's own interests, or in the sense of taking one's own perspective as the only perspective, can be avoided only by engaging with others, with all relevant others."[4]

Fortunately, Kant did not in fact overlook the social aspects of inquiry. Even in the short essay to which Putnam refers, "What is Enlightenment?" Kant focuses on the use that one makes of one's reason before a reading public. In another short essay, "What is Orientation in Thinking?" Kant asks the question of how well would we think if we did not think in common? His answer is not very well: "Yet how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think in community with others to whom we *communicate* our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us! Thus one can very well say that this external power which wrenches away people's freedom publicly to *communicate* their thoughts also takes from them the freedom to *think* – that single gem remaining to us in the midst of all the burdens of civil life, through which alone we can devise means of overcoming all the evils of our condition."[5] For Kant, enlightenment simply is the development among persons of their capacity for the self-legislative exercise of reason – the gradual realization of autonomy. The public use of that reason plays a critical role in that process. As with any other capacity, one's reason must be exercised if it is to develop at all. Only if individuals are free to discuss and debate publicly can they employ their own reason, correcting and purging it of inevitable error. Consequently, Kant maintains that "the public use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men." Kant's conception of the public use of reason is admit-

[2] Richard Rorty, *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2024), 16.
[3] Hilary Putnam and Ruth Anna Putnam *Pragmatism as a Way of Life: The Enduring Legacy of William James and John Dewey*, ed. David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), chap. 18, Kindle.
[4] Putnam and Putnam *Pragmatism as a Way of Life*, chap. 1.
[5] Immanuel Kant, "What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?" in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 12.

tedly rather limited, consisting as it does in "the use of which a person makes of it before the reading public, but nonetheless, through such exercise, persons are able to liberate themselves from the unthinking and mechanical acceptance of the proclamations of established authority. Furthermore, members of the reading public come to consider themselves as participants in a "society of world citizens," a Republic of Letters that transcends national boundaries.[6] Enlightenment is a social process based on the public exercise of reason in which public discourse is a constitutive element in the exercise of reason and intersubjective agreement is the hallmark of truth.

None of this is particularly surprising as it is anticipated in the later sections of the first *Critique*, not just the Prefaces. In the section on "The Discipline of Pure Reason," Kant reasserts that "Reason must in all its undertakings subject itself to criticism; should it limit freedom of criticism by any prohibitions, it must harm itself, drawing upon itself a damaging suspicion. Nothing is so important through its usefulness, nothing so sacred, that it may be exempted from the searching examination … For reason has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens, of whom each one must be permitted to express, without let of hindrance, his objections or even his veto."[7] Kant's arguments for this position run throughout his critical period and are fairly straightforward. Free and open communication and rational discussion among all interested parties submits those involved to the corrective of criticism by others as well access to information that would not otherwise have been available to lone individuals.

Later, in the "Canon of Pure Reason," Kant argues that "truth depends on agreement with the object, and in respect of it the judgments of each and every understanding must therefore be in agreement with each other. The touchstone whereby we decide whether our holding a thing to be true is conviction or mere persuasion is therefore external, namely, the possibility of communicating it and of finding it to be valid for all human reason. For there is then at least a presumption that the ground of the agreement of all judgments with each other, notwithstanding the different characters of individuals, rests upon the common ground, namely, upon the object, and that it is for this reason that they are all in agreement with the object—the truth of the judgment thereby being proved."[8] In sum, the achievement of intersubjective consensus indicates that the subjective idiosyncrasies of different individuals have been eliminated and been replaced by evidence generated by testing by a number of persons. Given that we can never occupy a God's eye point of view and that we render the universe intelligible to ourselves through the activity of our minds within it, which is the central point of Kant's Copernican Revolution, it follows that there is no other standpoint available to us other than that of intersubjectivity.

One will recall that in his essay on Enlightenment, Kant maintained that he lived in an age of Enlightenment, not an Enlightened age. Throughout his writings on history, he consistently maintains that the development of reason within humanity is a socio-historical process. Similarly, Dewey's remarks on science echo Kant's views on reason and connect them to a broader cultural frame: "a 'disinterested' interest in scientific inquiry…has developed a morale having its own distinctive features. Some of its obvious elements are willingness to hold belief in suspense, ability to doubt until evidence is obtained; willingness to go where the evidence points instead of putting first a personally preferred conclusion; ability to hold ideas in solution and use them as hypotheses to be tested instead of as dogmas to be asserted; and (possibly the most distinctive of all) enjoyment of new fields for inquiry and of new problems." Again, like Kant, Dewey

[6] Immanuel Kant, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment?*, trans. Lewis White Beck. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 87.
[7] Immanuel Kant 1965. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 593.
[8] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 645.

saw the spread of this spirit as occurring through the development of culture: "the influence of science on both means and ends is not exercised directly upon individuals but indirectly through incorporation within culture." [9]

II. The Culture of Democracy

Let us now turn to Dewey's understanding of how the influence of scientific inquiry functions through its incorporation in culture. Dewey conception of culture is quite broad and comprehensive, including all of the myriad dimensions of human social life. In a similar spirit, the British cultural theorist and historian Raymond Williams held that culture is to be understood most broadly as a whole way of life, which sums up rather neatly and concisely Dewey's conception, so I will adopt it for my purposes from here out.[10] Looked at in this way, culture forms an interconnected whole that molds our persons.

According to Dewey, the basic malleability of human beings indicates that, whatever our natural, innate capacities may be, their expression is indeterminate until they interact with the cultural practices and norms that give them a determinate form. As Dewey puts it, "even when we refer to tendencies and impulses that actually are genuine elements in human nature …… they produce consequences only as they are shaped into acquired dispositions by interaction with environing cultural conditions." In that sense, there are no determinately specifiable inherent components of human nature prior to that interaction, "even when we refer to tendencies and impulses that actually are genuine elements in human nature …… they produce consequences only as they are shaped into acquired dispositions by interaction with environing cultural conditions." [11] Those who seek to read off an unchangeable human nature from simple observation of current conduct ignore this dynamic, as "we can see that such opinions about the inherent make-up of human nature neglected the fundamental question of how its constituents are stimulated and inhibited, intensified and weakened; how their pattern is determined by interaction with cultural conditions."[12] As a result, the tendency is to generalize existing behavioral patterns into a description of permanent features of human activity through the false assertion that that is simply the way we are.

Consequently, when we view, the instruction in and conduct of scientific inquiry in this context "in its quality of an attitude embodied in habitual will to employ certain methods of observation, reflection, and test rather than others,… the significance of science as a constituent of culture takes on a new color."[13] Through the permeation of the spirit of scientific inquiry throughout our culture, we are socialized into the norms of scientific inquiry which in their turn function to reinforce democratic norms and practices. By contrast, those institutions that encourage an uncritical acceptance of the pronouncements of a person or sacred text as not open to question work in a direction contrary to democratic discourse. Accordingly, Dewey argues that, "the historic influence of religion has often been to magnify doctrines that are not subject critical inquiry and test. Their cumulative effect in producing habits of mind at odds with the attitudes required to for maintenance of democracy is probably much greater than is usually recognized."[14]

Understood in this way, the character of our public sphere is central to the project of a democratic culture. As with reason, communication is essential to the development of persons and their incorporation into human community: "To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs,

[9] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 144-145.
[10] Raymond Williams *The Long Revolution* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2021).
[11] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 109.
[12] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 29.
[13] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 145.
[14] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 151.

desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values."[15] By thinking of culture as a whole way of life, then, we recognize that, as Dewey maintained, "the struggle for democracy has to be maintained on as many fronts as culture has aspects."[16]

III. The Democratic Public Sphere: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The siting of political theory within a democratic culture as a whole way of life creates a double role for political theorists as public philosophers within the public sphere. In the public sphere, we can engage with the culture as an array of meanings for specific activities and explore publicly the political dimensions of framework of concepts that determine those meanings, a task for which political theorists are well-suited. At the same time, we are constructing the public sphere, understood to include institutional settings and normative claims, both formal and informal, in which those discussions actually occur within a democratic culture conceived as a whole way of life. As intellectuals, we are active within what is ideally an Enlightenment public sphere, where persons meet to discuss issues of public concern with the outcome is determined by the force of the better argument. As political theorists we need to articulate and institutionalize the values of dignity, recognition, and equality within our public sphere. In other words, we need to engage in the practice of public philosophy, conceived of as the presentation of philosophical ideas and arguments presented in non-technical language addressed to a lay public. As Jürgen Habermas puts it, "it is simply not true that complex political considerations cannot be translated into everyday language that everyday citizens can understand – otherwise they would not be *political* considerations… it is a question of clever and skillful professional translation whether the essence of the matter and its justification is captured by an explanation expressed in normal language."[17] Effectively, we are engaged in the project of democracy constituting itself as a culture.

Rather than pursuing the traditional tasks of political theory, which involves identifying and justifying the basic principles of political order, Habermas maintains that "[A theory of democracy] is instead to *rationally reconstruct* such principles from existing law and from the corresponding intuitive expectations and conceptions of legitimacy of the citizens. It must render the fundamental meaning of the historically *established* and *proven*, and hence sufficiently stable, constitutional orders explicit and explain the justifying reasons that can invest the de facto exercise of government with legitimizing power in the eyes of their citizens, and therefore also ensure civic participation. That form of political theory, by making *explicit* the implicit consciousness of the mass of citizens who participate in political life, can in turn *shape* their normative self-understanding."[18] But we also need to explicitly criticize the contrary principles, which are invoked to delegitimize and destabilize democracy. For just as there are democratic cultural practices and institutions, there are undemocratic and anti-democratic ones as well. The ferocious attack on DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) is a case in point, as it is an assault on democratic culture itself. Diversity as respect for our pluralism, equity as an obligation imposed by justice, and inclusion as full participation within the community are fundamentally democratic values and give concrete expression to equality of consideration within the democratic community. These values are also well-grounded in the epistemology outlined above, "One can assume that the orientation of reasonable participants to the truth or correctness of their argued convictions adds more fuel to the fire of political disputes and

[15] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*. (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1954), 154.
[16] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 173.
[17] Jürgen Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023), 101.
[18] Habermas, *New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, 10.

lends them a fundamentally *agonal character*. To argue is to contradict, It is only the right – and, indeed, the encouragement – to say 'no' to each other that elicits the epistemic potential of conflicting opinions in discourse; the latter is geared to the self-correction of participants who, without mutual criticism, could not *learn from one another*. The point of deliberative politics, after all, that it enables us to *improve* our beliefs in political disputes and get *closer* to correct solutions to problems."[19] Thus, the political public sphere plays the vital role of "the sounding board for the disruptions of major functional systems in need of repair,"[20] but for that to happen, as Dewey pointed out, "the adjustment of interests demands that diverse interests have a chance to articulate themselves."[21] Understood in this way, the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion are basic to the proper functioning of a truly democratic politics.

IV. Two Challenges of the Politics of Identity: Reactionary Nationalism and Elite Capture

Among the many contemporary challenges involved in constructing a democratic culture, there are two that stand out as being rooted in different versions of identity and as responses to neoliberalism: reactionary nationalism and elite capture. Cultural identity is very personal, and as feminists have always understood, the personal is political. A challenge to one's cultural identity is a challenge to one's whole way of life and one's very being as a person as it has developed in one's culture. In approaching these challenges, I cannot pretend to offer comprehensive solutions. I can only follow John Dewey in pointing out that, first, in order to solve a problem, one must first become conscious of it as a problem, and, second, any solution must be compatible with the democratic culture we aim to construct.

As Habermas points out, "the moral core of a [liberal political] culture consists in the willingness of citizens to reciprocally recognize others as fellow citizens and democratic co-legislators endowed with equal rights. This begins with regarding political adversaries in a spirit open to compromise as *opponents* and no longer as *enemies*."[22] But what happens when "participants" in the public sphere do not consider their political adversaries as opponents, but as enemies, and do not share the commitment to deciding questions through the force of the better argument. Instead, we witness the verbal performance of transgressive cruelty simply as a way of "owning the Libs" and violent fantasies of conspiracy mongering. This is the situation with reactionary nationalism, the alt-Right, or far-right populism.

The neoliberal assault on democratic politics has generated a reaction in the form of the authoritarian politics of far-right populist movements, which seek to reinstate racial and gender hierarchies as a defense of the traditional values of their respective civilization. Throughout the world, right-wing populist regimes use widespread resentment of governing elites to stoke anger and fear of marginalized populations, cutbacks in public services, and increased authoritarian repression, all while claiming the mantle of cultural authenticity.

The far Right, or alt-Right, has long appreciated the importance of culture for politics. The late Andrew Breitbart famously declared that "politics is downstream from culture." Our values, traditions, customs, norms dictate our politics in such a fundamental way that winning the culture means occupying the high ground in the battle of politics. As Dewey understood in the 1930s, "in a way the Fascist claim goes deeper since it pretends to extend below merely intellectual loyalties, to which science appeals, and lay hold of fundamental emotions and impulses."[23] In doing so, reactionary nationalists, have rejected

[19] Habermas, *New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, 17.
[20] Habermas, *New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, 20
[21] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 128.
[22] Jürgen Habermas, *New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, 23.
[23] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 132.

the inclusive pluralistic democracy in favor of an exclusionary politics of repressive uniformity. In the United States, ethno-nationalism has merged with an intolerant white Protestant evangelicalism to produce Christian nationalism.

Breitbart's successor Steve Bannon has abandoned any pretense of a commitment to pursuing reason and truth in public discourse and instead advocates "flooding the zone with shit" so that people will not know what to believe. Furthermore, disinformation campaigns by autocrats take advantage of the relative openness of liberal democracies to spread disinformation through social media, a risk that Dewey fully understood. As he observed in the late 1930s, "The democratic belief in freedom of speech, free press and free assembly is one of the things that exposes democratic institutions to attack. For representatives of totalitarian states, who are the first to deny such freedom when they are in power, shrewdly employ it in a democratic country to destroy the foundations of democracy. Backed with the necessary financial means, they are capable of carrying on a work of continuous sapping and mining."[24]

In contrast to Habermas's understanding of adversaries as opponents, Bannon in particular and the far Right in general have embraced Carl Schmitt's identification of Friend and Enemy as the fundamental distinction of politics, so it is quite revealing that Bannon calls his podcast "The War Room."[25] The embrace of the division of politics into friends and enemies can be clearly seen in the characterization of political opponents in dehumanizing language and violent rhetoric used against immigrants, racial and religious minorities, and the trans community. This process of "Othering" such groups in order to justify their repression and public sphere, but for Dewey it is also evinces a distrust of humanity itself and sets in motion a process resulting in full dehumanization of those subjected to this process, ultimately stripping them of human dignity:

> Systematic hatred and suspicion of any human group, 'racial,' sectarian, political, denotes deep-seated skepticism about the qualities of human nature…. It may start by being directed at a particular group, and be supported in name by assigning special reasons why that ground is not worthy of confidence, respect, and decent human treatment. But the underlying attitude is one of fundamental distrust of human nature…. There is no physical acid which has the corrosive power possessed by intolerance directed against certain persons because they belong to a group that bears a certain name. Its corrosive potency gains with that which it feeds on. An anti-humanist attitude is the essence of every form of intolerance. Movements that begin by stirring up hostility against a group of people end by denying to them all human qualities.[26]

This provides us with a useful understanding of the both the character and the danger of hate speech. The central feature of this hate speech is the use of ascriptive identity as grounds for excluding a group from the public sphere, thereby violating the norm of inclusion and denying their legitimate claim to political equality.

Hate speech takes a quite dangerous turn in the form of stochastic terrorism as a form of indirect incitement to violence. Essentially, stochastic terrorism is hate speech amplified by mass media, including social media, that increases the probability of random acts of violence against the group that is the object of that hate. For example, the widespread repetitive characterization of gays and trans persons as groomers increases the likelihood that random actors will perpetrate violence against members of those groups. At this point, we are confronted with what Karl Popper called "the paradox of tolerance: Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant

[24] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 149.

[25] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Schmitt was the leading theorist of Nazi jurisprudence in the 1930s and 1940s, and his centering of the friend-enemy distinction is fundamental to understanding the politics of the contemporary far right.

[26] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 127.

society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them." Popper does not argue that we should simply censor intolerant ideas and speech, but that they should be permitted only "as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, ..." However, coercive forms of suppression are nonetheless acceptable in principle. In defense of tolerance itself, "we should claim the *right* to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of fists or pistols." As he sums it up, "we should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant."[27]

Popper's paradox of tolerance raises a crucial challenge: how does a public sphere regulate discourse in a manner compatible with the norms of democratic culture? As I mentioned earlier, I will only suggest possible responses here that respect the character of the public sphere as persons engaged in rational discourse with each other in seeking to attain mutual understanding regarding issues of public concern. Within the public sphere, then, threats of violence directed against other participants, including groups based on ascriptive identity, may be prohibited as clearly incompatible with the fundamental norms of civil discourse. In addition, moral censure can be used by participants to ensure that discourse is conducted in an appropriate manner. Accurate information, which is necessary for deliberation, ought to be secured through independent fact-checking by panels experts drawn from the professional associations of relevant disciplines. Given that participants are supposed to be actual persons, bots should be strictly restricted to legitimate purposes, and algorithms should be designed to reduce the risk of discursive bubbles. These are just a few measures in their broadest outlines that should be taken. Considerably more work is required for a more detailed elaboration of appropriate measures, but that is beyond the framework of this paper.

The second challenge that identity poses to democratic culture comes in the form of a type of identity politics identified with the political Left. Much of the resentment stoked by the populist far Right is ostensibly targeted at this form of identity politics and its corresponding cancel culture. Now there is a significant difference between the far-right identity politics of reactionary nationalism that seeks to reinforce or reinstate traditional hierarchies through the dehumanizing vilification of some marginalized Other, on the one hand, and a left identity politics that seeks the emancipation and inclusion of marginalized Others within a democratic polity, on the other hand. Thus, rather than a threat to democratic culture *per se*, the danger in this case is the fragmentation and resultant loss of a shared common discourse within a democratic culture through an inappropriate or inadequate understanding of the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.[28]

In his recent book *Elite Capture*, Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò has developed an important and insightful critique of identity politics in terms of elite capture. Elite capture is a pervasive phenomenon found within complex social systems in which "political projects can be hijacked by in principle or in effect by the well-positioned or well-resourced" within a group in pursuit of its own interests in such a way that "pubic resources such as knowledge, attention, and values become distorted and distributed by power structures."[29] As he describes it, "elite capture happens when the advantaged few steer resources

[27] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Volume I: The Spell of Plato*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 265.

[28] For an extensive and theoretically informed discussion of this point, see Yascha Mounck, *The Identity Trap: A Story of Power and Ideas in Our Time* (New York: Penguin, 2023).

[29] Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022), 10.

and institutions that could serve the many toward their own narrower interests and aims."[30] (2022, 22) Those in decision-making come to occupy that position due to processes of selection that exclude most persons; those who are in the room where the decisions are made tend to read the room in a way that reproduces the underlying structure of inequality. Thus, the call to "center the most marginalized" ignores the basic fact that the most marginalized are not even in the room in the first place and so are unable to represent their own interests. The spread of the current practice of identity politics has coincided with the widespread imposition of a neoliberal agenda. With its understanding of equality as simply 'equality of opportunity' for individual advancement, rather than equality of opportunity in access to the resources needed for human dignity and flourishing, as well as full participation in social life, neo-liberal ideology has proven to be an effective vehicle for the appropriation and distortion the originally emancipatory vision of identity politics.

Táíwò proposes to restore the vision of identity politics as originally propounded by the Combahee River Collective. The Collective was a group of radical Black lesbian feminists who had grown disenchanted with mainstream feminist organizations to recognize their own experiences and incorporate such an understanding into a program of action. The founding Statement of the Collective Statement includes the first use of the expression 'identity politics,' as well as the basic elements of the analysis of intersectionality. Identity politics was understood by its members as a politics rooted in their own lived experiences, who asserted the right to pursue their own emancipatory agenda in coalition with others, rather than just serving as adjuncts in the causes of others. Solidarity was to be the guiding principle governing the work of such a coalition.[31] Thus, the Collective proposed an understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in line with Dewey's understanding of democratic culture.

Motivated by this spirit, Táíwò advocates a constructive approach to politics through the building of institutions and movements, an approach that is to be judged by its consequences. How we treat others with whom we are organizing is of course critical in this approach, but the key is that we are organizing together to construct some larger institutional entity that seeks to change the surrounding society of which it is a part. We are essentially constructing a system within a system, and so we must pay attention to the relations between the two and focus on the desired outcome of structural change, demanding accountability to the most marginalized within a democratic public sphere.

Kant's unity of reason implies a unity of praxis and theory. As a practical matter, the institutional framework of our democratic culture will respond pragmatically to the demands of the time. We need not tolerate the intolerant; a democratic culture has a right to defend itself, and that raises the issue of the institutions suitable for that defense. Along with Taiwo, both Dewey and Habermas understood the importance of institutional structures. Thus, the role of political theory as public philosophy is not just articulating and guiding arguments within the public sphere, but also constructing through our practice the institutions of that same public sphere in which those discussions occur. Proceeding in the spirit of Dewey, "we have to see that democracy means the belief that humanistic culture should prevail; we should be frank and open in our recognition that the proposition is a moral one—like any idea that concerns what should be."[32]

[30] Táíwò, *Elite Capture*, 22.

[31] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 18-21. Taylor's work includes the original Statement, along with an in introduction and interviews with members of the Collective and, combined with Táíwò's book, provides a necessary corrective to the popular current understanding of identity politics.

[32] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 124.

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PRAGMATISM, NON-CONSENSUAL DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM[1]

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I offer a reinterpretation of populism as viewed through the lens of political pragmatism and my pragmatist concept of non-consensual democracy. My argument takes its starting point from a critique of the currently dominant approach in which populism is primarily described as a threat to liberal-democratic institutions. While such an assessment of populism is legitimate, it is also incomplete since it fails to explain why populist mobilizations prove to be convincing to the public. I argue that populism should also be regarded as an expression of real deficits of liberal democracy, including an enfeeblement of representation, a yawning gap between institutional politics and everyday experience, a crisis of representation, and the reduction of conflict to a technocratically managed consensus. In the first part, I build on John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and also Mikhail Bakhtin to outline the pragmatist understanding of politics as rooted in practices of everyday life. In the second part, I discuss my idea of non-consensual democracy, which proposes an alternative to both the deliberative model of consensus and the agonistic affirmation of conflict. In the third part, I draw a distinction between the common good and common interests to show that pragmatism furnishes us with a language capable of capturing democratic integration without recourse to the notion of community. This promotes construing populism as both a symptom and a challenge because while it reveals actual failings of liberal democracy, it responds to them in an anti-pluralist manner. Thus, the democratic response must not come down to a condemnation of populism; instead, democratic institutions must be restructured to accommodate permanent disagreement, conflicts of interest, and non-consensual dialogue.

Keywords: common good, common interests, liberal democracy, non-consensual democracy, pluralism, populism, pragmatism

In "Absolute Pragmatism," Scott Pratt has written the kind of essay that we should applaud from any colleague: rooted in sound historical scholarship, it has both a clear argumentative purpose and a real-world application. Briefly, he claims that a pragmatism modeled on some of Royce's later ideas might serve as a normative ground for decisive action in troubling times. Even the most critical response should thus be sympathetic with his effort, since whatever is true in Pratt's claim would be a boon to philosophers, or at least to pragmatists. Many people would very much like a philosophy to help us through the mess of climate change, war, genocide, and authoritarianism. And we should forgive a colleague for any failings in thus executing what has only very rarely succeeded among the best philosophers.

What are the broadly political uses of pragmatism? Can a specifically Roycean pragmatism be of any use in 2025 or beyond? Pratt worries that classical or pure pragmatism is a politically indecisive tendency in philosophy, and that the purest pragmatists are *eo ipso* reluctant to "take a side." But he thinks that a Roycean turn, according to which an absolute pragmatism is actualized through transparently irrevocable action, corrects this shortcoming. The Roycean pragmatism consists precisely in decisive side-taking, because it is decisive action that is the mark of the absolute. In this essay I hope to extend Pratt's inquiries into these questions with a series of skeptical problems, drawn from historical sources cognate to Pratt's own, about the uses of philosophy in responding to problems of the sort posed by fascism, climate change, genocide, and the seemingly endless list of difficulties faced by us citizens of the twenty-first century.

1. Introduction

Discussions on populism are dominated today by the language of crisis. Accordingly, populism is painted as a phenomenon that destabilizes liberal democracy, undermines the rule of law, impairs the autonomy of institutions, and destroys democratic pluralism. As a matter of fact, this gamut of accusations is well-founded because populist movements and leaders do tend to rely on the strategy in which the homogeneous people is pitted against the corrupt elites and the delegitimized political

[1] This article is an extended version of the paper I read at the European Pragmatist Conference in St. Gallen in 2025. The research for this study was funded from the National Science Centre Poland's grant *Estetyka populizmu: Walka polityczna i doświadczenie estetyczne w Polsce po 1989 roku* (The aesthetics of populism: Political struggle and aesthetic experience in post-1989 Poland) (No 2019/35/B/HS2/01187)

opponents.[2] However, this interpretation falls short if it does not explain why populism garners social credibility, as it does, in liberal democracies. The notions of manipulation, people's irrationality, or the "immaturity" of citizens, while not misguided, certainly fail to account for the scale of populist success. To elucidate this, I believe, we should rather ask what structural tensions and what social experiences, particularly those in everyday life, make the populist narrative so persuasive.

In this paper, I seek to show that inquiry of this kind is effectively supported by tools provided by pragmatism and by my pragmatistically informed idea of non-consensual democracy.[3] These two perspectives frame politics as being something more than just the domain of institutions, procedures, and formal decisions. On the contrary, they bind democracy to the practices of everyday life, the experience of recognition and exclusion, the modes of articulating interests, and the ways of engaging in relations with others. Using approach, we can understand populism not only as a threat to democracy but also as a symptom of real deficits of liberal democracy.

Given this, I argue two major points. One is that populism should be interpreted as a response to the rift between democracy as a set of institutions and rules and democracy as a form of life. The other is that in our response to this rift we must not either technocratically defend the status quo or endorse the anti-pluralist politics of the homogeneous people; instead, we should buttress the democratic forms capable of sustaining dialogue despite the lack of agreement. In this sense, non-consensual democracy does not abolish conflict, but makes it politically productive.

2. Pragmatism and the New Formula of the Political

The pragmatist concept of politics stems from challenging the rigid division into the political and the private/everyday. Describing politics in terms of parties, parliaments, and state procedures alone is unfeasible because modern societies produce new movements, new masses, and new forms of expressions that blur the traditional lines between the public and private spheres. The same insight was expressed by John Dewey, who stated in *The Public and Its Problems* that an action becomes public when its effects spill beyond its direct participants and come to affect the welfare of others.[4] This means that the political is not defined once and for all by the institutional order; rather, it arises from social relations and their consequences.

This pragmatist concept of politics is particularly useful in the study of today's populism. Indeed, it helps capture the areas of collective life that the liberal-institutional model consistently marginalizes, such as emotions, the sense of being invisible, the experience of humiliation, distrust of experts, a crisis of party representation, and the increasing importance of digital communication. If politics is only thought of as a space of formal rules, populism is by default regarded as a glitch. Yet if politics is believed to be embedded in everyday practices, populism becomes intelligible as an articulation of problems that have been politically imperceptible before.

Dewey proposed conceiving of democracy beyond the mechanism of governance and regarding it as individuals' way of life.[5] In this sense, democracy hinges on certain dispositions, including readiness to learn, experiment, listen to others, and revise one's own beliefs. This shift from institutions to attitudes is pivotal. Institutions can stabilize the democratic order, but they become frag-

[2] Nadia Urbinati, *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).
[3] Leszek Koczanowicz, *Politics of Dialogue: Non-Consensual Democracy and Critical Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
[4] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927).
[5] John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 224–30.

ile if they are not sustained by civil practices. Crucially, democracy is not only a system but also and ethos of everyday interaction. This is why a crisis in democracy may be triggered not just by a formal constitutional change but by an erosion of trust, mass withdrawal from public life, and decline of capacity for dialogue.

This view was rounded off by George Herbert Mead. His concept of "taking the role of the other" shows that democratic subjectivity is not originally autonomous or self-enclosed, but comes about in social relations. The democratic subject learns to look at itself from the viewpoint of other community members and in this way acquires the skill of reflexive self-definition. Therefore, democratic community is neither an ensemble of isolated individuals not an organic unity but a dynamic network of reciprocal interplays. The more inclusive this process is, the more likely democracy is to develop.[6]

Mikhail Bakhtin's thought is my third salient, though not pragmatist, framework of reference. Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue insists that there is no closure to dialogue: no voice has the ultimate right to conclusion that caps the discussion.[7] In the political context, it means that plurality is not a temporary stage on the road to agreement but a permanent condition of shared life. Democratic communication is always open-ended because the different perspectives it encompasses cannot be reduced to one rationality once and for all. For this reason, pragmatism and dialogism combined direct us toward a vision of politics where dispute is not a deviation from the norm but the normal condition of democracy.

3. Democracy as a Form of Life and the Idea of Non-consensualness

Central to this framework is the tension between democracy as everyday practice and democracy as a set of formal arrangements and principles, for short: DAWL (democracy as a way of life) and DAIR (democracy as institutions and rules).[8] The former refers to the style of social interactions, civic traits, and communication practices while the latter concerns procedures, offices, the representative system, law, and administration. Both levels are indispensable for a democratic society but neither is reducible to the other. Institutions without the robust social substrate become petrified whereas spontaneous social energy can mutate into anarchism or authoritarianism without institutional mediation.

The relevance of the idea of non-consensual democracy is vividly visible against this backdrop. Non-consensual democracy is not simply a negation of deliberation; neither is it a praise of disagreement for the sake of disagreement. At stake in non-consensual democracy is the recognition that no ultimate, rationally attainable consensus can be presupposed in a pluralist democracy. In the Habermasian iteration, the deliberative model is essentially premised on the mutual negotiation of positions, but at the same it considers agreement to be the presupposed horizon of communication. Meanwhile, many political disputes unfold not only around the means but also around the different ways of assessing and attributing value to reality, different historical experiences, and different languages of description irreducible to any common denominator. Under such circumstances, the demand for consensus may be exclusionary because it promotes the groups that already possess a language that is acknowledged as rational and publicly legitimized.[9]

At the same time, Chantal Mouffe's agonistic theory pertinently reminds us that conflict is an ineradicable component of democracy but does not explain what it is that prevents antagonism from devolving into the friend/enemy logic as the foundation of the political field. If the

[6] George Herbert Mead, *Selected Writings*, ed. Andrew J. Reck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
[7] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
[8] This distinction was suggested to me by David Owen in a discussion on my paper on non-consensual democracy.
[9] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

formal recognition of the rules of the game is the only shared plane, democratic politics constantly remains vulnerable to destruction.[10] For its part, non-consensual democracy projects a middle way. While it does not expect complete agreement, it accepts that communication must be continued in spite of the abiding difference of views. The ethical core of non-consensual democracy consists of readiness to maintain relations with others even when this does not result in agreeing on a position with them.

On this take, disagreement is not deplored as a defect in democracy; just the opposite, it is acknowledged as democracy's condition. The quality of collective life in democracy depends on whether its institutions are capable of accommodating conflict without condemning it in ethical terms and without excluding those who use different languages of political experience. Non-consensualness is thus both a descriptive and normative notion. It conveys the actual state of pluralist societies, and at the same time it insists that mature democracy should not suppress multiplicity under the guise of neutral consensus.[11]

4. The Common Good or Common Interests? The Pragmatist Correction of Liberalism and Communitarianism

The dispute between liberalism and communitarianism is among the key axes of political thought today. Liberalism is based on the idea of an autonomous individual, which compels it to try and determine which mechanisms promote the harmonizing of actions of free and separate agents.[12] One answer to this conundrum is the common good, which is conceived either as a set of solutions advantageous to all or as acceptance of the formal principles of political coexistence.[13] For its part, communitarianism insists that this procedural vision is too limited because it passes over the communal sources of identity and tacit norms that regulate social life.[14]

The communitarian critique is valid insofar that it exposes the constraints of formal liberalism. Yet it is also risky in that it may encourage identifying democracy with the community's homogeneity of values. If a community is a vehicle of substantial good, it is easy to slip from an affirmation of bonds into the pressure of uniformity and, in the next step, into a nationalist circumscription of political belonging. In this sense, the dispute of liberalism and communitarianism highlights two opposite but equally problematic temptations: of procedural abstraction on the one hand and of essentialized community on the other.

Again, pragmatism comes in handy as it proposes a shift from the common good to common interests. Following John Ryder and his reading of Dewey, democratic society can be said to integrate not in virtue of one supreme value or an impersonal mechanism of rationality but through the practice of finding interests shared by various groups.[15] Common interests are neither prior to politics nor metaphysically given; rather, they arise in the process of communication, cooperation, and solving concrete problems. The scope of common interests is historically variable, experimental, and contingent upon context. As a result, the pragmatist thought on democracy is anti-ideological; specifically, instead of taking ready-made abstractions as its starting point, it treats them as working hypotheses to be evaluated on the basis of their effects in real collective life.

This correction is fundamental to the study of populism, particularly if the notion of non-consensual democracy as described above is taken into consideration. If democratic politics is about producing common interests across and above the boundaries of classes, ethnic

[10] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).
[11] Koczanowicz, *Politics of Dialogue*.
[12] Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc A. LePain (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).
[13] B. J. Diggs, "The Common Good as Reason for Political Action," *Ethics* 83, no. 4 (1973): 283–93.
[14] Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
[15] John Ryder, *The Things in Heaven and Earth: An Essay in Pragmatic Naturalism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

groups, religious communities, or lifestyles, populism can be made sense of as a response to the situation in which this process has been blocked. In liberal democracy, dominated as it is by technocratic management, citizens ever more often feel that while the common good is repeatedly invoked, common interests are not constructed and no attempts are made to really understand the values cherished by various social groups. The rules of the system are defended on grounds of their neutrality, but a considerable portion of society does not experience these rules as theirs. Populist mobilizations are nurtured by this discrepancy—by the feeling that there is an institutional order that demands loyalty but cannot convincingly organize the shared world of issues.

The pragmatist notion of common interests helps avoid two errors. Firstly, it does not reduce democracy to impassive procedures. Secondly, it is not premised on any prior cultural or moral uniformity. Democratic integration is framed as an open process that is based on communication, education, and the capacity to perceive the shared amid differences. This also means that conflicts of interest do not need to cause disintegration; on the contrary, they can initiate new configurations of the political community as long as there are institutions and practices capable of articulating them.[16]

5. Populism as a Symptom of Deficits of Liberal Democracy

The reasoning above suggests that populism is not only an internal threat to liberal democracy. It is also a symptom of an increasing disconnection of liberal institutions from citizens' experiences. This deficit has a number of facets to it. One of them vitally concerns representation. Large social groups find themselves unable to see the political system in place as an instrument for expressing their issues because parties have transformed into organizations that manage the center, no longer being mediators between social conflicts and the institutional language of decision-making. Another facet pertains to recognition. Citizens experience not only material inequalities but also a symbolic degradation as their lifestyles, emotions, and ways of talking of the world tend to be deprecated as retrograde, irrational, or politically unauthorized. The third facet is related to agency. If key decisions are more and more relocated to expert, supranational, or bureaucratic centers, people's sense of having a real influence on common affairs is dwindling.

In this sense, populism is an attempt to restore the political where it has been replaced by technocratic management. However, this restoration is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, populism is right to insist that the public does not consist of individuals gratified with formal procedural equality. On the other hand, populism tends to reduce plurality to the clear-cut opposition of the true people and the elites who, together with opponents, are excluded from the democratically legitimized community. Apparently, populism recognizes the problem, but its response sometimes results in a depletion of democracy.

Pragmatism helps capture this ambivalence without simplifying it. If ideas are to be treated as working hypotheses, populism should also be analyzed through the lens of the problems that it articulates. The point is not to rehabilitate populism normatively; the point is to make a methodological change of perspective. Instead of pondering how democracy can be defended against populism, we should look into what populism tells us about the quality of democracy. What it says is first and foremost that liberalism has lost the capacity to translate formal rules into the experience of co-participation.

Seeing this, democratic education is of special importance. Ryder emphasizes that democracy needs attitudes of open-minded inquisitiveness, a hypothetical approach to issues, and readiness to revise one's own beliefs. The political psychologist and political theorist Shawn Rosenberg notes that today's democracies are so complex pro-

[16] Leszek Koczanowicz, "Common Goods or Common Interests: Two Visions of Democratic Society," *Pragmatism Today* 12, no. 2 (2021): 198–204.

cedurally that they are becoming more and more opaque to many citizens. Populist simplifications sound attractive precisely because they re-introduce an appearance of sense and agency. Rosenberg insists that, given this, education is the only way to salvage democracy. Yet this education must not rely on the pedagogy of adjustment to the order in place alone. We need education that fosters skills such as identification of conflicts, recognition of shared interests, and involvement in dialogue without expectations of ultimate agreement.[17]

Of course, this does not mean that all populist mobilizations should be construed as democratically creative. Whenever populism converts an adversary into an enemy, supplants plurality with moral monism, and treats institutions only as obstacles to the will of the people, populism is a clear and present danger. Yet the pragmatist approach helps set the diagnosis apart from the remedy or, in other words, acknowledge that populism reveals deficits of liberal democracy, without accepting the populist prescription as a viable solution.

6. Toward Non-consensual Democracy

If populism is a symptom and a challenge in one, the democratic response should involve reconstructing the fundamental systemic assumptions of liberal democracy. To safeguard the procedures in place will not solve the problem because the procedures themselves became part of this problem when they lost rootedness in citizens' experience. What we need is democracy capable of sustaining conflict in ways that do not absolutize it. This is what non-consensual democracy is able to do.

The first prerequisite for non-consensual democracy is accepting that plurality is a permanent phenomenon. Modern societies are not and will not be homogeneous in terms of values. It means that institutions must not be designed solely as machines for the production of agreement but also as spaces for articulation of disagreement. Parliament, the public media, self-government bodies, the schooling system, citizen associations, and communication platforms ought to support the expression of conflicting positions, instead of just filtering them by the dominant criteria of rationality. Restoring mediation is another prerequisite. Populism thrives where citizens feel that they directly clash with the anonymous system. Democracy needs mediating institutions, but these institutions must be capable of hearing new social conflicts and translating them into the language of public decisions, without immediately neutralizing them. Non-consensual democracy does not eliminate mediation; on the contrary, it makes mediation a condition of democratic stability. Basically, the maturity of democracy is measured by the effectiveness with which its institutions facilitate mutual understanding under conditions of disagreement.

The third condition involves shifting focus from the abstract common good onto the practical generation of common interests. This entails politics that attends to concrete issues instead of indulging in moralizing narratives on the unity of the nation or the neutrality of the system. Common interests do no put an end to conflict, but they create interfaces between groups that could otherwise only function on the logic of mutual hostility. This role can be performed both by local institutions and by educational, consultative, or deliberative practices as long as they are not geared to achieving the pre-set goal of complete agreement.

Finally, the fourth condition lies in the ethics of dialogue, which does not equate recognition and acceptance. A standpoint may be acknowledged as politically relevant but not be shared for that. Being locked in a dispute need not mean invalidating the opponent's right to co-create common space. This attitude is what sets non-consensual democracy apart both from liberal proceduralism and

[17] Shawn W. Rosenberg, "Democracy Devouring Itself: The Rise of the Incompetent Citizen and the Appeal of Right Wing Populism," in *Psychology of Political and Everyday Extremisms*, ed. Domenico Uhng Hur and José Manuel Sabucedo (Brazil: Editora Vozes, 2020).

from populist monism. Non-consensual democracy does not pursue harmony but aims to ensure the community's enduring capacity to process conflicts in ways that do not result in the breakup of the pluralist order.

7. Conclusion

Pragmatism and the idea of non-consensual democracy make it possible to move the debate on populism to a more productive level. Instead of framing populism exclusively as a departure from the liberal norm, we can view it as a sign that the norm itself does not effectively organize citizens' political experience anymore. Liberal democracy has proved too weak where it has reduced politics to procedures and social conflicts to management issues. At the same time, populism is too dangerous where it responds to real deficits by touting a monist vision of the people and delegitimizing the opponent.

Given this, the most important pragmatist lesson is that democracy is not the state of once-achieved equilibrium but an ongoing process of reconstruction. It requires experimentation, correction, learning, and seeing problems from perspectives of various groups. Non-consensual democracy develops this idea by showing that the lack of agreement does not necessarily mean a failure of the political community. Just the opposite, a mature democratic community is recognized by its ability to abide under conditions of permanent difference, without remaking it either into a technocratic silence or into the populist identity war.

For this reason, populism should be treated, so to speak, in a twofold manner: as a wake-up call against anti-pluralist politics and as a reminder that liberal democracy cannot survive without a renewal of its own social foundations. The defense of democracy today calls for less moral panic and more institutional and cultural imagination. Pragmatism suggests that to handle this challenge we must begin with concrete issues, common interests, and practices of dialogue, one that does not lead to agreement but remains democratic precisely for that.

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NEW POPULISM AS THE MISAPPROPRIATION OF THE EMANCIPATORY JUSTICE CLAIM

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ABSTRACT: Every account of the New Populism must explain two things at once: why its grievances are real, and why its answers are false. Most accounts manage one. This article derives both from a single structure, drawn from Adorno's negative dialectics: collective affirmation is scarce. A society's economy of affirmation, the nexus of norms and knowledge it holds as binding at a given moment, cannot take up every claim of justice; the claims it excludes, emancipatory justice claims, are never refuted, only left without resources. The New Populism is their return in false form: a misappropriation that presents genuinely unmet expectations while affirming legacy subjectivity, our investments in legal norms we did not choose and cannot easily shed. Its raw material accumulates wherever unbearable risks are downloaded onto the individual; its occasion is the collapse of disappointment0/1, the disappointment of proving unequal to a necessary transformation fused with the disappointment internal to every transformation achieved. Populism promises an emancipatory transformation exempt from both, which is to say, none. For the debate oscillating through this issue between critique and repair, the argument yields a sequence. The excluded justice claim must be resourced before institutional repair can reach it; where repair comes first, institutions respond by translating the claim into what they can already affirm, and the response becomes another form of exclusion. But there exists an alternative figure, in the form of the fiduciary: the one position law has built for acting in another's interest where no rule can say in advance what the duty requires. A fiduciary does not promise success; a fiduciary remains answerable, and allows for the inadequacy of the task. The article ends by stating the predictions on which the account can be tested.

Keywords: New Populism; emancipatory justice claim; economy of affirmation; legacy subjectivity; fiduciary; Adorno

I. Introduction

Every account of the New Populism must explain two things at once: why its grievances are real, and why its answers are false. Explanations that manage only the first end in apologetics; explanations that manage only the second end in the reflexive dismissal that the introduction to this issue rightly rules out. The framework offered here is built to hold both.

Legal categories supply us with guidelines and solutions. The more that collective support can be found for a legal convention or institution, the more we ascribe to it normative value. But what do we do when justice expectations can no longer be met within the existing categories? If one asks this question, one begins to make an emancipatory justice claim. The New Populism, I will argue, is what this question looks like when it is given a structurally false answer.

New Populism is used here in the sense required by that answer. It is not treated as an empirical catalogue of parties, slogans, or leaders. It designates the political form in which unmet justice expectations are returned to the subject as the promise that nothing in the subject's inherited investments has to change. The claim is therefore neither that populist grievance is invented, nor that the populist answer is merely mistaken. It is that a real claim is taken up by a false bearer.

Kilanowski's article traces the New Populism to four origins, the crisis of neoliberal legitimacy, cultural dislocation, digital disintermediation, and institutional distrust, and proposes a division of labor in response: critical theory diagnoses the structural conditions, pragmatism supplies the institutional repair.[1] I accept the origins and will complicate the division of labor, because the frame offered here is diagnostic and prescriptive in the same movement, and it locates all four origins within a single structure.[2] Largely unquestioned legal doctrines are in need of significant change to cope with unprecedented problems of societal accountability, what I term macro-normative challenges: challenges on the dimensions of universal suffrage or the abolition of slavery.[3]

[1] Marcin Kilanowski, "Introduction" and "The Origins of New Populism: A Response from Critical Theory and American Pragmatism," both in this issue.
[2] Developed at length in Richard Lehun, "The Emancipatory Justice Claim" (DCL thesis, McGill University, 2013), https://ssrn.com/abstract=3104228.
[3] A macro-normative emancipatory problem would be, for example, what position could the positive law have toward property rights so as to disable unsustainable, ecocidal outcomes by enabling individuals to embrace other relationships to non-renewables and to other actors.

The New Populism responds to the same challenges, and this is what makes it dangerous.

The argument proceeds in five steps, and the order matters. Section II sets out the basic economy: societies affirm norms and knowledge the way they spend a scarce resource, and some claims of justice find no place in the budget. Section III describes the subject this economy produces, and shows how systemic risks are downloaded onto the individual. Section IV derives the collapse that follows and states the central claim: the New Populism is not the mere expression of false grievance but the misappropriation of a real one. Section V presents the response, the resourcing of excluded claims, and the legal figure built for exactly this work, the fiduciary. The article closes with three predictions by which the account can be tested.

II. The economy of affirmation and the justice matrix

The first step is the economy itself. Begin with a distinction between what a society knows and what it affirms. A given totality of knowledge can typically find only partial expression in what we normatively affirm. I call the nexus of norms and knowledge that is collectively affirmed at a given moment an *economy of affirmation*. It instantiates legitimacy because of its capacity to mesh related social structures together, and the term is meant literally: affirmation behaves like a scarce resource, produced, invested, and defended, and a society can no more affirm everything it knows than it can fund everything it values. To have standing within this economy is to be capable of obligating, to be heard as a claim of justice rather than as noise. The law is structurally ill suited to calling into question the validity of the economy of affirmation; it is in fact the latter's formal expression.

This is why the term economy matters. The issue is not that a society lacks ideas, values, or available information. It is that it lacks the affirmative capacity to make each of them binding at the same time. A claim can therefore be known without being resourced, and resourced without being finally adequate. The gap between knowledge and affirmation is the space in which the later argument takes place.

What acquires standing rests, historically, on three grounds. The justice matrix maps these concurrent justice affirmations. Its poles are the conventional, the metaphysical, and the subjective; each designates a discrete basis of rightfulness. Conventional justice claims embody normative affirmations that are deemed just because of wide adoption and legal institutionalization; metaphysical claims are rooted in divine or sacred notions of right; subjective claims evolve through rational, subjectively convincing critique. Each pole has a familiar history. The metaphysical pole carried justice when law answered to revelation. The conventional pole carries it wherever wide adoption and institutional form are themselves the warrant. The subjective pole carries it when a claim convinces the individual conscience on reasons alone. Think of these as the axes of a space, a justice matrix, within which every recognized claim can be located.

The point is not that these axes are exhaustive in a timeless sense. It is that, within a given economy of affirmation, they identify the routes through which a claim becomes capable of obligating. A claim that cannot enter by one of these routes is not thereby false. It is disabled as a claim before the question of its truth can be reached.

Presenting justice claims within a matrix allows justice to be seen as an aggregate rather than as a discrete state or outcome. Contemporary capitalism in its self-understanding generally configures justice most tightly around the conventional and subjective poles, as is captured in large part by the centrality of individual rights and the rule of law; the metaphysical axis has been largely evacuated. A claim expressible on none of the operative grounds has, by definition, no standing, however much may depend on it. *Emancipatory justice claims* are those justice expectations that are not being met in the existing economy of affirmation. History supplies the calibration.

Before abolition, the claim of the enslaved person had no coordinates: it was not convention, it contradicted the dominant readings of the sacred, and the subjective pole of those who held standing was closed against it. The claim was real the entire time. What changed was not its validity but its resourcing. Emancipatory justice claims are the normative form of what Adorno's negative dialectics calls the non-identical, the remainder that is continuously present and that marks the inadequacy of any justice affirmation.[4] Two properties of such claims carry weight in what follows. Their content cannot be fully specified in advance; once specified, it acquires coordinates and becomes one more convention. And they are terminated not by refutation but by the withdrawal of resources: a claim that is not funded, staffed, heard, or answered ceases to operate as a claim while remaining real as a justice deficit.

How does an economy of affirmation spend its scarce capacity? Weber's emphasis on calculability is instructive: modern rational capitalism requires calculable law, law that lends itself to prediction, that is not arbitrary in its administration, and under which contracts are legally enforced.[5] The calculability of capitalism is bound to a cost-benefit analysis and to wealth maximization, which relies on the capacity to find and refine sources of surplus value. If we depend on the idea of surplus value to eliminate the need to legitimate our actions, we will avoid those transactions that cannot meet its simplifying criteria. At some point we no longer have the justice resources, the set of investments, tangible and intangible, made in enabling justice outcomes, to respond to any other type of expectation. Tangible resources have been diverted into producing surplus value, and intangible resources, especially normative and epistemological resources, have been confined to instrumental reasoning. Competition creates profit by externalizing and downloading costs onto individual economic actors, or onto that which is least capable of agency, often the environment. The race to the bottom is one example of an aggregate justice resourcing failure.

III. Legacy subjectivity and the downloading of risks

The second step concerns the subject this economy produces. Whereas the twentieth century was marked by dystopian ideological conflicts, we now also face issues stemming from natural limits.[6] The scope of possible harm and our concomitant responsibility has exceeded that of any previous historical period. These are macro-normative challenges, and they meet a subject formed by the very order that would have to be transformed. The problem is therefore not simply the size of the challenge. It is the relation between the challenge and the subject addressed by it. The subject is asked to undertake transformations for which its own law, habits, property relations, and expectations have given it neither a language nor a tolerable distribution of risk.

Bentham's outline for an implicit social contract concerning the limits of legitimacy, the extent of private choice, and the operation of legal prerogative pre-empts other social contracts, because it can be reproduced without the transaction costs associated with a fully other-regarding relationship. The other-regarding contained within the law that Bentham affirms is only towards a symmetrical other legal subject, that is, towards oneself as the legal subject in another. He substitutes for the customary definition of justice a right to an unending process of individual and collective enabling of gratification. In this sense Bentham is an architect of enthroned legacy subjectivity.

[4] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1981).
[5] Richard Swedberg, "Max Weber's Contribution to the Economic Sociology of Law," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 2, no. 1 (2006): 13.
[6] See generally Andrew Goudie, *The Human Impact on the Natural Environment: Past, Present, and Future*, 6th ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005); Anthony D. Barnosky et al., "Approaching a State Shift in Earth's Biosphere," *Nature* 486, no. 7401 (2012): 52.

Legacy subjectivity is the self constituted by these investments. We are obligated to affirm and invest in positive legal norms that we do not necessarily choose; these investments, and the expectations they create, discipline what we are able to treat as a live claim. Polemically expressed, legacy subjectivity can induce an individual to be epistemically disabled to the point that one is fully justified in advancing one's own destruction and that of future generations. The property right to the computer on which these words are written has great affirmative solidity in comparison with the claim against it that could arise from its exploitation of non-renewable resources or its future generation of e-waste.[7] The justice externalities of private property use are perceived as internalized by society and legitimated by democracy and the rule of law. Locked in at this depth, a person can be fully rational, fully law-abiding, and fully committed to a trajectory that is ruinous for all those who come after them. This is not a claim about foolishness or bad faith. Within the investments, the reasoning is sound. The disability lies one level down, in what can appear as a live question at all.

Negative macro-justice consequences are discounted against economic freedom and the perception of democratic choice. Legitimation independent of justice externalities downloads an alienated and misleadingly subjective form of affirmation onto the individual. Even if "better knowledge" were available, this knowledge could not become normatively material if the right to exercise judgment according to it is coupled with unbearable risks downloaded onto the individual. Thus, for example, the knowledge of impending ecological catastrophe cannot become normatively significant if it is only to be used by individuals who cannot bear the risk of that catastrophe through their own choices. Within a ubiquitous consumer society, individual consumers cannot bear the burden of choosing not to consume so as to prevent the perils of over-consumption. The stronger the internalization of the rule of law, the greater is the barrier to justice alterity. Under such an assignment of risk, more information does not produce more obligation; it produces more sophisticated resignation, and resignation is raw material. This is the point at which legacy subjectivity becomes politically volatile.

The individual is not merely uninformed. The individual is informed under conditions in which acting on the information would impose costs that cannot be borne individually. Knowledge then ceases to be emancipatory. It becomes an accusation without a practicable addressee. A concrete case shows the mechanism. In 2018 the French government raised fuel taxes as an ecological measure. The cost landed on people who drive because they must: rural and small-town workers with long commutes, no transit alternative, and thin margins. For them the levy was not a signal but a threat, and the response was the gilets jaunes, a revolt organized on roundabouts by people many of whom had never protested before.

Read through the framework, the episode is exact. The ecological knowledge behind the tax was sound. It could not become binding, because the risk of acting on it was downloaded onto those least able to carry it. The claims voiced on the roundabouts were real justice expectations that had found no place in the economy of affirmation. And the movement's grammar, the unheard people against institutions that do not listen, is the grammar this article describes: a reservoir that restoration politics stands ready to claim. The same case anticipates the third prediction below. Where transition costs are socialized instead of downloaded, this recruitment pool does not form.

The example is important because it keeps the argument from turning into a psychology of resentment. The injury is not reducible to affect. It is produced where a necessary transformation is made available only as individual burden. The exposed subject can then reject the

[7] Apart from non-renewable natural resources such as oil, Jared Diamond lists examples such as deforestation, habitat destruction, soil problems, water management problems, overhunting, overfishing, anthropogenic climate change, and energy shortages. See Jared M. Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Viking, 2005).

transformation without having refuted the claim that made the transformation necessary.

IV. Disappointment$^{0/1}$ and the misappropriation

The third step captures the collapse, and with it the central claim. Every deep transformation exposes those who undertake it to two distinct disappointments. The first comes before: the discovery that one is unequal to the change one knows is necessary. The second comes after: the achieved change never has the quality that was hoped for. The framework indexes these as disappointment$^{0/1}$, and it defines the *justice reserve* as the ability to bear them. The reason for the neologism is to visually express the dialectical character of emancipatory collapse; no emancipatory instantiation is possible without it. The economy of affirmation leaves claims without standing; legacy subjectivity makes the transformation needed by those claims appear as an unbearable self-indictment. Disappointment$^{0/1}$ names the collapse that follows when this situation is repeated enough that transformation itself begins to appear both necessary and impossible.

How does downloading become collapse? Through repetition. A subject who is structurally unable to act on what it knows, fails, in its own eyes, again and again. Each failure teaches the first lesson: I am not equal to the change. At the same time, every adaptation the subject does manage, the retraining, the move, the new discipline, arrives without the promised difference, and teaches the second lesson: even achieved change betrays. Run the two lessons together for a generation and they fuse. Transformation as such now appears both impossible and certain to disappoint, before any particular transformation has even been proposed.

Justice claims that cannot be taken up, because legacy subjectivity resists transformation, engender disappointment^{0}: one must admit that one is inadequate within the transformed given. Thus, when we resist the ecological transformation of the economy that we know is necessary, because we relate to it as unimaginable and as requiring too great a sacrifice of our existing way of life, we are in the throes of disappointment^{0}. If the emancipatory projection is indeed incorporated into the ex post self, disappointment^{1} arises: the reality of the outcome no longer has the quality of the emancipatory otherness that was sought. The most negative outcome is the collapse of these distinctions. We might then assert that an ecological transformation of the economy is at one and the same time beyond our capability as consumers and inevitably bound to produce a dystopian future. We thus become ensnared in stasis, reproducing and multiplying existing unsustainable outcomes.

Why does the excluded claim return in this form and not another? Consider the position of a subject inside the collapse. The expectations are real, and they do not dissolve because they cannot be taken up; stasis is not rest but pressure. Yet within the collapse, emancipatory politics stand convicted in advance: at once impossible and certain to betray. In the post-emancipatory period, often running together with the "end of history" motif, only one politics remains, a politics that promises transformation without disappointment$^{0/1}$, which is to say, no transformation at all. And only one object can carry such a promise: the given that was already ours. The return of the given cannot disappoint, because it never arrives; it demands no admission of inadequacy, because it presents itself as already there. It is what politics looks like from inside the fetishization of emancipatory collapse. At this point the restoration promise becomes intelligible. It does not have to show that the excluded claim was false. It has to offer a form in which the pressure of the excluded claim can be felt without allowing the claim to transform the subject. The grievance remains alive, but its direction is reversed. It no longer points toward justice alterity; it points toward the recovery of the given.

Its attraction is not mysterious. Restoration is the one offer that asks nothing of the injured investments; it affirms legacy subjectivity instead of indicting it. And

it relieves the subject of the admission that the first disappointment demands: nothing in one's life has to be judged inadequate, because what was lost was taken, and it was already there. This, finally, is what the New Populism is. It is the colonization of disappointment$^{0/1}$; it deploys the collapse as politics.

It is a misappropriation of the emancipatory justice claim. It presents justice expectations that are not being met, and the expectations are real; what it affirms, however, is not justice alterity but legacy subjectivity: the return of the given, with the appearance of the emancipatory. There is no unique emancipatory agency to shoulder accountability for an other-regarding outcome; the mass democratic political process represents the interests of the majority of a proximate constituency. Populism presents itself as this unique agency, while its presentation is the misappropriation. It does not open the justice matrix; it re-affirms the conventional pole, fetishizing situations whose resolution depends on the absence of the consciousness of unresolvable inadequacy. The remaining origins localize the same way: the crisis of legitimacy is the depletion of justice resources; "cultural dislocation" is legacy subjectivity under the pressure of transformation; "institutional distrust" is the rational registration of the downloading. And what Kilanowski describes as "digital disintermediation" is an expansion of calculability applied to affirmation itself, which reproduces the economy of affirmation, multiplying the collapse in real time. This is why both halves of the opening test are met at once. The grievances are real, because the claims are. The answers are false, because what they affirm is the very economy of affirmation that reproduces emancipatory implosion, while simultaneously de-resourcing the consciousness of justice alterity.

V. Equity, the fiduciary, and the resourcing of the claim

The final step turns from diagnosis to response. One does not answer such a claim with better arguments; better arguments meet the same fate as better knowledge. We cannot be legitimate without having law; yet the rule of law could lead us to a wholly illegitimate outcome. On the one hand, to be legitimate we have to maintain and transform from within the existing economy of affirmation, a process of intrinsic transformation. On the other hand, we have to supplant the existing economy of affirmation by another, a process of extrinsic transformation. Populism promises the second without the first, and the promise of no disappointment$^{0/1}$: an outcome without a process.

In contrast, accounting for justice alterity and indeterminacy requires resourcing the processes of judgment surrounding them, and not just specific outcomes. This means internalizing our liability to justice alterity and indeterminacy, which includes socializing the cost of externalities such that individuals can make sustainable choices without assuming disproportionate risks. That is why the response cannot be introduced as a program of outcomes. To specify the outcome too quickly is to pull the excluded claim back into what the present economy can already recognize. A response has to create capacity before it settles content. It has to make judgment possible where judgment has been disabled.

Existing paradigms are inadequate to the task. Legislation specifies and so converts the claim into convention. Markets price, and so miss what cannot appear as a price. Ordinary adjudication treats like cases alike, and the decisive cases are the unlike ones. The failure of these instruments is not that they are useless. They are indispensable once a claim has acquired enough form to be administered. The difficulty is earlier. The emancipatory claim is at the threshold at which administration has not yet learned what it would administer. A figure is needed that can occupy that threshold without pretending to have resolved it.

Law has throughout history struggled with its own inadequacy by acknowledging an otherness within it, namely equity. The Jewish concept of lifnim mi-shurat

ha-din designates actions "beyond the line of the law": the aggrieved is enabled not to require the outcome that would block the emancipatory dimension of justice alterity, and the antinomical justice burden is placed upon the more resourced party. The same impulse can be traced through the Classical Greek epieikeia, through aequitas, and through English equity; equity does not suppress the tension between law and justice, equity embodies it.

The most radical instance of equity is the fiduciary relationship. The reason is not that the fiduciary supplies a superior substantive norm. Its significance lies in the form of the relation. Everyone relies on fiduciaries: the trustee, the guardian, persons bound to exercise judgment in another's interest under conditions no rule could specify in advance. Asymmetry defines the relation, one party holds discretion and the other is exposed to its exercise, and the law answers asymmetry with answerability, binding the powerful party most tightly exactly where calculation gives out. The fiduciary shares the closest relationship with the emancipatory justice claim by virtue of its connection with justice indeterminacy. It institutionalizes answerability before the content of the duty can be exhausted by rule. Fox-Decent argues that everyone, regardless of civil or political status, is a beneficiary of an overarching fiduciary obligation that manifests itself as the rule of law.[8]

Populism presents itself in this position and negates it: its promise is a right defined before the moment of its articulation, viz. the negation of the fiduciary's antinomical capacity. This repeats a longstanding pattern, the misappropriation of fiduciary categories to prop up and obscure deficits of the "legal". What must a response to it sustain? It must (i) resource the processes of judgment rather than specified outcomes; (ii) internalize our liability to justice alterity and indeterminacy, socializing the cost of externalities; and (iii) enable individuals to leave the confines of the legal and of legacy subjectivity, and the limitations of the economy of affirmation, without downloading the attendant risks onto the individual. These are threshold characteristics that must survive any transformation at the risk of total illegitimacy. I make no assumptions about the willingness or probability of outcomes.

Where the pragmatist contributions to this issue ask what can be done, the analysis here answers with the thresholds within which any doing remains legitimate. The two are not rivals, but the order matters: the resourcing of the claim comes first, or responsiveness becomes one more form of normative capture, the taking up of claims only insofar as they can already be affirmed. A response that skips the resourcing does not answer the misappropriation; it competes with it.

The predictive dimension is not ornamental. These claims are answerable to evidence, and the account stakes itself on three predictions. First, counter-populism by refutation will keep producing null results at scale, because claims of this kind do not answer to argument. Second, institutional repair undertaken without prior resourcing will be absorbed, in the manner just described. Third, where the risks of transition are socialized, recruitment to the misappropriation will decline independently of political persuasion.

Two inferences follow from the above, and they apply to the account itself. The first concerns what can be claimed about exclusion. Seen from outside, a valid justice claim that was starved of resources and a claim that simply failed on its merits look identical: both fall silent. Within the framework there is no proof that any particular silence was an exclusion. This holds for the claims the account is most inclined to defend, and it holds for this account: that it may itself have gone unheard is no argument in its favor.

The second inference binds the theorist first: to announce, from within an anti-fatalist theory, that the future has already been forfeited is to enact the very collapse the theory describes. On this account one may

[8] Evan Fox-Decent, "The Fiduciary Nature of State Legal Authority," *Queen's Law Journal* 31 (2005): 282–83.

warn that the future is being forfeited; one may not report that it has been. And holding that line is not a matter of optimism. It requires the justice reserve, the capacity the theory describes; the theorist must bear disappointment$^{0/1}$ like everyone else or stop meaning the theory.

What the above emancipatory justice theory can offer instead is forward-looking: the coherence of its derivation and the predictions above. Grievance is not evidence. The second inference binds the theorist first: to announce, from within an anti-fatalist theory, that the future has already been forfeited is to enact the very collapse the theory describes. On this account one may warn that the future is being forfeited; one may not report that it has been. And holding that line is not a matter of optimism. It requires the justice reserve, the capacity the theory describes; the theorist must bear disappointment$^{0/1}$ like everyone else or stop meaning the theory. What must be enabled, finally, is the justice reserve, the ability to bear disappointment$^{0/1}$. A polity that cannot bear them will meet every justice expectation that is not being met with a further misappropriation. Sustainable emancipatory transformation must meet the threshold of enabling individuals to reproduce it.

VI. Conclusion

The resourcing of justice alterity and indeterminacy is the key step towards laying the framework for a Copernican normative turn: a shift in the basis of legitimacy itself, from the affirmation of what already has standing to the resourcing of the claims that do not yet. The New Populism marks justice expectations that are not being met; it does not meet them, and it will persist for as long as the collapse it colonizes is manufactured. An evolved theory of the fiduciary is a potential fulcrum for emancipatory justice claims. To be a fiduciary is to allow for the inadequacy of the task, as opposed to fetishizing situations whose resolution depends on the absence of such inadequacy.

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AND THE CRISIS OF PUBLIC OPINION, HABERMAS, DEWEY, AND COMMUNICATION ETHICS IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE[1]

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Abstract: The explosion of digital technology, especially social networks, big data, and artificial intelligence (AI), has profoundly changed the structure of social communication and the moral foundation of democratic life. While digital platforms expand public access and participation, they simultaneously create new forms of cognitive control, manipulation, and fragmentation, what Jürgen Habermas once warned of as "the colonization of lifeworld." This article argues that the current crisis of democracy is not just a consequence of technological transformation, but a manifestation of a weakening of rational communication and citizen trust. Drawing on two major philosophical traditions of the twentieth century, Critical Theory and Pragmatism, the paper proposes a hybrid approach: critiquing the power of algorithms and reconstructing the moral underpinnings of digital public opinion. From Habermas, we can understand the dominant logic of data systems and the commercialization of information; from Dewey and Rorty, we find the way to restore "public intelligence" and "civic solidarity" through education, dialogue, and moral imagination.

Keywords: digital democracy; public opinion; Habermas; Dewey; Rorty; communication ethics; pragmatism; critical theory; digital citizens.

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, humanity is witnessing a landmark change: the rise of the digital public sphere, where social networking, artificial intelligence (AI) and big data platforms have become the main infrastructure for social communication[2], exchange information and form public opinion. From Facebook, TikTok, YouTube to X (Twitter), digital platforms not only shape how people consume information, but also how they think, feel, and participate in politics[3]. If in the twentieth century, mass media (newspapers, television) played an intermediate role in shaping public opinion, today algorithms and data systems have taken over that function, but with a completely different logic: algorithmic amplification.

In this context, public rationality, the foundation of modern democracy, is being replaced by the mechanism of spreading and manipulating emotions. Information in the digital age is no longer exchanged to reach consensus or seek truth, but to attract attention, maximize interaction, and serve commercial or political interests. Technology platforms operate based on predictive algorithms, constantly adjusting the content displayed to keep users in an "information ecosystem" that is difficult for them to escape. As a result, the truth becomes a secondary issue, and the emotional impact becomes the main criterion of the media.[4]

From a philosophical point of view, this phenomenon reflects the "crisis of the public sphere" that Jürgen Habermas once warned about. In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989), Habermas described public opinion as a space of rational communication, where equal citizens engage in discussion in order to form the general will. However, when public space is infiltrated by economic and media power, it loses its autonomy and turns into a tool of manipulation. Habermas described the public sphere as a space of public communication in which citizens could engage in discussion about matters of common concern. However, when economic and media power increasingly penetrate this sphere, public opinion can lose its autonomy and become vulnerable to manipulation.[5]

Today, in the context of AI and big data, this phenomenon has reached a new level: "algorithmic coloni-

[1] This research is funded by University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (UEH)
[2] Christoph Lutz. 2019. "Digital Inequalities in the Age of Artificial Intelligence and Big Data." "Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies" 1, no. 2: 141–148. https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.140
[3] Bhup Bahadur Budhathoki. 2025. "Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Culture." "Journal of Rapti Babai Campus" 5, no. 1: 12–25. https://doi.org/10.3126/jrbc.v5i1.78059
[4] Jessica Roberts. 2024. "Effective Journalism: How the Information Ecosystem Works and What Journalists Should Do About It". Bristol: Intellect. https://intellectdiscover.com/content/books/9781789389036
[5] Habermas, Junger. 1989. "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere". Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Originally published in 1962.

zation". If in the past humans were still subjects in communication, now digital platforms have become invisible intermediaries, controlling the flow of information, preferences and political behaviors of billions of people[6]. Public opinion, which is the foundation of democracy, has been replaced by "filter bubbles," where each person is exposed only to ideas that reinforce existing beliefs[7]. Instead of encouraging dialogue, technology is fragmenting the living world into closed communities, fostering extremism and mutual distrust. This transformation is not only technological, but also deeply ethical and philosophical. When communication is manipulated by algorithms, human freedom and reason are threatened, and that entails a crisis of democracy. Because democracy, as Habermas emphasizes, cannot exist without a rational and critical public sphere.

However, if Habermas helps us see the negative side of the technological engineering of communication, John Dewey, the epitome of pragmatism, opens the door to reconstruction. In The Public and Its Problems (1927), Dewey asserted that democracy is not just an institutional system, but "a way of life", maintained through habits of dialogue, cooperation, and mutual learning. According to Dewey, "public" is not an abstract concept, but a collective of people affected by collective action; And it is through communication that people learn to understand, empathize and solve social problems together. In this spirit, Habermas and Dewey can be placed in the same dialogue: Habermas provides a critical framework for articulating the mechanisms of dominance in the digital system, and Dewey provides a practical perspective for reconstructing moral competence and communicative communities. When combined, these two traditions can help redefine "digital communicative ethics", a new platform for democracy in the age of AI[8].

From there, this article aims at two main objectives: First, to analyze the transformation of public opinion under the impact of digital technology, especially how AI and algorithms are undermining citizens' ability to communicate and think critically. Second, propose a theoretical framework that combines Critical Theory and Pragmatism to restore moral and community competence in the digital environment. Thereby, the article raises the central question: Can humans recover the capacity for dialogue and reason in a world where communication is being automated by machines? And if it does, it requires a new ethic of public opinion, where technology serves understanding, not governs it.

2. The digital transformation of the public sphere

The rapid development of digital technology, especially social networks, big data and artificial intelligence (AI), has profoundly transformed the communication foundations of modern society. The public sphere, which used to be a place where citizens engage in rational dialogue to form a common will, is now being restructured by digital platforms. In this era, social communication no longer takes place in forums of reasoning and dialogue, but in algorithmic spaces, where information is shaped, filtered, and amplified according to the logic of data and profit[9].

In the history of thought, Jürgen Habermas once considered public opinion to be the foundation of deliberative democracy[10]. In The Structural Transformation of the

[6] Hao Wang. 2022. "Algorithmic Colonization: Automating Love and Trust in the Age of Big Data." "UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)". Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
[7] Hao Wang. 2022. "Algorithmic Colonization: Automating Love and Trust in the Age of Big Data." "UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)". Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
[8] Sandra B. Rosenthal. 2012. "Habermas, Dewey, and the Democratic Self." In "Habermas and Pragmatism", 210–222. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203714713
[9] Manoj Kumar Mahto, and Gundu Raja Vikram. 2025. "Fundamentals of AI and Communication Networks: Applications in Human Social Activities." In "Intelligent Networks", 1–17. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
[10] Aleksandar Jovanoski, and Kire Sharlamanov. 2021. "Jürgen Habermas and His Contribution to the Theory of Deliberative Democracy." "American International Journal of Social Science Research" 7, no. 1: 36–47. https://www.cribfb.com/journal/index.php/aijssr

Public Sphere (1989), he described public opinion as an intermediate space between the state and civil society, where equal citizens discuss common issues on a rational and public basis. This model appeared in the eighteenth century with forums, clubs, and newspapers, places where the "common will" was formed through fair debate. However, Habermas warns that as mass media and markets commercialize communication, public opinion will gradually lose its autonomy and become a tool for power and profit. He called this the "colonization of the lifeworld", the process by which the mechanisms of currency and power overwhelm human relations and rational communication.

In the twenty-first century, with the advent of artificial intelligence and algorithms, this phenomenon has not only continued but also become more sophisticated, forming a form of "algorithmic colonization". Digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok or X (Twitter) are not only intermediaries for transmitting information, but new power subjects, controlling how people perceive the world. Through recommendation algorithms, they select the content that users see, which in turn shapes emotions, behaviors, and even political views[11]. In such an environment, the rational logic of public opinion is replaced by algorithmic amplification, where information is judged not on the basis of correctness, but on the ability to attract attention. The more outrageous it is, the more extreme it is, the stronger the information is spread. Technology platforms, profiting from advertising and data, tend to capture and monetize users' attention, leading to emotional stimulation rather than the encouragement of thought[12]. This change is not just a matter of technology, but a distortion of the structure of public life. If, according to Habermas, public opinion is a place where people reach "mutual understanding" through communicative reason, in the digital age, communication has become a process of behavioral manipulation, operated by artificial intelligence systems.

Philosopher Shoshana Zuboff, in The Age of Surveillance Capitalism (2019), calls this phenomenon "surveillance capitalism." According to her, technology companies not only provide services, but also exploit human behavior as an economic resource. Every online action, searching, sharing, commenting, clicking, becomes analyzed and commercialized data. Zuboff calls this piece of data "behavioral surplus," because it allows companies to not only predict but also adjust future user behavior[13]. That system creates a new power structure, not based on violence or law, but on the invisible control of information. Citizens think they are free to choose content, but are actually living in "echo chambers" where algorithms only show what matches their existing beliefs. This reinforces the radicalization and division of society, as each group of citizens lives in a "private reality" personalized by data.

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han in In the Swarm (2017) described this phenomenon with the image of a "digital swarm". According to him, the age of social media no longer produces public opinion, which requires reason, time and respect for difference, but only virtual crowds that lack depth of dialogue. Individuals do not actually converse with each other, but react instantly to images and brief facts, as in a reflex. Han calls this a "society of reaction," where people lose the ability to reflect, listen, and reflect on themselves[14].

These depictions show the disintegration of public opinion in the digital age. Instead of a common dialogue space, we have thousands of "micro-publics," each of which is trapped in an algorithm-nurtured reality. This has been especially evident in recent democratic elections, where AI and social media have become tools of

[11] Sergey N. Komissarov., and Nikolay A. Vasilyev. 2021. "New Social World: The Great Power of the Network." "Journal of Social Sciences Transformations & Transitions" 1, no. 2. https://doi.org/10.52459/josstt1281221

[12] Anne Zimmerman., Joel Janhonen, and Michael Saadeh. 2023. "Attention Span and Tech Autonomy as Moral Goods and Societal Necessities." "Digital Society" 2, no. 2: 23. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44206-023-00053-3

[13] Shoshana Zuboff. 2023. "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism." In "Social Theory Re-Wired", 203–213. London: Routledge.

[14] Byung-Chul Han. 2017. "In the Swarm: Digital Prospects". Vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

collective psychological manipulation: During the 2016 U.S. election, personal data was exploited to target political ads through the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In Brazil, India, and the Philippines, social media campaigns have been used to spread fake news, amplify hatred and disrupt trust in democratic institutions.

When information becomes a commodity, and users become a product, the foundations of social trust, the core element of public opinion, are severely weakened. Trust in the press, in experts, in the truth declined, giving way to "post-truth politics". In that environment, truth is negotiated with emotions, and "reality" becomes the product of the algorithm. As a result, public opinion, which is the space in which democratic reason is formed, has become a tool of manipulation and division. Democracy, which is based on dialogue, is gradually being replaced by emotional mobilization, and public reason is drowned in a cascade of information and data[15]. In other words, today's digital public opinion is being "automated", but this automation does not bring understanding, but deprives it of the ability to reflect. If public opinion used to be a place where people are free to debate for consensus, it is now where algorithms argue for humans, and the result is no longer truth, but "interactivity."

The crisis of public opinion in the digital era, therefore, is not only a crisis of information, but a crisis of reason and citizen personality. To better understand the mechanism of this crisis, it is necessary to go back to the foundation of Habermas' thought, communicative action theory, to determine what has weakened human communicative reasoning in the data age.

3. Habermas and the ethics of communicative rationality

The crisis of public opinion in the digital age is not just a sociological or communicative phenomenon, but more deeply, a weakening of "communicative rationality", a central concept in the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas. According to him, all true democracy is based on the ability of people to understand each other through language and dialogue on an equal footing[16]. When this ability is weakened, the moral and political foundations of society are shaken. In the context of artificial intelligence and data dominating life, Habermas' thinking provides a powerful analytical framework for explaining why public opinion is falling apart, and how to restore it through digital communication ethics. Habermas built his theory on the distinction between two social logics: the system and the lifeworld. "Systems" encompass economic, administrative, and technocratic structures where human action is coordinated by instrumental rationality, i.e., acting on effective goals. In contrast, "lifeworld" is the realm of communication, culture, morality, and identity, where people interact to build mutual understanding.

According to Habermas, modern society is only balanced when these two spheres maintain a reciprocal relationship: the system provides the means of organization, and lifeworld plays a value-oriented and meaning-oriented role. However, in the process of modernization, the system tends to expand and "colonize" lifeworld, that is, to impose the logic of power and money on the field of communication. At that time, people no longer dialogue with each other as free subjects, but as links in the technocratic machinery. Today, in a digital society, this process of "colonization" has extended to the depths of awareness and communication[17]. The system includes not only economics and administration, but also the data economy and artificial intelligence (AI). Digital platforms operate by storing, processing, and predicting human behavior, making communication, which is a free and reflective activity, regulated by algorithms.

[15] William Davies. 2019. "Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason". New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

[16] Barbara Fultner. 2014. "Jürgen Habermas: Key Concepts". London: Routledge.

[17] Michalinos Zembylas., and Charalambos Vrasidas. 2005. "Globalization, Information and Communication Technologies, and the Prospect of a 'Global Village': Promises of Inclusion or Electronic Colonization?" "Journal of Curriculum Studies" 37, no. 1: 65–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000190687

When algorithms decide which information is displayed, which stories are spread, and which emotions are triggered, communication life is "programmed." Users think they are communicating freely, but are actually engaging in an interaction cycle designed to optimize the platform's profitability. This has replaced mutual understanding, the highest goal of communication, by mutual visibility, where people observe each other but no longer really understand each other.

Habermas argues that the essence of communicative action lies in the ability to reach rational consensus, based on the ideal conditions of dialogue: equality, freedom, non-coercion, and mutual verification[18]. But in today's digital space, these conditions almost no longer exist. Users do not participate in discussions in a transparent environment, but in "filter bubbles" created by algorithms. They dialogue with people like them, sharing the same beliefs, while conflicting opinions are dismissed or blurred.

When tech platforms define "engagement" by clicks, shares, or comments, communication becomes a performative and commercial act, rather than a moral one. Here, we witness the replacement of communicative action with instrumental action, people communicate not to understand each other, but to achieve a goal: to influence, attract, or control.

Philosopher and media critic Jodi Dean calls this phenomenon "communicative capitalism." In Blog Theory (2010), Dean argues that in a digital society, forms of communication, seemingly democratic, actually convert political energy into data and goods[19]. People blog, share, comment, protest, but all of that action is absorbed by the media system, turning political participation into "empty participation." According to Dean, instead of promoting democracy, digital media has "simulated democracy", making people feel that they are participating, when in fact they are being manipulated.

Thus, both Habermas and Dean point to a crisis form of public communication, but Habermas offers us an important direction: the restoration of the rational capacity of communication. To do this, it is necessary to develop a digital communicative ethics, a new ethical framework in which technologies, platforms and users share the responsibility to protect the conditions of fair and transparent dialogue.

A digital communication ethic needs to meet three basic principles: Transparency: Algorithms that determine the flow of information must be public and verifiable. Users need to know what mechanism they are being led by, instead of blindly trusting "smart suggestions". Access equality: All citizens must have equal opportunities to express their opinions, access multi-dimensional information, and criticize power. This is not just a technological right, but a political condition for maintaining democratic public opinion. Accountability and dialogue: Both the platform and users are responsible for their language, information, and communication behavior. Only when communication is bound to moral responsibility can genuine public reason exist.

Here, Habermas's critical reasoning can be extended to criticize the algorithms themselves, similar to his criticism of instrumental reason in industrial society. If in the twentieth century, instrumental reason is expressed through the bureaucracy and the market economy, in the twenty-first century, it exists in artificial intelligence systems, "non-human agents" capable of deciding the flow of information, forming public opinion, and even affecting elections and public policy.

Therefore, AI needs to be seen as a new form of power, not violent power, but linguistic power, because it defines who gets to speak, what to say, and to whom. In Habermas's theoretical framework, this is the intrusion of the "system" into the very structure of the "lifeworld": when the tool of communication no longer serves the human being, but begins to define the conditions of the

[18] Dirk Ulrich Gilbert., and Michael Behnam. 2009. "Advancing Integrative Social Contracts Theory: A Habermasian Perspective." "Journal of Business Ethics" 89, no. 2: 215–234. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9995-6
[19] Jodi Dean. 2010. "Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive". Polity Press.

existence of communication[20]. Instrumental rational criticism in the digital age must therefore be extended to algorithmic critique, that is, to outline new forms of domination disguised as "intellect" and "efficiency." This is the new role of critical theory in the data age: not only exposes economic or state power, but also the power of technology, which operates silently through language, data, and interfaces.

But Habermas doesn't stop at criticism; He believed that communication was still the power to liberate people. Even in an algorithm-dominated environment, humans can establish new spaces of dialogue where transparency, reflection, and fairness are reaffirmed. That requires a "repoliticization" of technology: seeing digital platforms not just as tools, but as components of democratic life, which should be regulated by ethical and legal norms that protect the right to fair communication.

The crisis of public opinion in the digital age is a concrete manifestation of the weakening of communicative rationality that Habermas once warned about. When communication is replaced by interaction, when reasoning is replaced by algorithms, democracy loses its soul. But it is here that Habermas's theory opens up the possibility of rebirth: by restoring the ethics of digital communication, we can transform technology from a tool of dominance into a vehicle of freedom, and transform cyberspace, which is already divisive, into a new forum of public reason.

4. Dewey and the reconstruction of the digital public

If Habermas helps us to understand the current crisis of public opinion as a manifestation of the weakening of communicative reason, John Dewey offers a different approach, not just criticism but towards reconstruction. For Dewey, democracy is not just a political institution or a set of constitutional rights, but "a way of life." Democracy is a living practice sustained through dialogue, learning, and collective action, where people are constantly discovering, adjusting, and developing a common sense. Dewey's philosophy thus contains a spirit that is very relevant for the digital age: the spirit of experimentation, humanity, and interconnectedness, something that the data society is losing[21].

In The Public and Its Problems (1927), Dewey posed a fundamental question: "Who is the public?" According to him, the "public" is not an abstract entity, but a collective of people affected by the collective action. In other words, the public only appears when people realize that their actions have an indirect impact on others and on society as a whole[22]. The problem of the modern world, and today, even more so in the digital age, is that humans have lost the ability to recognize this connection. In a world dominated by technology and data, actions seem to be detached from their consequences: users share information without realizing it can spread hatred, incite violence, or manipulate politics. Dewey calls it the "public losing track of itself", when social connections are overshadowed by the complex structure of the media and the market.

To restore public opinion, Dewey argues, it is necessary to rebuild the capacity of "public intelligence", society's collective ability to understand, judge, and act on common problems. This perspective also highlights the importance of public accountability and the relationship between influential actors and civil society in shaping democratic communication[23]. "Public intelligence" is not the intelligence of an individual, but the capacity for reflection formed through dialogue, education, and social experience. In the age of AI and social media, when in-

[20] Hin-Yan Liu. 2018. "The Power Structure of Artificial Intelligence." "Law, Innovation and Technology" 10, no. 2: 197–229. https://doi.org/10.1080/17579961.2018.1527480

[21] Chandra Kumar. 2009. "John Dewey, "Reconstruction in Philosophy" (1920)." "Philosophical Papers" 38, no. 1: 111–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/05568640902933510

[22] John Dewey. 1927. "The Public and Its Problems". Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1954.

[23] Vian Bakir. 2018. "Intelligence Elites and Public Accountability: Relationships of Influence with Civil Society". London: Routledge.

formation is flooded everywhere, humans need this capacity more than ever to distinguish between right and wrong, between real and staged, between truth and manipulation. Digital platforms can collect and process vast amounts of data, but as Dewey once said, data is not synonymous with knowledge. Information is only valuable when it is transformed by humans into reflective understanding and responsible action.

In Democracy and Education (1916), Dewey asserted that "education is the process of regenerating society through the transmission of experience, and democracy is the social form in which the process of education attains its fullest meaning."[24] Democracy, therefore, cannot exist without education, especially a civic education that helps people learn to participate responsibly in common life. In the digital era, that means building digital civic education. This is not just about teaching people how to use technology, but more importantly, about learning how to understand, criticize, and live ethically in a technological environment.

Digital education in the spirit of Dewey needs to equip citizens with three basic competencies. The first is media literacy, the ability to analyze and critique disseminated information, recognize fake news, manipulate emotions and hidden political advertising. The second is critical literacy, which helps people understand the power structure of the data economy: who controls the information, who drives the algorithms, and the goals behind the flow of communication. The third is communicative ethics, the ability to communicate responsibly, listen, respect differences, and empathize with others[25].

In that spirit, Dewey met Habermas at a very important point: his belief in the power of dialogue. Habermas emphasized the role of communicative reason as the moral foundation of public opinion, while Dewey saw dialogue as a method of social learning through which people develop common sense and test their beliefs. Both oppose the notion that democracy can be secured by technocracy or digital power. They shared that democracy is a living process, sustained by continuous participation, understanding and dialogue. However, Dewey goes so far as to argue that reason is not an abstract capacity but a social practice, formed through habits of life, through actions, through mutual learning.

Therefore, to restore digital public opinion, it is not possible to rely only on institutional reform or algorithmic control; It must start with the restoration of democratic habits in everyday life, from the way people read, write, and share to the way they debate and collaborate online. Here, Dewey brings a perspective that is close to reality: democracy is not something that comes from the top down, but a habit of life that needs to be forged in the smallest act of communication.

What makes Dewey's philosophy relevant to the digital age is its experimental and open-minded spirit. Dewey believed that democracy was "a collective experiment." Each generation has a responsibility to "reinvent democracy" in its own historical conditions. From that perspective, the digital public space can be seen as a new laboratory of democracy, where society experiments with forms of communication, participation, and control of information. Open dialogue platforms, citizen data projects, or efforts to design transparent AI are all concrete expressions of the Deweyan spirit, combining technology with civic responsibility and critical thinking.

When we contrast Dewey with Richard Rorty, the postmodern pragmatic philosopher, we see another humanistic depth of digital democracy. In Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989), Rorty argued that solidarity is not discovered through reason but created through imagination, the capacity to see strangers as fellow human beings[26] Rorty emphasized that people can only

[24] Dewey, John. 1916. Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education. New York: Macmillan.
[25] Sulistiawati, Sulistiawati. 2024. "The Relevance of John Dewey's Philosophy of Education in Early Childhood Development in the Digital Age." "Journal of Childhood Development" 4, no. 2: 522–531. https://doi.org/10.25217/jcd.v4i2.3902

[26] Rorty, Richard. 1989. Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

unite when they imagine others as fellow human beings, when they can see the world through the eyes of others. This is an important reminder in the digital age, where humans interact through screens, icons, and short paragraphs. Digital dialogue cannot be based on reason alone, but must be nourished by moral imagination, the ability to feel and understand the pain and joy of others through online experiences.

On social media, this civic imagination manifests itself in movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, or global environmental campaigns, where people cross national boundaries to act together for justice and dignity[27]. However, without an educational and moral foundation, that energy can easily be turned into "herd emotions", where anger and instant agreement take the place of reflection and reason. Thus, Dewey and Rorty both emphasize that moral education and imagination are conditions for transforming emotions into civic responsibility.

Thus, reconstructing digital public opinion in the spirit of Dewey is not just about restoring the structure of communication, but about reconstructing the moral, emotional, and imaginative capacities of people. That requires a humanized technology, and a culture of open dialogue. Technology needs to be designed to support understanding and collaboration, not just optimize profits. Education must lead people to freedom of thought and critical thinking, while a culture of dialogue must encourage listening, empathy and creativity.

Dewey believed that democracy could only exist when people learned to live together, and that each generation had to recreate it according to the conditions of the times. In today's digital world, that means reinventing public opinion, transforming social media and AI from divisive tools into means of learning, connection, and collective intelligence. Habermas helps us understand what is collapsing, but it is Dewey who helps us reimagine how it is constructed. Democracy, in the end, does not live on technology or algorithms, but on the ability of people to dialogue, sympathize and create a world of common meaning together.

5. Pragmatism, critical theory, and digital ethics

In the era of artificial intelligence, when technology not only aids in communication, but also shapes the way people perceive, feel, and act, the central question is: what ethics can guide humans in the digital world? The problem is not just the rule of technological governance, but the reconstruction of the ethical foundations of public life, which was formed through the philosophical tradition of humanism and democracy. In this context, the combination of Critical Theory and Pragmatism can create a new ethical framework for digital democracy ethics: a model capable of both critiquing algorithmic power and fostering moral competence, human intelligence and community that democratic life requires.

Critical reasoning, starting with the Frankfurt School, has always considered the task of philosophy to be to liberate man from invisible forms of domination. For Habermas, this is embodied in his critique of instrumental rationality, the rationality towards efficiency, control and benefit, which dominates political, economic, and cultural life. In the digital age, tool rationality has reemerged in the form of algorithmic rationality, where AI systems and data automatically make decisions, replacing human moral judgment. This makes power impersonal, non-transparent, and difficult to control.

As the analysis of surveillance capitalism in Section 2 showed, power in the digital era operates less through state or industrial capital than through the data economy. What critical theory adds here is a diagnosis of *how* this power reproduces itself: not as ideology, but as algorithmic structure. On the other hand, Byung-Chul Han calls this phenomenon "psychopolitics", domination by freedom: people voluntarily expose their lives, believing

[27] Anna Lampinen. 2020. "Tweeting for Change: How Twitter Users Practice Hashtag Activism through #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo." Master's thesis, A. Lampinen. https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:oulu-202005262182

they are connected, when in fact being conditioned.

From the perspective of critical reasoning, these phenomena reflect the expansion of system power that Habermas warned about. The "system" here includes not only the state and the market, but also digital platforms and artificial intelligence, new actors that coordinate social behavior through data and language. Therefore, critical reasoning in the AI era needs to shift from ideological critique to algorithmic critique, that is, analyzing how data structures reproduce inequality, consolidate power, and shape perceptions.

But criticism is not enough. If critical reasoning helps to identify the dominant structures hidden in technology, Pragmatism, with representatives such as Dewey and Rorty, offers a way to rebuild: rebuilding community, education, and ethics in digital life.

For Dewey, ethics is not an abstract system of rules, but a social practice, sustained through learning, experience, and collaboration. Democracy is therefore not just a political structure, but a process of collective moral education. In the digital context, the Deweyan spirit requires people to develop "practical digital ethics", that is, the ability to judge, empathize, and act responsibly in the online space.

If critical reasoning focuses on critiquing algorithmic power, pragmatism emphasizes the reconstruction of the "lifeworld", through education, dialogue and community. Dewey argues that only through equal dialogue and shared experience can people form "public intelligence", the foundation for discerning the truth, building trust and defending the common good. In the digital world, "public intelligence" must be redefined as the collective capacity to understand, verify and judge information, resisting the manipulation and fragmentation of data systems.

Here, Richard Rorty adds to Dewey another humanistic dimension: "Solidarity is achieved not by reason but by imagination." In digital spaces, where language is often short, images replace dialogue, and emotions are manipulated, moral imagination becomes an important capacity for reconnecting people. It's the ability to see the world through the eyes of others, to feel their pain and aspirations, something that digital citizenship education needs to nurture.

From the intersection of these two traditions, it is possible to propose an ethical framework for digital democracy, with three main pillars:

First, develop "Digital Publics", digital public opinion with clear ethical rules. It is necessary to establish technological spaces where communication is not governed by commercial algorithms, but guided by the principles of transparency, equality and accountability. Social platforms should be treated as public institutions, subject to the same moral constraints as journalism or education.

Second, build "AI Ethics for Democracy", artificial intelligence ethics for public reason, not only commercial efficiency. AI systems should not be designed solely to optimize profits or attention, but must follow the principle of serving people: protecting privacy, promoting understanding, and maintaining the diversity of public opinion. "Democratic artificial intelligence" must help expand society's capacity for reflection, not shrink it.

Third, promote the role of education, the media and universities as intermediaries for the regeneration of "public intelligence". Educational institutions should not only train technology skills, but also teach moral competence, reflection and intercultural communication. Schools, universities and the media must become the cornerstones of public dialogue where citizens learn to use language responsibly and understand the value of truth.

If critical reasoning helps us identify the "darkness of the system", pragmatism only gives us the "light of action". These two traditions, when combined, can create a parallel moral model: both critiquing digital dominance mechanisms and building human capacity for moral freedom. This is the most feasible path to salvage democracy in an algorithmic world. Finally, it should be emphasized that digital ethics cannot be just the product of law or

philosophy, but must be lived through everyday practice, through every act of communication, sharing, and choice in the online environment. Democracy, as Dewey puts it, is "a way of life." And in the age of AI, that means learning how to use technology with a spirit of reflection, empathy, and responsibility. Technology will then cease to be a tool of dominance, but a vehicle of freedom and common understanding.

6. Conclusion

The crisis of democracy in the age of artificial intelligence is not only a consequence of technological development beyond control, but more profoundly a crisis of trust, reason, and community. When communication, the foundation of democratic life, is regulated by algorithms and data, people lose the ability to understand each other, and public opinion is fragmented into separate "information universes". Democracy is therefore not declining because of a lack of technology, but because people are no longer connected through reason and dialogue. In this context, the combination of Critical Theory and Pragmatism opens up a new direction of recovery for digital democracy. From Habermas, we learn how to critique algorithmic power, outlining the invisible dominance mechanism in the data economy; from Dewey and Rorty, we learn how to reconstruct moral community life, where people learn to listen, cooperate, and imagine a common world. Only when criticism and reconstruction are combined can democracy adapt and rebirth in the digital era. Further research directions should focus on emerging issues: "algorithmic populism", how algorithms create virtual masses; "digital Habermasian ethics", the ethical foundation for dialogue in cyberspace; and the role of education and digital culture in the formation of reflexive digital citizens. The future of democracy depends on people being able to turn technology into an instrument of freedom, rather than letting it define their own humanity.

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Varia

RECONSTRUCTION IN DEMOCRACY: JOHN DEWEY ON THE EPISTEMIC IMPORT OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT: One of the most pressing debates in the field of political epistemology is that between epistemic democrats and epistocrats concerning the possibility of making a case for democracy on epistemic grounds or, on the contrary, advocating any kind of epistocracy. A detailed review of both classical and current literature –including several contributions that refer to classical pragmatism as a relevant antecedent for the discussion, both in the Peircean- and Deweyan-inspired arguments– shows that the different approaches usually overlook a constituent of politics, namely social conflict. As a result, they operate with a narrow view of democracy. The aim of the article is to develop a Deweyan-inspired epistemic case for democracy that includes the topic of social conflict, so as to make a contribution to the above-mentioned discussion. To achieve this goal, Dewey's third type of social philosophy is considered, as it is mainly developed in the lectures he delivered in China between 1919 and 1921. In particular, the article draws on two elements: (i) Dewey's three-stage theory of social conflict between groups, and (ii) the ideal picture of social development, which sets the normative dimension of his social philosophy. Given Dewey's emphasis on the integration of the interests of social groups as a defining mark of genuine social development, that ideal picture is here understood in terms of democracy as a way of life, according to the well-known definition appearing in Democracy and Education. After analysing Dewey's account of the resolution of social conflict in the light of his view on inquiry and knowledge, and building on some recent contributions, it is argued that the progressive achievement of democracy as a way of life carries epistemic import at the level of the interaction among social groups, insofar as it is the result of an ongoing, successive series of inquiries.

Keywords: democracy, epistocracy, social conflict, knowledge, interests

1. Introduction[1]

Even though the relationship between epistemology and politics is long-standing –consider, for instance, Plato's view about the philosopher king or Mill's argument in favour of plural voting– contemporary phenomena such as "fake-news", "post-truth" or "epistemic bubbles" as well as political irrationality or voting polarisation make the epistemic analysis of politics absolutely pressing. As Hannon & Woodard observe, it is not coincidental that the focus on the epistemic dimension of politics coincides with the theoretical development of the field of political epistemology (2025, 3). Within this context, the *epistemic turn* in theories of democracy, in both aggregative and deliberative models (Cohen 1986; Landemore 2017), has given rise to a considerable debate between epistemic democrats and epistocrats regarding the possibility of making an epistemic case for democracy or, on the contrary, advocating any type of epistocracy.

In general terms, epistocrats claim that political power ought to be held primarily, or even exclusively, by competent electors, so that epistocracy is a system in which political influence and voting rights are distributed in accordance with citizens' levels of political knowledge. For instance, Brennan's provocative argument (2011, 2016, 2022) contends that (i) there is widespread *political ignorance and misinformation* (along with a problem of incentives to get informed, leading to the phenomenon of rational ignorance) as well as *political incompetence*, insofar as the electorate would be *irrational* and *morally unreasonable*; (ii) there is a presumptive "right to a competent government"; and (iii) certain forms of epistocracies are likely to produce more competent decisions, so that (iv) we should probably replace democracy with certain form of epistocracy, *i.e.*, enlightened preference voting. Such type of argument is also advanced by other contemporary scholars like Caplan (2007), Achen & Bartels (2016), and Somin (2020), among others.

This proposal has received several responses from very diverse angles. On one hand, some scholars focus on assessing whether epistocracy is epistemically superior to democracy. In this sense, Bhatia (2018) refers to the epistemic avoidance problem while Méndez (2022) refers to the in-

[1] A preliminary and shorter version of this article was discussed in the International Dewey Colloquium Series hosted by the Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University. I appreciate the generous feedback received after the talk as well as the enriching review from the anonymous referees.

formation gap problem. From an alternative perspective, Moraro (2018) claims that competence is not sufficient for good governance, while Reiss (2019) argues that there is neither uncontroversial social scientific knowledge nor superior political judgments, and van Bouwel (2023) asserts that social scientific knowledge does not lead to superior political judgments. Taking a slightly different strategy, Hannon (2025) has recently defended epistemic theories of democracy from two epistemic challenges, the authority dilemma -related to the problem of political legitimacy- and the epistemic gamble. On the other hand, on an instrumental basis, some scholars argue that democracy is epistemically superior to epistocracy, due to the cognitive diversity of voters (Landemore 2013) or to its tendency to make good decisions given the epistemic value of deliberation (Estlund 2008, Estlund & Landemore 2018). Moreover, appealing to a non-instrumental view, other scholars argue that democracy is legitimate because of its *pure* epistemic proceduralism (Peter 2008) or because of the intrinsic values it promotes, such as equality or mutual respect –beyond its alleged epistemic benefits (Gunn 2019).[2]

Within the broader context of the discussion, it is worth noting that both epistocrats and (most of) epistemic democrats usually adopt a rather narrow view of politics, in general, and of democracy, in particular. As Hannon & Woodard put it, these kinds of epistemic approaches reduce politics to a cognitive or theoretical exercise; therefore, "[...] they overlook its core function: navigating and negotiating deep disagreements about the purposes and values of collective life." (2025, p. 67). Moreover, beyond the fact that some authors characterise their own theories either as ideal (*v.g.* Landemore 2013, p. 9) or as non-ideal (*v.g.* Brennan, 2016, p. 19), they tend to overlook social conflict and struggle, an essential feature of "real democracy".[3]

At this point it may be fruitful to bring classical pragmatism into the discussion. As is widely acknowledged, classical pragmatism constitutes a highly relevant theoretical antecedent for contemporary developments in political epistemology that defend democratic models. Two main lines of argument are generally recognised: (i) a Peircean-inspired argument, according to which crucial democratic commitments such as equality, free speech, open debate, and access to decision-making institutions follow from epistemic commitments, *v.g.* truth-aiming belief and justification (Misak 2000, 2004; Misak & Talisse 2021; Talisse 2007, 2011, 2021); and (ii) a Deweyan-inspired argument, drawing on the notion of democratic experimentalism and social cooperative inquiry (Honneth 1998; Putnam 1992; Anderson 2006; Festenstein 2019; Forstenzer 2019; Räber 2020; among others), and on the rejection of a fixed, independent standard of truth or correctness (Cuevas Badallo & Labrador Montero 2020; Serrano Zamora 2020; Feuerstein 2021). Of course, other classical pragmatists could be also referred to, for instance Jane Addams regarding the political role of sympathetic knowledge or Mary Parker Follett and her theory of integration (Hamington 2009; Santarelli 2021). In any case, both Peircean and Deweyan perspectives are the most considered by current literature.[4]

At the same time, regarding Dewey's philosophy, it is also widely acknowledged that the notion of *conflict* plays a very important role. This point has already been highlighted, for instance, in relation to Dewey's logic of inquiry and theory of education (Point 2018), and, more recently, to his ethics of democracy (Arroyo, Saharrea & Viale 2025). Moreover, it is worth noting that since the discovery of the manuscripts of "Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy" that Dewey delivered in China between 1919 and 1921 (Dewey 2015), notions such as *social conflict* and *social struggle* have been taken to be

[2] Peter (2016) offers a detailed map of epistemic theories of deliberative democracy and summarizes both instrumental arguments for and against deliberative democracy and non-instrumental arguments for and against deliberative democracy.
[3] A nice exception is Camilo Ardila's article on epistemic theories of democracy and political reconciliation, even when he refers to a more specific case of social conflict (Ardila 2025).
[4] For a comprehensive view on pragmatism and political theory, see Festenstein (2023) or Ervan & Möller (2019).

central to an understanding of Dewey's social and political philosophy (Frega 2015, Pappas 2017, among others).[5]

This article aims at contributing to the above-mentioned debate from a Deweyan perspective, in order to argue that his standpoint includes a crucial component of politics –*i.e.*, *social conflict*– which has been largely overlooked in recent literature, yet it constitutes a key concept to develop a more comprehensive epistemic case for democracy. For that purpose, "Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy" will be considered as the main source, while Dewey's major works on democracy will be at the background of the argument. More precisely, section 2 focuses on Dewey's three-stage theory of social conflict as well as on his "ideal picture" of social development, which is here understood in the light of the well-known definition of democracy as a way of life that Dewey states in his 1916 *Democracy and Education*. Section 3, in turn, recovers Dewey's theory of inquiry and definition of knowledge, and builds on a very stimulating argument developed by Serrano Zamora (2017, 2022). The main question is whether Dewey's account of the resolution of social conflicts provides a valuable contribution to the discussion about the epistemic case for democracy. To enrich the analysis, the Argentinian abortion reform process will be considered –though it is not the main topic of the article, given the multiple dimensions of the case. Ultimately, it is argued that, according to Dewey, proper resolution of social conflict towards the accomplishment of an equal and proportionate social development is the ongoing result of a series of successive inquiries, so that his theory of social conflict provides a valuable additional epistemic import crucial for making a revised case for democracy.

2. Dewey's three-stages account of social conflict and the "ideal picture" of social development

In "Lectures", after critically examining both idealistic and conservative approaches to social phenomena (Plato, early Christians, French and Russian Revolution, and Lao-Tze, on one hand, and Aristotle, Confucius, and Hegel, on the other), Dewey identifies a problem common to them: they lack the kind of practical power to shape and direct necessary social changes. To remedy this lack, he proposes a *third type* of social philosophy which constitutes "[t]he union of the scientific spirit with the moral and practical aim of philosophy" (Dewey 2015, 12).[6] The purpose of this new kind of social philosophy is clearly stated in "Syllabus: Social Institutions and the Study of Morals", a series of notes intended for course use at Columbia University in 1923. At the very beginning of the text, Dewey claims that "social philosophy is concerned with the valuation of social phenomena" and that its goal is to carry further "[...] the process of reflective valuation which is found as an integral part of social phenomena." (MW.15.229 and 232).[7] The third type of social philosophy, then, carries a normative dimension. Indeed, the main hypothesis of the course is in tune with his theory of valuation and the distinction between valued and valuable, insofar as the standard of valuation is derived from phenomena yet it is not reduced to a mere record of given valuations but the result of an evaluation (MW.15.231).

It is important to note that, according to Dewey, "[t]heory began in disturbance, confusion, friction" and that "[t]he significant conflicts [that a social philosophy should address] are conflicts of groups, classes, factions, par-

[5] "Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy" had been considered lost and the only existing publication related to them was a "back translation" into English from a Chinese transcription of the oral presentations (Clopton & Ou, 1973). However, working at the Hu Shi Archives in Beijing, Yung-chen Chiang discovered a series of notes typed by Dewey himself and corresponding to nine out of the sixteen lectures he presented at Peking University in 1919. There are very interesting works written before the discovery of the manuscripts which also underline the crucial role of conflict such as Westbrook (1993, 240 and ff.), and Midtgarden (2011).

[6] Between 1919 and 1924 Dewey tried to develop a social philosophy in a pragmatist vein but he abandoned the project –or, at least, he reconfigured it– by the mid-1920s. For a detailed analysis on Dewey's project of social philosophy, see Frega (2015, 1-10).

[7] As usual in literature, quotations and references are to *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953* (1967-1987). Jo Ann Boydston (Ed.). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. Thus, it is indicated EW (*The Early Works*), MW (*The Middle Works*) or LW (*The Later Works*), followed by volume and number of pages. References to "Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy" follow the Author-Date system, for they were published after *The Collected Works of John Dewey*.

ties, peoples". Within this context, Dewey introduces the idea of *basic human need*, sometimes also referred to in terms of *interests*, which may be satisfied by specific social groups. Additionally, he defines social groups as "[...] a number of people associated for some purposes, some common activity that holds them" which constitute "[…] fairly universal modes of union and association." (Dewey 2015, 16, all quotations). More precisely, Dewey lists a set of basic human needs, as follows: (i) reproduction and affective security; (ii) support, sustenance and regular activity; (iii) spiritual guidance and security; (iv) investigation, discovery, intellectual development; and (v) regulation of men's conduct. As mentioned, there is a strict relationship between these basic human needs and the constitution of groups, at two different levels: firstly, basic human needs could be satisfied only through associated action; secondly, there are specific groups corresponding to each need. Thus, for the list (i) to (v), Dewey identifies the following groups or societal forms: (i) family; (ii) industry and business; (iii) churches/religion; (iv) schools, learning societies/science; and (v) governmental association, political society/state. Each social group is qualified by its capacity to satisfy a particular basic human need. Moreover, social groups have evolved to better fulfil their task and they are evaluated according to that particular capacity (2015, p. 16).[8]

Even though there are different social groups aiming at satisfying different needs and interests, it usually happens that some particular interest and its corresponding form and principle of association become dominating and cuts across the other forms of life. In other words, some pattern of human association tends to be central and regulative, so that there is an unequal and unbalanced development of forms of life. As a result, one set of people represents the dominant, law-interpreting group, and the others represent the subdued, depressed and dumb groups, whose interests are not acknowledged by the dominant (Dewey 2015, p. 20). Such unequal and unbalanced development constitutes the first stage of social conflict, a kind of conflict that is not reduced to a clash of interests –even when it includes one– but is deeper insofar as it is a conflict between patterns of human association. Following Frega, given that inequalities arise when a pattern of human association becomes monopolist, social conflict is "[...] a more radical type of conflict, one taking place among competing and irreducible principles struggling for the organisation of social life [...]" (2015, 13). This is the case with the organisational model of the family, a type of human association oriented to promote reproduction and affective security that progressively expanded and subjected every other sphere of social life, or, more contemporary, with the model of industry and business, which seems to prevail over the other principles of human association.

At this stage of social conflict, the suppressed groups are not even aware of their suppression, and they take social relations as a given order of things. It implies a one-sided social development and, at a deeper level, "[a] distortion of human nature –suppression of growth in some direction, exaggeration in others." (Dewey 2015, 11). Regarding the purpose of the article, the crucial point is that this way of suppression hampers the epistemic necessary conditions to foster any social change, for "[t] here are not opportunities that suggest an idea of a different state of things, and hence no idea of an effort to bring about change." (Dewey 2015, 23). Indeed, some years earlier, while analysing the stages of logical thought, Dewey argued that fixing the meaning of ideas results in removing them from the sphere of doubt, so that they are "[...] the chief instruments of social conservation [insofar as] these sets of ideas thus become the embodiment of the values which any group has realized and intends to perpetuate." (MW.1.155). In light of Elizabeth Anderson's

[8] In "Syllabus" (MW.15.236), Dewey claims that such fundamental human needs are the basis of groups and their different interests reflect these needs and he lists the following: (i) support, sustenance / industrial groups; (ii) protection, security / ecclesiastical, military and political groups; (iii) reproduction / family; (iv) recreation, use of leisure / Clubs, etc.; and (v) language, sociability / school, academies, scientific organizations.

now-classic analysis (2006) according to which Dewey's democratic experimentalism implies diversity, discussion and feedback, this stage of social conflict undermines the first condition of the epistemic account of democracy, insofar as it excludes some social groups from the process of public discussion, and it precludes the reference to their situated knowledge to solve the kind of complex problems that democracy usually addresses.

However, social conditions may change and give rise to discontent and restlessness. This is the second stage of social conflict, in which dominated groups become aware of the suppression. At this stage, the challenge raised by suppressed social groups has a wide range and a very general goal because it is usually directed towards the entire society, as something "[…] positively oppressive and to be destroyed in the interests of individual freedom." (Dewey 2015, 23). Even though this stage of social conflict is marked by a sense of individualism, of mere revolt against authorities and institutions without any clear channel for performing a social function, it may create the conditions for articulating the demands for needed social functions. This represents a step further, in which the capacities of the suppressed social groups are not merely stimulated in an emotional way, but they find an adequate channel for expressing their interests and they set their demand as a legitimate one: "*The claim shifts from a right to a neglected social duty.*" (Dewey 2015, 23. Emphasis in the original). The third stage of social conflict, then, is marked by an organised challenge to the instituted order so as to rectify social inequalities in a way that the claims of the suppressed groups are acknowledged as part of the common goods and, at the same time, these groups consider themselves as contributing to the social well-being. As might be expected, this type of conflict usually implies social struggle because dominating groups tend to be conservative and to defend the state of affairs.[9]

It may be enriching to consider the kind of social conflicts Dewey is bearing in mind. The author detects the three-stage model of social conflict in the history of feminism, the labour movement and the growth of scientific authority against the Church. In a similar vein it would be possible to analyse the social conflict regarding abortion in Argentina. Indeed, it seems clear that the legal prohibition of abortion reflected the monopoly of some patterns of human association, namely the patriarchal conception of family and the Church aiming to control every sphere of human life, including the regulation of familial and medical practices. In addition, the first revolts by feminists were quite fragmented from other social claims, and they were considered by dominant groups as subversive practices against society as a whole. More precisely, conservative politicians and part of the public opinion accused them of attacking the very ideal of family, taken to be the foundation of society. By the 1990s, the bills to legally regulate abortion were systematically rejected before being formally introduced in Congress. However, by the 2010s, social and political conditions changed, and feminists found institutional channels to express their demands and achieved the passage of a new legal framework in December 2020. Briefly, abortion on demand until 14 weeks of pregnancy was legalised by the Senate. As will be shown below, the entire development of the conflict carried significant epistemic import for a broad series of public hearings were held both in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, including experts from fields such as medicine, biology, law, philosophy, the Church, and social organisations.

Resuming Dewey's theory of social conflict, in "Lectures" he also provides a normative framework by means of an "ideal picture" of social development –as the result of an evaluation– according to which

[9] It is not always the case that social conflict traverses the three identified stages because of the resistance of subordinating groups and of their ability to characterise the new social demands as self-interested, contrary to the alleged-universal interest they seem to promote. Following Pappas, "[t]here is no guarantee of a third stage or even a smooth transition to it. Dewey is not naïve about forces that usually operate against some resolution of conflicts." (Pappas 2017, 21).

> there is an equal proportionate development of all these forms of associated life [*i.e.* social groups], where they interact freely with one another, and where the results of each one contribute to the richness and significance of every other [...], not merely materially but morally and intellectually all forms of human intercourse –where in short there is mutual stimulation and support and free passage of significant results from one to another. (Dewey 2015, p. 16)

In contrast to the predominance of one group over other forms of association, this normative criterion establishes a sense of balance, equity, and mutual enrichment among groups and their patterns of organisation, but also of individual fulfilment within each group. To put it simply, the most important characteristic of any social development should be its integration. At this point, it is claimed that Dewey's theory of social conflict should be read considering his theory of democracy. Indeed, the idea of integration is suggested in what the pragmatist states in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*: "[democracy] is but a name for the fact that human nature is developed only when its elements take part in directing things which are common, things for the sake of which men and women form groups: families, industrial companies, governments, churches, scientific associations and so on." (MW.12.199-200). Apart from listing the same kinds of social groups included in "Lectures" –even though the link between a defined interest and its corresponding social group does not appear–, Dewey highlights the link between the idea of democracy and social philosophy by relating human development to the direction of common things.[10]

However, the most relevant reference appears in *Democracy and Education*, where Dewey maintains that "[...] democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience." (MW.9.93). As is well known, Dewey introduces a twofold criterion to evaluate social life: (i) how numerous and varied are the interests consciously shared, and (ii) how full and free, *i.e.*, how cooperative is the interplay between social groups. Such a criterion points to consider not only common interests nor interaction but "[…] a greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control [… and a] change in social habits [by means of] its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse." (MW.9.92). In addition, it is possible to achieve an articulation of diverse interests by means of discussing and evaluating conflicting interests to settle them in favour of the widest possible contribution to the interests of the majority, *i.e.* by means of what Dewey names as "the method of democracy –inasfar [*sic*] as it is that of *organized intelligence*" (LW.11.65. Emphasis added). In this sense, the defining feature of democracy is certain kind of relationship between the interests of social groups rather than any particular interest common to all of them, while the ideal of an integrated and cooperative society is the main yardstick to evaluate the successful character of a democracy as a way of life.[11]

3. The epistemic import of the resolution of social conflict and a revised case for democracy

Thus far, Dewey's third type of social philosophy provides an analysis of social conflict as well as a normative

[10] It is worth remembering that *Reconstruction in Philosophy* is based on a series of lectures Dewey delivered at Tokyo's Imperial University of Japan in 1919, just before arriving in China.

[11] A complete analysis of Dewey's idea of democracy as a way of life is beyond the scope of the article. A classical reference on the topic is Westbrook (1993, 150-194). For a detailed discussion of Dewey's concept of interest and its sociopolitical dimension, see Santarelli (2019, 141-166). The reading of the "ideal picture" as the main normative feature of "Lectures" is in tune with Pappas' understanding (Pappas 2017). It is worth noting, also, that even though Dewey's public-based theory of democracy is mainly developed in his 1927 *The Public and Its Problems*, there are some references to the concepts of *public, public opinion,* and *community* already in "Lectures": "True social or community life means *inter*-action, reciprocal influence, mutual response to the needs and claims of the other parts of partners in the combination", or "[t]here has to be a social organization of publicity in the interest of the public instead of some special class or country or government. […] In order that public opinion may control, there must be means of forming public opinion. In order that wise public opinion may control, the true facts must be gathered and disseminated by the press, by discussion." (Dewey 2015, 37. The idea of a "public-based" theory of democracy is taken from Frega, 2019).

framework to evaluate social development. As it was mentioned, this framework or "ideal picture" is strongly related to his philosophical definition of democracy. The following task, then, is to consider the epistemic feature of social conflict in order to examine whether it allows for making a revised case for democracy on epistemic grounds. At this point it is worth considering the two steps argument developed by Serrano Zamora (2017, 2022). In a nutshell, Serrano Zamora (2017) provides an expressivist reading of Dewey's theory of social conflict by referring to some theoretical insights from *Art as Experience* and argues that the three stages of social conflict could be taken as a process towards collective self-understanding. Subsequently –in dialogue with the traditional account of epistemic democracy, according to which (i) there would be a procedure-independent standard of correctness, and (ii) democracy would be good at tracking the right or true solution–, Serrano Zamora (2022) focuses on Dewey's logic of inquiry and claims that problems are not given but hermeneutically and practically articulated, in order to argue that social problem-articulation is an act of expression of social identities. However, as was already highlighted, according to Dewey the relationships among groups are full of domination, or *expressive domination*, following Serrano Zamora's previous analysis. This entails a three-fold epistemic problem given that dominant social groups (i) articulate problems one-sidedly, (ii) block alternative problem-articulations, and (iii) reduce the multiplicity of problems affecting the possibilities of defining and solving different problems. Ultimately, Serrano Zamora claims that inclusion and equal participation ought to be encouraged so as to produce better decision-making processes on epistemic grounds.

Apart from this well-established epistemic case for democracy –which resembles the Peircean-inspired argument, for it derives political commitments from epistemic commitments, in this case the articulation of problems in social inquiry– there is another feature to consider. According to Dewey, the shift from the second to the third stage of social conflict, namely the shift from individualistic expression to a demand for needed social functions, is also an appeal to intelligence, *i.e.* "[…] *the substitution of the scientific method for the method of opinion, dogmatic assertion, bitter recriminations and disparaging name calling, epithets of abuse.*" (Dewey 2015, 25. Emphasis in the original). Indeed, any proposed social change should trace causes and consequences to understand how social institutions and arrangements work, what kind of effects they produce or would produce were they modified, etc. In Dewey's words, advocating for a social change within the context of social conflict among groups is the same as working with

> […] a hypothesis that the welfare of society would be promoted by the adoption of a certain change, that if this harms a special class for a time, this loss to the class is in the interests of the community of the whole, and is the measure of justice to some other class now suffering from inadequate social recognition. […] His claim that certain defects exist, and that they may be remedied by the adoption of certain proposed measures of change are propositions to be examined in the light of facts –first facts of history, existing facts and conditions, second new facts, facts to be brought in. (Dewey 2015, 21).

In the analysis proposed here, the resolution of social conflict should result from a process of experimental inquiry, which leads to a certain kind of knowledge. Two intertwined concepts should be considered in some detail, then: inquiry and knowledge. Dewey's view on inquiry is developed throughout his entire career, from some early essays regarding the relative distinction between ideas and facts (EW.1.83) to his 1938 *Logic. Theory of Inquiry* (LW.12). Even though *Logic* constitutes Dewey's more systematic and mature approach to the issue, the focus here will be on some earlier texts, in order to circumscribe the reading to the period in which he is also working on the project of social philosophy. In the Introduction to his 1917 *Essays in Experimental Logic*, Dewey establishes the most important insights about inquiry:

(i) reflection appears when the meaning of the situation as a whole is uncertain, and articulated as problematic, (ii) the only way to solve the problem is reorganising the experiential factors in order to get unity, (iii) to achieve this goal a certain kind of inquiry is needed, and (iv) the validity of the reflective considerations is determined by means of action. From the standpoint of temporal order, then, inquiry occupies an intermediate position between the indeterminate situation and a new and unified situation resulting from the action guided by practical judgments (MW.10.320-335).

Dewey also makes a detailed analysis of the *pattern* of inquiry and he identifies different phases. As he states as early as 1910, in the first edition of *How We Think*,

> [u]pon the examination [of all types of inquiry], each instance reveals, more or less clearly, five logically distinct steps: (i) a felt difficulty, (ii) its location and definition, (iii) suggestion of possible solution, (iv) development by reasoning of the bearings of the suggestion, (v) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection, that is, the conclusion of belief or disbelief (MW.6.236).[12]

The crucial point here is that the object of knowledge is an outcome predicted after inspection of data and elaboration of hypotheses oriented to the practical resolution of the uncertain or indeterminate situation. In this sense, Dewey argues, reasoning shows that if the suggestions or ideas are adopted, certain consequences follow. This is precisely what Dewey means by systematic inference: "[…] the recognition of definite relations of interdependence between considerations previously unorganized and disconnected, this recognition being brought about by the discovery and insertion of new facts and properties." (MW.6.243). However, the conclusion will remain as a hypothesis until changed conditions are instituted, that is, "till thinking has terminated in the experimental act which fulfils the specifications set forth in thinking" and which is labelled as knowledge "[…] in virtue of the inquiry which has led up to it." (MW.10.329, both quotations).

Regarding knowledge, it may be interesting to also consider what Dewey claims in his 1929 *The Quest for Certainty*: "[...] knowing is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participator inside the natural and social scene, [so] the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of directed action." (LW.4.157). In this sense, knowledge is not a distant relationship between a subjective knower and an object known, but the result of functional and experimental procedures, of certain kind of trans-actions between organism and environment in which the organism tries to deliberately control the environment. Within the context of his general criticism of both classical rationalism and empiricism, such an understanding means that there is no antecedent reality to which thought or sense perception should conform. Rather, there are as many objects known as operations of inquiry resulting in the consequences intended towards the resolution of the indeterminate situation that gives rise to a process of inquiry: "We know whenever we do know; that is, whenever our inquiry leads to conclusions which settle the problem out of which it grew. This truism is the end of the whole matter upon the condition that we frame our theory of knowledge in accord with the pattern set by experimental methods" (LW.4.158). To put it simply, facing the needs and deficiencies of an indeterminate situation that is stated as problematic, knowing implies changing experiential conditions by means of hypotheses and plans of action to readjust the situation, and the process is tested by practical success or failure in achieving this reconstructive goal –all of which is referred to by Dewey in terms of *intelligence* (MW.12.134).[13]

[12] For a general approach to Dewey's logic of inquiry, see Fesmire (2015, 87-93), and for closer examination about the temporal and logical sequence of inquiry, see Brown (2012). I have addressed Dewey's view on logic in Mattarollo (2025).

[13] While a detailed analysis of the Deweyan idea of intelligence is beyond the scope of the article, it is important to note that in the late 1910s and early 1920s Dewey substitutes reason for intelligence to highlight the practical dimension of knowledge. Following Colapietro, "[t]he pragmatist portrait of the intelligent experimentalism is truly a new chapter in our intellectual history." (2019, p. 90).

These Deweyan insights allows for claiming that adequate resolution of social conflict accords with his experimental account of knowledge, for solving this type of conflict requires "[…] arriving at a common conclusion by the use of intelligence in analysing specific conditions, studying definite problems of cause and effect." (Dewey 2015, 20). According to Westbrook, in the long term, the process towards desired social ends and conditions is "[…] an incremental process of experimental problem-solving" (1993, 245). Therefore, the shift to the method of intelligence not only has an impact on the collective self-understanding of social groups, on "[…] the epistemic status of social facts" (Serrano Zamora 2017, 59), or on specific social problem-articulations (Serrano Zamora 2022), but also on the resolution of the main social problem, namely, the subordination of groups due to the aggrandisement of patterns of any particular form of associated life. The third type of social philosophy, then, advocates a kind of knowledge similar to that of applied sciences, for it is "[…] concerned with the intelligent reshaping or alteration of existing conditions." (Dewey 2015, 12).

As mentioned, the process leading to a new legal framework regarding abortion in Argentina could be analysed from Dewey's third type of social philosophy. Once the topic was included in the legislative agenda, between April and August 2018 more than 700 invited speakers could express a variety of arguments in favour and against the bill, in order to assess both Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Even though speakers were not organised into a deliberative forum, for they could not respond to each other, institutional as well as public discussion certainly gained an epistemic import. Indeed, participants included some of the most important local physicians, biologists, philosophers, jurists, and social activists, who addressed the topic from different angles. For instance, philosophers considered the metaphysical status of the foetus, the apparent conflict between the intrinsic value of human life and the right to bodily autonomy, the consequences of keeping clandestine abortion networks instead of allowing abortion at different moments of the pregnancy under healthy conditions in public institutions, among other topics. More generally, and beyond their deep differences, most of the speakers focused on the wide range of consequences resulting from one or another bill so as to evaluate them in the light of moral, political, and social values –a very interesting kind of dramatic rehearsal, in the light of Dewey's account. In any case, the resolution was not reduced to a scientific one, but scientific advice was a very important part of a political decision. In this sense, the whole process elevated the epistemic quality of public opinion as well as of the institutional outcomes, for it was the result of a cooperative inquiry to solve a public problem. It gave room to a new general view on the topic as well as a rectification of some social inequalities towards a more equal development of forms of human association. Recalling Dewey, "[m]utual speech subjects ideas to criticism, improves them by selection and combination, leads to new thought and to inquiries" while "[…] the only way to improve government is to improve public opinion by improving ideas and the methods of their circulation. Suffrage, chamber of deputies, etc., are ultimately means of creating and expressing public opinion." (2015, 35, both quotations).[14]

All things considered, a revised epistemic case for democracy could be advanced as follows: given that (i) the "ideal picture" of democracy, in Dewey's normative sense, states that there should be an equal, balanced, and proportionate development of groups or forms of associated living, and that (ii) adequate resolution of social conflict results from a series of successive inquiries, whenever the third stage is reached, it follows that (iii) the progressive achievement of democracy carries epistemic import at its very core, at the level of the interaction among groups, in order to avoid subordination and to make possible further material, moral, and intellectual

[14] Among the extensive literature addressing the Argentinian discussion on abortion, see Fernández Anderson (2022).

mutual enrichment. Indeed, in both Lecture VI and Lecture XII Dewey asserts that the supreme test of any social arrangement is its capacity to promote association and communication, while its "ulterior justification" lies in "[…] its effect in stimulating thought, ideas and their expression about social matters", *i.e.* in its *educative effect* (Dewey 2015, 35). In other words, democracy as a way of life should be endorsed on epistemic grounds not only because it sets the conditions for social cooperative inquiry into specific problems, as classical analyses of the topic have already stated, but also at a deeper level, because it is the ongoing result of the intelligent resolution of social conflict in order to create a "[…] new action of social forces bringing about a re-construction of social groups and of their adjustment to one another." (Dewey 2015, 22). In turn, fostering association and communication between groups –promoting collective discussion, following Anderson (2006)– is epistemically enriching as well: "[…] in the mixture of discussion some light is shed, some advance in secure knowledge is made." (Dewey 2015, 36). It is worth noting, then, that Dewey refers not only to the *dependence* of social life but also to the *culmination* of social institutions and arrangements upon intellectual and ideal factors in such a way that they reinforce each other (2015, 35). Therefore, this argument seems coherent with a well-established Deweyan case for democracy –that based on his experimentalist account of social, cooperative inquiry– and provides an additional and fruitful feature –that based on his theory of social conflict.

4. Concluding remarks

This article has focused on a current debate in the field of political epistemology, namely the possibility of making an epistemic case for democracy. After reviewing the main lines of argument, it has been pointed out that the fact of social conflict is not considered by most of the approaches to the issue, even those that refer to classical pragmatists as theoretical references for the debate, both in the Peircean- and Deweyan-inspired arguments. Within this context, the article has offered a reading of Dewey's three-stage theory of social conflict in the light of his understanding of democracy as a way of life, so as to recover a dimension of politics that has been overlooked by most of classical and current literature. As it has been highlighted, Dewey's philosophical framework works with a more complex view of democracy than what epistemic democrats and epistocrats usually consider, for the pragmatist develops a moral and social meaning of democracy characterised by a wide area of shared and common interests and concerns, and a great individualisation and diversity of personal capacities (MW.9.96). This refers precisely to the need for a reconstruction in democracy: instead of identifying democracy with political democracy –the responsible for most of its failures, Dewey says (MW.12.200)–, the focus should be on the intelligent reshaping of social conditions. Thus, what Dewey states about philosophy seems to apply for democracy as well: "[…] the task of future philosophy is to clarify men's ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day. Its aim is to become so far as is humanly possible an organ for dealing with these conflicts." (MW.12.94).

Within this context, the central claim of the article is that Dewey's three-stage account of social conflict has a strong epistemic dimension, for the shift from isolated, individual revolts to proper social changes is the shift from the method of opinion and dogmatic assertion to the method of intelligence. This accords with the Deweyan concept of inquiry as a problem-solving process, which underlies his third type of social philosophy. Indeed, a pragmatist social philosophy "[…] *substitutes discrimination of particular consequences of good and bad, better and worse, for general criticism and justification*" and its ideas "[…] *will be valuable and valid just in the degree in which they help solve problems*." (Dewey 2015, 15, both quotations, emphasis in the original). As highlighted, the Argentinian abortion reform process is a kind of social conflict that allows for identifying the three-stage

model developed by Dewey. It is an open task, then, to further study it from a Deweyan framework. More generally, social inquiry points to the control of the consequences of social change by means of a working-hypothesis, and the track of causes and consequences of adopting certain proposed measures of change. Therefore, it is based upon accurate knowledge of the situation, and it also constitutes new knowledge because it results from inquiry. In this sense, the epistemic dimension of social conflict is related not only to the collective self-understanding of oppressed groups, to the status of social facts, and to the articulation of social problems, as Serrano Zamora lucidly argues, but also to the resolution of social conflict, insofar as it is the result of successive inquiries whose ulterior test is given by their capacity to promote "[…] exchange of feelings and ideas that makes experience common" (Dewey 2015, 25). Considering that the main goal of social change should be the equal and proportionate development of all groups and forms of associated life, *i.e.*, democracy, it is ultimately asserted that progressively achieving this goal as the result of an ongoing series of inquiries allows for making a revised epistemic case for democracy and, in the wider debate on political epistemology, for working with a richer concept of democracy.

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RECOVERING EXISTENCE IN THE CLINIC: THE SOMAESTHETICS[1] OF LAUGHTER

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ABSTRACT: Humour and laughter shape the body's response towards illness. They affect the neurobiological functioning of our body and determine its response towards our routines and experiences. Though medical studies corroborate the healing capacity of mirth, the therapeutic value of laughter remains overlooked in philosophy of medicine. We read *Laughing Cancer Away: An Actor's Memoir* (2014) by the Indian actor and politician, Innocent to explore how laughter, as a mode of resilience, contributes to wellness by reshaping the embodied existence. By examining the dialectic of suffering, we redefine healing through a phenomenological investigation and explore the therapeutic value of laughter as a habitual practice and its representation in autopathography. By emphasising the vitality of knowing one's own body, we propose a new vision of existence and a patient-centred philosophy of healing.

KEYWORDS: phenomenology of illness, laughter, humour, body, habit, emotion, healing, somaesthetics

Introduction

Illness is a universal and pervasive phenomenon which unsurprisingly dominates the discourse in Health Humanities. As an intense human experience, illness is a great reflector of human truths. Health Humanities systematically investigates the multifaceted dimensions of health, healing, and resilience, elucidating the intricate interrelationships between illness and its personal, social, cultural, political, medical, and philosophical dimensions. Furthermore, this discourse critically examines the epistemology of illness narratives, particularly autopathography, in redefining health and healing, thereby fostering an interdisciplinary dialogue between Medicine and the Humanities (Crawford et al. 2015). The present study contributes to this academic discourse by advancing a re-evaluation of healing through the analytical framework of phenomenology by emphasizing the therapeutic potential of mirth as evidenced by philosophical, personal, and medical perspectives. By bridging the gap between the clinical understanding of laughter and its literary representations, we posit that the human body possesses an inherent capacity to modulate its physiological and psychological responses to illness in a manner that affirms and sustains life.

In the first section of the paper, we analyse the role of autopathography in medical humanities as the voice of the witness and explore how the voice of the witness, here, the patient, becomes the voice of the experience and the value of it in medical humanities. The section examines how this experience becomes a way of seeing, not merely with the eyes, but with the mind as well. This dialectic between suffering as one sees in the body, and suffering as one sees through and beyond the body becomes the focal point of the section. We observe how Innocent's autopathographical reflection represents this dialectic, between Innocent, the cancer patient and Innocent, the comedian as cancer patient, and resolve the tension.

In the second section, we analyse how phenomenology facilitates the resolution by providing an insight into the lived experience of illness besides providing a viable theoretical and methodological framework to implement as a mode of resilience when illness strikes. Acknowledging the unavoidability of knowing one's body's capacity,

[1] Somaesthetics is a discipline where body consciousness and mindfulness intertwine to manifest a better understanding of the self. There is a greater awareness of the body which leads to a special care that Innocent is able to work out by himself. He also attends to the care of the body mindfully. He convinces himself that unless the mind is fully invested in the body and the actions in the body, there is no somatic salvation possible. Therefore, the somatic amelioration happens when body consciousness meets mindfulness.

We draw from the concept of Somaesthetics, from Richard Shusterman's *Body Consciousness* (2008), shaping of life by reposing faith in the intelligent and integrated body, the *Soma*, as the site of both the experience of life and its representation. Somaesthetics, according to him, "in its experiential dimension, clearly refuses to exteriorize the body as an alienated thing distinct from the active spirit of human experience" (28). It challenges the conservative notion of mind-body dualism and proposes a philosophy of Body and Mind to highlight the vitality of human experience embedded in self-awareness. He adds: "Somaesthetic reflection and its representations can be useful not for explaining ordinary experience but for altering it and supplementing it" (67). Innocent, through a somaesthetic strategy, alters his experience of illness and recovers existence in the clinic with the agency of laughter.

this section investigates, in light of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of habit, how laughter induced by humour can be a powerful tool of resilience in its physiological as well as ontological sense.

The third section contains a phenomenological analysis on how *Laughing Cancer Away: An Actor's Memoir* (2014) by Innocent represents the dialectic between seeing suffering in the body and seeing suffering through and beyond the body and how it can be resolved. We analyse Innocent's lived experience to see how he resolves, through habit, the dialectic tension by choosing humour as a tool of resilience. We employ Havi Carel's Phenomenological Toolkit through which illness and healing are more effectively engaged. In light of Carel's phenomenological toolkit, one observes how humour as a habitual practice alters the corporeal environment of the body as much as the experiential space outside the body. Paralleling Norman Cousins' approach, Innocent positions himself as an agent of healing by altering his will through a somaesthetic strategy, specifically by cultivating humour as a resilient response to illness.

In conclusion, we posit that humour and laughter possess the capacity to modulate the body's response to affliction and facilitate the process of recuperation by contributing to both physiological and existential well-being. Autopathography acts as a field of the lived experience of resilience and healing. This research, aims to explicate the epistemological and ontological significance of mirth as a philosophical paradigm, thereby advancing its recognition as a salient factor in the holistic conceptualization of therapeutic processes, beyond its conventionally acknowledged medical relevance.

Autopathography and the Dialectic of Suffering

The body is our closest companion and safest shelter. Any serious rupture like terminal illness would cause physical as well as an ontological quandary (Toombs 1987).The health care systems help the patients through medical support, palliative care and other measures like psychotherapy to strengthen the somaesthetic as well as the emotional capacity to live with the illness and survive it. Though many disciplines advocate and propose patient support services, the domain of philosophy has had a modest engagement in terms of useful discoursal interventions and patient-centred approach to the experience of illness (Carel 2012). Although medical services and social care systems are capable of facilitating cure and rehabilitation, the existential dimension of the phenomenon of illness remains overlooked as the patient becomes a diseased body or a mere object of medical scrutiny in the clinical setting.

Illness is an unforeseen disruption of one's physical as well as the existential harmony. Why do patients write their illness is a central question in medical humanities? The patient, the witness of pain and agony, reflects on the experience of the affliction in the autopathographies. As Hawkins states, sometimes, they are 'didactic' in nature. Some are 'angry' narratives and some are 'pathographies advocating alternative modes of treatment' (4). In all these forms, the voice of the author-patient becomes the voice of the experience. Hawkins in *Reconstructing Illness* (1999) understands pathography as "a reaction to our contemporary medical model, one so dominated by a biophysical understanding of illness that its experiential aspects are virtually ignored" (11). Illness narratives act as counter-narrative to the case history or the objective medical description of the symptoms by foregrounding the subjective account of one's affliction.

Autopathography, the first-person narrative of an individual's experience of illness, has been a vital subject of discussion in diverse discourses. The personal reflection of one's affliction represents the life-world of the patient and becomes the voice of the experience. The term 'pathography' was introduced by Robley Dunglison in his *Medical Lexicon* (1853) to denote the 'description of disease' (648). Etymologically, autopathography is derived from the combination of auto (self), patho (suffering), and graphe (writing), which indicates the self-narrative of one's suffering. In *Recovering Bodies* (1997), Thomas

Couser terms autopathography as the "autobiographical narrative of illness or disability"; the personal encounter with one's illness, treatment and the relationship with oneself and the world. According to Anne Hawkins, "The task of the author of a pathography is not only to describe this disordering process but also to restore to reality its lost coherence and to discover, or create, a meaning that can bind it together again" (1999, pg.3).

In the last thirty years, studies have explored the multifaceted dimensions of autopathography and its scope. They have examined the role of illness narratives in humanising medical professionals (Kumagai 2008; Fioretti et al. 2016; Easton 2016; Le et al. 2017; Milota et al 2019; Joshi et al. 2020). They have explored the philosophical dimension of the experiential account of illness and disability (Couser 1997; Mesa Freydell 2022). There have even been studies on the selfhood, narrative medicine and identity of the author-patient (Frank 1997; Charon 2006; Avrahami 2007). However, an extensive phenomenological study on the autopathography as the voice of the experience by bridging the gap between medical, literary and philosophical realms of embodiment and illness remains overlooked. We posit that autopathography contributes to the field of medical humanities by opening a discursive space for the engagement among medicine, phenomenology of illness and literary representation.

The biomedical system which is concerned with the diseased body, its symptoms and prognosis, foregrounds the somatic difficulties and often perceives bodily suffering objectively. This perception overlooks other crucial factors of illness such as the patient's role in healing besides care of the afflicted organ and the prescribed medicine or the mode of treatment. As the patients are known to lack epistemic agency, they often imbibe and follow this perception from the clinical setting and become mere objects of medical scrutiny and treatment. Though patients attain medical awareness about their disease from the clinical setting, their existential dilemma remains a constraint to healing. The patient's knowledge about the affliction acquired from the physician is limited as it describes the disease as bodily dysfunction and excludes all other facets of the condition of illness. Nevertheless, philosophizing illness allows patients to reconsider the objective view of the body and to perceive the illness as a phenomenon which affects somaesthetic, psychological as well as the epistemological realms of life. More than the awareness of the severity of the disease or the type of medication and the side effects of a particular drug, what prepares the patients for healing is the knowledge about themselves and the meaning of life they construct out of their experience of illness. This indicates seeing suffering through and beyond the body. This dialectic, between seeing suffering in the body and seeing beyond it is often reflected in autopathographies. Illness writing becomes a medium of navigating how one should resolve this tension as it provides a chance to reflect on illness both objectively and subjectively. Writing one's philosophy of illness is a seminal method of recuperation as it acknowledges and highlights the subjective account of illness and proposes a patient-centered approach to healing.

Laughing Cancer Away: An Actor's Memoir (2014) by Innocent, the Indian actor, politician and social worker, is the representative autopathography that manifests different dimensions of healing. This autobiographical work documents Innocent's transformative journey from suffering to joy, loss to levity, and ultimately, a reclamation of life. Being an extraordinary talent, Innocent foregrounds a profound vision about existence following the encounter with cancer. Reading Innocent's experiential account of how he attained lightness over the dark days of pain through his sense of humour phenomenologically underlines that choosing how to shape one's body's response to illness is a powerful mode of resilience. As Hawkins states, illness narrative "gives the ill person a voice" and "returns the voice of the patient to the world of medicine, a world where that voice is too rarely heard, and it does so in such a way as to assert the phenomenological, the subjective, and the experiential side of illness"

(11). We examine how Innocent's writing becomes a call for a patient-centered philosophy of healing grounded in seeing beyond the body by resolving the tension between the objective reality of the ill body and the experiential realm of the lived body.

Phenomenology of Illness, Laughter and Habit

Autopathographical writings resonate with the voice of the experience of affliction. This experience is a way of seeing; not merely with the eyes, but with the mind as well. 'Seeing illness with the eyes' or locating suffering in the body in terms of physical symptoms figures a patient as a mere medical body. 'Seeing suffering with the mind', on the other hand, in its philosophical sense, is a view that locates pain as building on the body and expanding beyond its definable boundaries. A patient often witnesses an existential torment as illness throws him into the dialectic space between the medical body and the lived-body. In order to reclaim the normalcy of the life-world and resolve this tension, one must become aware of the body's capacity for healing (Shusterman 2008). Healing, in its holistic sense, is an embodied process that assimilates neurochemical, physiological, emotional and medical functions.

Human emotions, being the outward reflection of the inner world, enable our interaction with ourselves and the world (Shusterman 1999). The body responds to illness, like any other phenomenon, through the agency of emotions like fear of pain and death, indignation or dejection which intensify the physical and existential torment. A patient in agony or fear will find, through self-introspection, that negative emotions obstruct the process of healing We argue that what buoys the spirit up is laughter induced by humour. In this context, examining laughter, as an embodied expression, is a means to knowing the capacity of human emotions to shape the body's response to ailments. Laughter is a universal human faculty that resists emotional deterioration by bringing lightness in perturbed states and channelizes effective human communication (Kimmel 1998) It is an act of liberating oneself from the miseries, sufferings and the burden of bitter human realities (Monro 1963). Laughter induced by humour even elevates one from low self-esteem by manifesting one's own follies. Etymologically, humour originates from the Latin 'Umor,' which signifies 'liquid.' In medieval medicine, it denoted the four universal liquids namely blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. In accordance with this notion, bringing people into wellness was termed 'humouring' (McDonald 2012) and 'humour' became an indicator of a cheerful state of mind by the sixteenth century. Paul McDonald, in *The Philosophy of Humour* (2012) observes that "'sense of humour' came to be seen as something worth cultivating by the nineteenth century. In our time, humour is a synonym for joking, comedy and laughter" (10).

Many empirical and theoretical studies attest to the healing effect of humour and laughter (Seaward 1992; Fry 1994; Provine 1996; Pattillo et al 2001; Gervais and Wilson 2005; Bennett et al 2003; Amici 2019; Perez-Aranda 2019). Humour, as the source of mirthful laughter, is now known to bring about physiological, psychological, and neurochemical changes in one's body with the potential to alter the body's response towards ailment (Herth 1990). It is a powerful tool of resilience and a beneficial strategy for dealing with pain (Martin 2001; Cousins 2005). The effect of laughter can be categorized in to four segments. The first effect is at the physiological level where changes in musculoskeletal, neural, immunological, cardiovascular and endocrine systems happen (Mora-Ripoll 2010). Secondly, humour and laughter through immunity-enhancing effects ensure a positive emotional state (Bennett and Lengacher 2007). The third one is the stress moderating effect of laughter (Berk et al 1989; Lefcourt and Martin 1986; Abel 2002; Kim et al. 2015) . The fourth major health benefit of humour and laughter is during social mediation (Black 1984; Martin 1998; Caruana 2017).

Laughter therapy is one of the non-pharmacologic interventions that is used to help people cope with physical as well as psychological diseases. Including laughter yoga, exercises, comedy movies, games and clowns in the programme, laughter therapy validates the therapeutic benefits of laughter induced by humour and prevails as a complementary therapy globally. Several studies corroborate the physical as well as the psychological changes laughter therapy brings in cancer patients who undergo chemotherapy, radiation and other modes of treatment (Kong et al 2014; Naghibeiranvand 2021; Uner et all 2022; Karimi et al 2024). Many studies document the role of laughter therapy in reducing stress and anxiety among diseased people (Kim et al 2015; Mbiriri 2020; Akimbekov and Razzaque 2021). Studies acknowledge how laughter therapy enhances the quality of life of the patients, caregivers as well as their family (Rosner 2002; Morishima et al 2019; Mehta 2024; Moon et al 2024). This clearly validates that laughter induced by humour complements healing by bringing positive alterations to somatic as well as the psychological conditions. Though these studies have considered the therapeutic value of laughter at the psychosomatic level in the clinical setting, the epistemological realm of the healing potential of laughter needs to be addressed. As the experience of illness varies from person to person, the question of how a personalised approach to healing through one's own sense of humour as a habit facilitates recuperation becomes the central point of the study. Innocent's illness narrative transpires to be the manifesto of such a patient-centred philosophy of health.

Though clinical studies on laughter corroborate the role of mirth in the positive physiological changes during illness, laughter induced by humour in philosophy remains a matter of discoursal neglect. Mirth, more than being a medically proven coping mechanism, can act as a facilitator of healing by addressing and mitigating the existential torments. Though laughter remains a pertinent mode of therapy, the question of what philosophy can do for patients in distress becomes relevant as it would enrich the discourse on health and healing and would enable each patient to philosophize one's sense of humour in a way that would facilitate the understanding of body consciousness as well as the mindfulness. It would enable patients to alter their mirth into a tool of resilience in their own spatial and temporal realm of life. Laughter, in this paper, is philosophized not as a casual expression or communicative gesture, but as a conscious practice or a habit through which one can prepare one's body for rehabilitation.

Phenomenology, as a disciplinary practice, attends to the experiences and perceptions of individuals, is a viable theoretical framework to understand the experience of illness and healing. Havi Carel in her "Phenomenology as a Resource for Patients" (2012) proposes a "philosophical framework that views cognition as embodied, focuses on subjective experience, and provides a robust existential account of selfhood as well suited to understanding the experience of illness" (100). Phenomenological inquiry into illness permits the conceptualization of pathological conditions as lived phenomena, recognizing the patient as a subject possessing affective and cognitive dimensions that extend beyond the objectification inherent in clinical examination.

Havi Carel states: "The materialism and mechanistic view of the body implicit in the medical model are of limited use when offered to patient as a framework for understanding their illness experience" (2012: 98) . In fact, the acquisition of the awareness of one's condition of illness is the foremost step in maintaining the somaesthetic as well as the existential integrity in illness. In order to comprehend the phenomenon of illness, one must know one's own body and its capacity to resist the onset of illness and to revive the energies. Philosophizing laughter becomes relevant here as it possesses therapeutic value, acts as a coping mechanism and nurtures social connection thereby manifesting oneself and the world around. What phenomenology can do, by providing process-based methods of inquiry, to facilitate the

understanding of healing is to manifest how the habitual engagement with oneself and the world will expose the capacities of human emotions, particularly laughter induced by humour. It helps the patient observe one's own illness and the experiential reflections of others on healing through which the construction of their own meaning of life is possible.

Knowing oneself underlines the vitality of understanding our interactions with the world as human engagements are, fundamentally, rooted in habit. Habit, in turn, originates from our regular and continuous activities. Our day-to-day interactions with the world are either through the expression of instinctive thoughts or a set of regular practices that shape an individual's personal as well as the social identity. In order to philosophize laughter as a mode of resilience, we must contextualize 'habit' in terms of illness. What happens to the regularity of life in ailment and how a patient regains the harmony of life through habitual engagement with the world are the relevant questions to be addressed. In order to re-attain the equilibrium of life, one must prepare one's body for the habit of incorporating new modes of resilience that come from within. The phenomenological investigation of habit becomes imperative here as it throws light upon the fundamental way of being in the world. The dynamic and powerful nature of habit opens up a new possibility for the patients to prepare their body for resilience through harnessing laughter as an instrument of healing.

Philosophical investigations on habit emphasize that it can be both an acquired propensity to act in a certain manner or a passive and natural way of behaving in a particular pattern without a conscious and deliberate attempt (Capek 2017). Nick Crossley defines habit as the "structures of behaviour, attaching the embodied actor to their world which take shape and are reshaped (and sometimes extinguished) in the dynamic and always ongoing process of interaction between actor and world" (Crossley 2013:147). This continuous interaction of an individual with the world shapes all the somaesthetic (as Shusterman has conceptualized) facets of human experiences. One prefers, knowingly or passively, patterns of behaviour that help one to know oneself in relation to the world. This determines the regularity of human existence. In fact, life-threatening illness destabilizes these patterns of behaviour that shaped one's life. This dislocation of routines when somebody falls ill leads to existential introspection (Carel 2016). This phase of ontological self-examination caused by illness invites one to observe one's own bodily changes and to construct a new normal out of consciously created habits. In this regard, one who is afflicted with serious illness like cancer would analyse how mirth brings physical as well as ontological wellness. Along with medicine, patients can turn laughter, through a phenomenological approach, into an embodied habitual practice as a mode of resilience and to create a new normal of life.

Havi Carel, in her *Phenomenology of Illness*, states: "When illness becomes a complete form of life, concepts such as 'worthwhile' or 'difficult' are modified, the expectations the ill person has of her life change, and her understanding of time and value is readjusted in light of her prognosis. Chronic or progressive illness is a comprehensive realignment of meaning, values, and ways of being that culminate in illness becoming one's complete form of existence. This process is a kind of distancing from one's previous form of existence, and as such it opens it to philosophical examination" (242). The deliberate cultivation and utilization of habitual capacities to modulate the body's response to pathological conditions, through a rigorous phenomenological inquiry, is essential for the attainment of both somaesthetic and ontological well-being. This approach recognizes that habitual patterns, far from being monotonous, possess a dynamic plasticity that can be harnessed to influence physiological and psychological responses to illness. By employing phenomenological methodologies, researchers and clinicians can explicate the ways in which individuals engage with their embodied experiences of illness, thereby finding the

potential for changing mirth into a habit to hasten cure. Such an understanding emphasizes the significance of integrating subjective experience with objective medical knowledge, fostering a holistic approach to healthcare that acknowledges the interconnectedness of physical and existential dimensions of well-being.

Habit, according to Merleau-Ponty, "expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 143). It is not a mere culmination of mundane, passive routines, but a powerful channel that determines our existence with the help of new instruments. In Merleau-Ponty's perception, "phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our 'understanding' and our notion of the body" (144). Regular and conscious effort to understand the power of human emotions is one of the modes of knowing ourselves and priming our body to encounter the phenomenon of illness. Our habits actively or inadvertently shape our personal, social and cultural existence by their regularity. Therefore, philosophizing laughter in illness is necessary for mitigating the adversities caused by illness and facilitating healing. The intentionality of laughter opens up a new possibility of incorporating it into our regular practices as an 'instrument' of resilience.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective on existence brings to light the enormous capacity of the body for understanding the world and constructing meaning out of it (Moya 2014). He states: "To understand is to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance-and the body is our anchorage in a world" (150). Acquiring the habit of restoring the integrity between the life in illness and the desired state of convalescence through observing our emotions, especially mirth is to harness its therapeutic power. We, through the phenomenology of healing proposed in the paper, argue that healing begins from within when the patient explores the capacities of one's emotions by making it an instrument of the habitual engagement with the world through which the body responds to the ailment in a positive manner. This framework emphasizes the patient's active exploration and deployment of laughter as instruments for shaping habitual engagement with the world. Furthermore, this perspective underlines the significance of embodied subjectivity in the healing process, signifying that, patients, through conscious engagement with their emotions, can actively participate in the reconfiguration of their relationship with illness. By integrating phenomenological insights with empirical medical knowledge, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of healing, one that transcends purely biomedical paradigms and admits the fundamental role of subjective experience in the restoration of well-being. Philosophizing laughter becomes essential here as it ensures the patient-participation in the healing process as well as provides a clarity and a new vision of life. In order to manage the existential agony of the patient, which is a major constraint to healing, levity through laughter should be encouraged in times of crisis. For that, phenomenology can provide useful methods on how to harness the healing capacity of mirth.

Humour, Laughter and Healing: Reading *Laughing Cancer Away*

Illness is a disruption to the normal flow of life. Terminal illnesses like cancer cause physical, psychological, social and ontological quandary in one's life. A patient goes through intense pain, fatigue and loss of functional independence. Psychologically, the diagnosis of a serious illness often evokes anxiety, depression, grief, and existential distress. Socially, illness causes the reconfiguration of the self and relationships and the patient becomes alienated from society. Ailments affect the ontological integrity, cause self-doubt and disrupt the patient's life-world. Along with medicine, optimistic comportment and mirth altogether facilitate cure. Healing, being the culmination of both the physical and ontological harmony, invites the

attention of philosophy in terms of the therapeutic value of laughter. How to philosophize laughter induced by humour to hasten cure needs to be explored extensively. *Laughing Cancer Away: An Actor's Memoir* (2014), Innocent's illness narrative, presents the dialectic between Innocent, the cancer patient and Innocent, the comedian as cancer patient. Innocent resolves the dialectic between suffering and accepting by choosing his mode of resilience. When he suffers, he is like a typical cancer patient, or a medical body, moving inevitably towards death. When he accepts illness as a lived phenomenon, he puts his will as an instrument to choose; and he chooses humour by habit as a powerful mode of living with cancer. He inserts habit into the everyday experience of cancer and by accepting it, he turns the habit of laughing into a more efficient way of engaging with the affliction.

Reading Innocent's memoir in the light of Havi Carel's phenomenological notion of illness would reassure that laughter, being a positive human emotion, can be incorporated to the habitual engagement with the world to resist the physical and existential torment caused by illness. In "Phenomenology as a Resource for Patients" (2012), Carel outlines a patient-centered toolkit for navigating the experience of illness, comprised of three key stages designed to facilitate healing through deeper understanding. The first stage, *bracketing*, involves a phenomenological reduction, enabling the patient to suspend preconceived notions of health and healing. Subsequently, *thematizing illness* encourages the patient to attend to the multifaceted emotive, cognitive, and sensory dimensions of their condition, fostering a personalized definition of illness. The third step in the toolkit is *to create the new understanding of illness and analyse how it alters one's being in the world*. Innocent's narrative demonstrates a pragmatic application of these phenomenological methods, effectively employing bracketing, thematization, and the creation of a new understanding of illness to foster healing and cultivate a life-affirming philosophy of health grounded in mirth.

The conventional understanding of illness obstructs the patient from bridging the gap between the objective medical interpretation of illness and one's subjective perception of it. What enables someone to attain one's own meaning of illness is the *bracketing* or the suspension of the natural attitude towards affliction. Havi Carel states: "This suspension neither questions nor negates reality; rather, it allows under-theorized aspects of experience of illness to become an object of inquiry because it enables us to shift attention from the given object to the way in which it is given and its modes of appearance to us" (Carel 2012: 107).

Innocent does not deny the objective reality of cancer. But he shifts the attention to the experience of it by suspending the conventional response to illness. He describes in his memoir: "I had been living under the firm conviction that diseases were not meant for me" (Innocent 2014: 26). Innocent's confession about the experience of illness indicates that his life was less despondent until his encounter with cancer. He is devastated the moment he realizes that he is afflicted with cancer. Illness, being an unpredictable and complex condition of life, disrupts the routines of his life and alters the spatial and temporal dimension of normalcy. The weight of grief becomes unbearable, but at the same time, giving up is tantamount to suicide. Therefore, after the initial shock and dejection, he distances himself from the natural way of experiencing illness and understands his own meaning of cancer and its nature. He relies on the method of phenomenological reduction to isolate himself from the usual interpretation of cancer as a medical condition and explores the capacity of his own body in coping with pain. Instead of agonizing, he explores the effect of mirth in bringing levity in serious circumstances and finds out the therapeutic power of laughter. He considers humour not as a mechanistic response, but as an existential dimension of his being and laughter as its representation.

Innocent realized that serious diseases progress through three stages. The first stage is the shock and

sense of loneliness when a person learns about the disease. Grief overpowers other emotions and the ill person lives with the fear of death. In the second stage, he accepts or surrenders to the physical and emotional demands. The third stage, according to Innocent, is overcoming the disease. He musters the courage to live with the cancer, thus reaching certain elevation of experience. At the moment of unbearable pain and anxiety, Innocent brackets all other emotions and decides to withstand the onslaught of cancer through his sense of humour. He states: "As in many other challenging situations through which I had come through in real life, I decided to hold humour close to my heart to face the disease also." Rather than fighting against illness, he lives with it. He adds: "I had to hold my seasoned eyes wide open, to continue to keep open the cells that helped me to find laughter in anything. That was all I had to do. I prepared myself to do that. I started to organize my own mental concoctions along with medicines prescribed by the doctors" (56). This is the stage of letting the fear of death go. This is a moment of being-at-home or seeking lightness of being.

Innocent writes in his memoir: "Anyhow, I am a patient now. I will face it, if possible, with pleasure. I was one who could find mirth in everything. Why I could not do that even in illness? Let the doctors treat me; along with that, I would continue my own treatment with laughter as the elixir of life" (40). Innocent distances or brackets himself and his attitude from any conventional approach to cancer to realize the healing power of his own body. Carel states: "What one ordinarily takes for granted becomes salient when it is lost or changed through illness" (Carel 2012:108) . In fact, sense of humour, the biggest asset of Innocent as a comedian, was taken for granted until he discovered that being mournful in illness would intensify the physical and existential pain. Therefore, through philosophical introspection, he chooses and finds the healing power of laughter. There is a conscious and dynamic reshaping of experience, of suffering with the habit of humour. This choosing alters the very environment in which he is placed, that is, people who perform pity and concern are replaced by more cheerful company.

One is tempted to see John Dewey's belief in the enabling environment as a significant factor here. The temptation to see the environment as contributing to the pragmatic consciousness of the individual is strong at this juncture of the argument. However, the authors hold the position that the approach to illness as illustrated by Innocent is clearly a Somaesthetic intention for which we are beholden to Shusterman. We do recognize the value of the environment in building the truth of experience as Dewey would insist (and Shusterman would not object). But the departure from Dewey is necessary to keep the focus on how individuals, through a pragmatist choosing-like the way the choosing happens in logotherapy of Frankl- is crucial to negotiating existentially complex experiences like dealing with the illness condition of cancer.

In order to alter the grievous environment into a life-affirming condition, Innocent thematizes laughter, as Carel mentioned in her proposal as the second step, as a conscious performance to resist the onset of cancer. By thematizing, Carel indicates "attending to the cognitive, emotive, moral or aesthetic aspects of a phenomenon" (108). He thematizes cancer by choosing the seeing mind over the suffering body and the alteration happens in the corporeal environment of the body as much as in the experiential space outside the body. Innocent thematizes the therapeutic value of laughter through making it an instrument of habitual engagement with the world. Innocent's understanding of his own body as well as the world through the cultivation of his sense of humour into a habit has shaped his philosophy of life. His 'understanding' of the world, as Merleau-Ponty argues, stems from the harmony between 'what is given' or his experience of illness and what he 'aims at,' which indicates a working through. He bridges the gap between the lived experience of illness and resilience through his habit of per-

ceiving the pain through humour. He observes: "I could discern in the beginning itself that the disease was a fact. I knew that there was no meaning in resenting or sidestepping it. It deserved to be faced with confidence and humour. If that could be done, even cancer will have to give way. My experience is my witness" (70). It is remarkable that Innocent's habit of handling the pain of cancer with laughter is a conscious activity. In other words, it is not a passive routine, but a practiced art of unburdening the life with the agency of humour.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty says: "To learn to see colours is to acquire a certain style of seeing, a new use of one's own body: it is to enrich and recast the body image. Whether a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for 'I think,' it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium" (153). Innocent obtains a new mode of perceiving the world using his own body in a manner that facilitates the construction of the meaning of life. Innocent finds his mode of resilience through a conscious structuring of his emotion in the form of a habitual engagement with the lived space. He trains his body to become accustomed to the habit of enduring the illness without the fear of dying by making light of the painful experiences of illness. He develops the art of laughing pain away, which tends to embrace the better self. The habit of laughter, which can be termed as a skilful performance of Innocent, acts as a bridge between his life and imminent death. Being an artist, he succeeds in training his body to 'dilate' in the lived space through the sense of humour which accelerates his movement towards 'equilibrium.' It enables the opening of new meaning during a closure of hope and shapes his body and mind to prepare for survival. Like Norman Cousins who proclaimed the therapeutic value of laughter in his seminal work, *Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived by the Patient* (1979), Innocent propagates his philosophy of rehabilitation through mirth in his autopathography. Cousins' testimony that "I made the joyous discovery that ten minutes of belly laughter had an anaesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep" (39) resonates with Innocent's experiential reflection on laughter that "my grief in the beginning days turned into humour by and by. The effect of that reflected on my body too" (13). Innocent, being a renowned film actor as well as a politician, has a powerful voice among people of India and his philosophy of healing has wider acceptance in the society. As Norman Cousins who has been acknowledged for his creative attitude towards healing, Innocent's harnessing of laughter as a tool of resilience and habitual engagement with the disease needs to be known globally. It will, indeed, strengthen the will of people who live with the malady and educate society on the holistic nature of healing.

Similar to a blind man's stick which is no longer an object perceived by him, but "an instrument with which he perceives" or which is "a bodily auxiliary, an extension of the bodily synthesis" (Merleau-Ponty 2012:152), Innocent's mirthful comportment acts as an instrument of survival. It is no longer an artificial, external or learnt skill, but an integral part of the habitual existence. Innocent's experiential account of illness can be juxtaposed with the notion of Merleau-Ponty's that "sometimes, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world" (146). Innocent discovers his natural sense of humour as a strong instrument to fight the disease. He writes in his autopathography: "Some such little flickers of laughter might be there always, even in the midst of the gravest diseases and intense pain. I have enjoyed such moments in my life. We don't generally see such bright spots; we never recognize them as the streetlamps that pave our way to life" (73). Life invents lightness through the habit of laughing the pain away and his autopathography becomes the Bible for countless despondent sufferers.

Havi Carel mentions constructing a new understanding of illness out of distancing and thematizing and

analysing how it alters one's being in the world as the third step in the phenomenological understanding of illness. Innocent in his *memoir* proposes a new philosophy of health and healing which he constructed out of his encounter with cancer. To the seriously ill, grief becomes a new situation and gloom descends over all the pleasures of life. Reason becomes captive to the mutilated emotions which results in distress and unbearable suffering. Moving forward with the weight of fear, pain and ailment, Innocent garnered the audacity to encounter the illness. The experience of illness worsens, and it distorts his day-to-day engagements until he arrives at the point of celebrating his own condition; the stage of self-realization. His experience of illness has reshaped his normalcy of life and altered his vision on existence. Innocent writes about his philosophy of life after the malady: "The greenness of life was waiting for us on the other side of the river of misery. We had to enjoy that" (87). This life-affirming philosophy he acquired during the time of ailment and was shaped by his habit of approaching life with laughter.

Carel states: "By moving away from a narrow understanding of illness as a biological process, a thick account of illness as a new way of being in the world can be developed by patients" (2012: 109). Innocent, instead of perceiving cancer as an intruder in to the tranquillity of life, views it as a phase of life and lives through it with the agency of laughter. Innocent reaches a moment of self-realization which frees him from the shackles of intense emotions that hinder rational thinking. He states: "during that moment of laughter, I forgot all about my disease, and the worries of countless patients that engulfed the hospital room" (73). He decides to survive by choosing the lightness of laughter over the burden of sorrow. He shares letting go philosophy as an essential part of existence. Innocent finds comfort in his sense of humour and lets everything else go. In fact, Innocent becomes a counter point to the natural attitude towards suffering by refusing to surrender to pain. The habit of laughing cancer away changes his being in the world which includes his interaction with the world and the people.

Laughter, as an expression of emotion, strengthens social bonds. Innocent recollects how fellow actors, politicians and fans had approached him with their hearts full of affection and consolation. He describes the way he turned the stressful situations into bright moments of laughter with his beloved fans: "Such moments made me forget that I was a patient. While bedridden, I tried my best to see laughter in anything and make everything amusing. My soul experienced how laughter could turn into a medicine" (66). The connection he shared with the visitors and the laugher in their conversation made innocent's ill days lighter and he declared that "such things in combination with the medicines caused my cure" (68).

When Alice, Innocent's wife, was also diagnosed with cancer, they courageously regained their poise and their sense of humour. In one of the instances, Innocent tells his wife: "Alice, now we don't have to worry that cancer will pass on to you. You also don't have to bother that the money spent on testing is wasted. The money spent on your test has been spent profitably. It has been fully realized. Let us thank God for that. We are now a happy cancer family" (81). This lightness informs their approach to the illness. Innocent's sense of humour works as a coping mechanism in the painful condition of illness. Dr. V.P Gangadharan, his physician calls Innocent "a remedy for cancer." In the foreword to *Laughing Cancer Away* (2014), he writes:

> I have no doubt that Innocent's '916' [allusion to purity of gold] witticism about cancer would be more effective than the words of a doctor. I can tell you authentically that the sense of humour with which he handled cancer hastened his cure more than by the treatment itself. Many unknown chemical reactions might have taken place in immunizing his body because of that. Many side effects of the medicines had been averted by this approach (10).

The oncologist's observation is a testament to humour's potential for resistance against illness. The positive al-

teration in his life, going by the doctor's dynamic evaluation, points to endocrinological alterations in the body which sustains the philosophical alterations in the way cancer is perceived. Innocent's sense of humour provides the resilience to encounter the predicament of pain in a life-affirming way. Along with the positive biochemical and physiological changes in the body, laughter acts as a remedy to the ontological agony of Innocent. In the introduction to the book, Innocent writes: "After some time, cancer became my second nature. From that disposition, I could create my natural humour. As days passed, this impulse prospered. All my cancer experiences unfolded before me as a drama" (2). This testament represents how accepting the malady as a phenomenon and living with it mirthfully is vital for healing. It brings back and reconfigures the shattered spatial and temporal realms of life, strengthens social bonds, redefines the philosophy of life which altogether operate as a coping mechanism. The conscious choosing of the habit of laughter which is not without a struggle is an affirmation of the will to see cancer differently. The will becomes a crucial factor for healing to take place; the will to laugh, thus, becomes a proposal for experiencing disease by altering the way we see it. When the mind sees disease not as a disease, it is intervening in the very formation of the experience. That experience brings strength to the body, the impulse to turn dynamic moments into moments of laughter and life.

Conclusion

"Remember, Life is waiting for you on the other side, with much greater charm" (91). This oracular statement is Innocent's vision of life. Laughter was instrumental in Innocent's push-back against cancer. Innocent's memoir, Laughing *Cancer Away: An Actor's Memoir*, is a manifesto of a holistic understanding of human body, health and healing.

The present study bridges the gap between the clinical significance of humour and laughter and their experiential reflection in illness narratives to propose that there are possible ways of healing outside the clinical system which positively can contribute to the well-being of the human race.

Innocent, who, at the time of completing the essay passed away at the age of 75, leaves behind an optimistic philosophy of life. We connect philosophical, clinical, cultural and social dimensions of illness with humour to reach the conclusion that healing is a process that primarily takes place within oneself. Though the external intervention such as medical aid is inevitable, the body's capacity to shape its response towards affliction through habit and emotions is remarkable.

We, by presenting Innocent's work as a paradigmatic example of a novel philosophy of healing grounded in mirth, make a significant proposal to the field of medical humanities. It advances a patient-centred approach to healing, rooted in phenomenology, which emphasizes the integration of resilient practices addressing both physical and ontological dimensions of well-being. Such an approach is posited to holistically support the process of healing. Furthermore, the proposed framework holds relevance not only for patients but also for researchers, clinicians, and social workers. It offers a theoretical model that can inform the development of a more effective and compassionate healthcare system, one that prioritizes the subjective experiences of patients and recognizes their active role in the process of recovery. By challenging the conservative medical paradigm which relies on the doctor-centric approach, we advocate a more inclusive healthcare system where medical expertise as well as the phenomenological insights and experiential reflection of the patients are incorporated. We understand healing not only as the absence of physical agony, but also as the somaesthetic, psychological and ontological integrity of existence. The study, by highlighting the potential of autopathographical reflections of patients in enlightening the society, contributes to the domain of philosophy of medicine as well as health humanities.

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LOGICAL EXPRESSIVISM AND THE PHANTOM ISLANDS: A CRITIQUE OF BRANDOM & HLOBIL'S REASONS FOR LOGIC, LOGIC FOR REASONS[1]

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ABSTRACT: This essay singles out and criticizes one aspect of Robert Brandom & Ulf Hlobil's recent book, Reasons for Logic, Logic for Reasons. The aspect in question is a reliance on the notion of monotonic inference, which is argued to be highly problematic, and to bring unwarranted necessity in a realm of contingent reason relations. Through a critical examination of necessity as it appears in Brandom's major works (Making it Explicit, Between Saying and Doing, and A Spirit of Trust) and a broadly Quinean line of argument against candidates for so-called "necessary truths", this paper shows that Brandom's local "islands of monotonicity" isolated in an ocean of nonmonotonic inferences are nothing but phantom islands, neither real nor necessary for a logical expressivist account of conceptual content and reason relations. I conclude that logical expressivists are not committed to any notion of necessity, monotonicity or impossibility, and that they can be fully satisfied with possibility and actuality.

Keywords: logical expressivism; necessity; pragmatism; Robert Brandom; inferentialism

Introduction

Reasons for Logic, Logic for Reasons (Hlobil & Brandom 2025, hereafter *RLLR*)[2] is an impressive, convincing and thought-provoking book. At long last, it makes more fully explicit Robert Brandom's powerful claim that "logic is the organ of semantic self-consciousness" (Brandom 1994, xix, hereafter *MIE*). Co-written with Ulf Hlobil and informed by work in the Research Group on Logical Expressivism (ROLE), the book provides a particularly satisfying account of the way reason relations can be made explicit by three meta-vocabularies (normative-pragmatic, alethic-representational and "implication-space") along with the extension of base vocabularies known as classical logic. It shows, in detail, how to formalize the relations of *implication* and *incompatibility* which characterize conceptual content. As such, it will be seen as a dazzling achievement by all of us sapient creatures who yearn to know ourselves.

Nevertheless, the book also gives us the opportunity to deal, more clearly than ever, with the possible infatuation of some logical expressivists (Brandom & Hlobil included) with the notion of *necessity*. Indeed, Brandom's initial account of inferentialism in *Making It Explicit* followed a Quinean trail that did not privilege any inference as *necessary*; yet the concept of necessity (and the related modal notion of *impossibility*) has taken an increasingly important part in Brandom's later work. However, it remains unclear if such a change is truly warranted. Therefore, it may be time to make the modest (though, for some, *indecent*) proposal to get rid of necessity altogether, within our inferentialist framework.

1 Logical expressivism and monotonicity

The motivating thesis behind *RLLR* is the doctrine of *logical expressivism*. For the logical expressivist, logic is a tool for *making explicit* reason relations. Instead of conceiving of it as a *standard* that *determines* good reasoning, the doctrine holds logic to be *expressive of* the reason relations themselves. Putting a reason into logical shape doesn't *add* any supplementary content to its conceptual role; it simply *makes explicit* how it stands in the space of reasons, by codifying it into the sentential form of a *claimable*, which in turn can serve as a reason *for* or *against* something. As Brandom & Hlobil explain:

> Logical *expressivism* is the view that logic is a *language* of reasons rather than a *science* of reasons. It is not a theory that determines or explains what is a reason for and against what. The distinctive task of logical vocabulary is not to *prove* that one set of claims implies or is incompatible with another, or to *derive* what is a reason for and against what, but rather to make it possible to *say* what is a reason for and against

[1] The author would like to thank Rémi Géraud-Stewart and Raphaël Tossings.
[2] The authors mention that the Introduction and the first two chapters were written chiefly by Brandom, and the remainder of the book was written chiefly by Hlobil, except for the Conclusion, which they wrote together. Whenever possible, I have tried to render unto Brandom the things that are Brandom's, and unto Hlobil the things that are Hlobil's.

> what. In this sense, logic is not a *canon*, but an *organon* of reason: not a set of principles determining or explaining reason relations but a set of expressive tools for making reason relations explicit. (*RLLR*, 60-61)

Thanks to logical extensions of base vocabularies (and to the other three metavocabularies deployed in *RLLR*), we can acknowledge what a given reason *implies*, and what it is *incompatible with*. By helping us to do so, logic (in its classical shape) contributes to the general philosophical enterprise of *making explicit* our commitments & entitlements, theoretical and practical, and serves as a crucial tool in the game of giving and asking for reasons. For the rest of this essay, I shall take the general picture of logical expressivism (and the philosophical viewpoint at its base) for granted. In other words: so far, so good.

At this point, an interesting aspect of reason relations must be mentioned. Classical logic, as taught today in introductory courses all over the world, is thoroughly *monotonic*. This means that a given premise will yield its conclusion even if we add another premise along the way. A monotonic implication holds "come what may," independently of any additional premise. If A→C is true, then any student of classical logic will know that A∧B→C is also true. Classical logic thus has a *closed*, monotonic structure. Its inferences are *persistent*.

By contrast, reason relations appear to have an *open*, *non-monotonic* structure. Indeed, what seems like a good inference often turns out to be invalid if one adds a relevant premise. For instance, lighting a match usually implies that the match is, now, lit. *But* if we are underwater, then this inference becomes a bad one: the match will not be lit. *However*, if those two premises (lighting a match, and being underwater) are complemented by a *third* premise (that we are actually in a submarine), then the initial inference becomes good *again*. And so on, *ad infinitum*... Consequently, a satisfying view of reason relations should leave the door open for *non-monotonicity*, for inferences whose validity may change with the addition or removal of relevant premises. This difference, between monotonic and non-monotonic reason relations, matters. As Brandom says:

> While we believe that purely *logical* consequence does have a global closure structure (and that logical inconsistency is monotonic), we argue that this is not in general true of *non*logical reason relations, and so is not and cannot be true of the full consequence (and incompatibility) relations of logical extensions of arbitrary base vocabularies. (*RLLR*, 16)

This difference creates the challenge (brilliantly met by the book) to codify the non-monotonicity of reason relations in satisfying terms. For each of the meta-vocabularies dealt with in the book, attention is given to allow for non-monotonic reason relations without harming the expressive power and the completeness of those meta-vocabularies[3].

To do so, Brandom & Hlobil attribute to each inference a *range of subjunctive robustness*: an inference is seen as a pair of non-defeating additions to a vocabulary (where adding the first member of the pair to the premises of a vocabulary, and the second member to the conclusions, yields another good implication). The number of inferences to which the pair can be added (*while still yielding* a good implication) gives us its range of subjunctive robustness. And Hlobil explains: "the larger the range of subjunctive robustness of an implication is, the more it approximates a sequent that holds persistently, that is, the more it approximates a sequent where monotonicity holds locally" (*RLLR*, 133). Therefore, monotonic inferences have a *total* range of subjunctive robustness; nonmonotonic inferences simply do not.

Without spoiling the rest of the story, one can say that the book succeeds in "logically codifying nonmonotonic (and nontransitive) consequence relations (and incompatibilities)," (*RLLR*, 80)[4] and in that sense, makes

[3] Brandom & Hlobil even make sure to leave open the possibility of *hyper*nonmonotonic reason relations, which are defeasible by the addition of premises already implied in the premise-set. See *RLLR*, 85.

[4] Of course, this should be distinguished from building a logic that is *itself* non-monotonic; rather, the book shows how logical vocabulary (and other meta-vocabularies) can deal with

an enormous step toward making explicit actual reason relations. It is my firm belief, however, that this step is a little too shy. Realizing that reason relations *can be* non-monotonic is only half the story. I would like to argue that *all* reason relations (including "purely" logical ones) *are* non-monotonic, and that the authors' refusal to say so marks the irruption of a "metaphysical article of faith", in Quine's famous phrase, without which logical expressivism would do just as well[5].

2 Breaking the monotony

What exactly does it mean to hold that all reason relations are non-monotonic? Obviously, no one holds that *all* reason relations are *monotonic* (as Brandom gladly acknowledges); that is why any monotonicity cannot hold *globally* in a logical expressivist account. But aren't there *some locally* monotonic reason relations? Don't *some* inferences, at least, hold "come what may", necessarily and independently of any historical contingency? Indeed, Brandom rightly asserts the following:

> [The monotonicity operator] can be read as "necessarily"—in the sense of "come what may," or "no matter what else is true." […] The implication continues to hold no matter what additional premises are added to it. (*RLLR*, 76)

To allow here and there for monotonic reason relations is to allow for necessary inferences, relations that will hold independently of any additional premise whatsoever. Therefore, those who think there are (local) monotonic reason relations are simply holding that there are *necessary* truths, as opposed to mere *contingencies*. But *are there* any such truths? Let's examine some candidates[6] that may come up within our framework.

Brandom himself provides some examples of what he and Hlobil have in mind regarding monotonic reason relations:

> The nonlogical implication of "Monochromatic swatch #13 is red," by "Monochromatic swatch #13 is crimson," and the nonlogical incompatibility of both with "Monochromatic swatch #13 is green," continue to hold when arbitrary further collateral premises are added. The same is true for many implications and incompatibilities involving claims about Euclidean plane figures, organisms classified according to Linnaean nomenclature, minerals specified by their chemical composition, and a host of other subject-matter specific reason relations. (*RLLR*, 75)

The problem with those examples (and by extension, with all so-called necessary *a posteriori* truths) is that they are simply *not* monotonic. To show this, all one needs to do is to pinpoint a premise that *would* defeat those implications. And is it really that difficult to imagine *something* which would defeat those inferences? The inference from "crimson" to "red" may not hold in case one is being asked to find the odd, crimson exception in a set of red swatches ("crimson" would here be categorized *in opposition* to merely "red"). Similarly, if it turned out that monochromatic swatch #13 was a mechanical device showing a single different color depending on one's perspective, then the aforementioned incompatibilities would be defeated[7]. As for the rest of the exam-

non-monotonic reason-relations. One of Brandom's reasons for keeping the basic logic monotonic is to be able to claim that his expressive logic is supraclassical, i.e., that it *is* just classical logic (See *RLLR*, 81). But I don't think anything of importance lies on whether we grant this point of detail or not.

[5] Note that the point of this essay does not depend on the bifurcation between the pragmatic and the semantic perspectives, because both sides are construed as having their *own* sort of necessity: deontic modal in the former, alethic in the latter. After all, both are *isomorphic* in that they rely on variations of the same process of (what Hegel called) *determinate negation*. It doesn't matter whether one simply *ought* not to believe A ∧ B or whether A ∧ B are impossible: in both cases, one seems to be claiming that A ∧ B is *necessarily* false.

[6] One can already set aside two other uses of "necessary" often mentioned by Brandom. The first is *necessary*, in the Kantian sense of "according to a rule" (*MIE*, 624), which is broad enough to apply to *any* application of *any* rule, and therefore, quite weaker than the other notions treated here. The second is *necessary*, as in "necessary but insufficient conditions," where (according to the present account) we could simply replace the word by "crucial" or "obligatory until we find another way". Both of these uses are harmless, because they do not pave the way towards any transcendent truth.

[7] One could argue that these counterpoints are based on polysemy and equivocation: and indeed, they are. But polysemy and equivocation are legitimate grounds for building objections. If one asserts that "If A is a bachelor, then A is an unmarried man", then "A is a married bachelor (of arts)" *does* count as an invalidating defeasor for the aforementioned inference. Objections

ples, there is no reason to believe that those inferences could not be defeated by similarly extravagant surprises, which nonetheless lay within the realm of the possible.

All one must do is to realize that unforeseen incompatibilities can always come up as we make those statements explicit. This is also the case regarding Hlobil's example that "If [...] PP is a parent of CC, then this [...] implies that necessarily CC is a child of PP" (*RLLR*, 135). As such, it is *already* defeasible: PP could be a parent company or a parent rock, neither of which is known to have children! Similarly, see Brandom's claim that "The combination of the claim that plane figure *T* is a Euclidean triangle and the claim that the angles of *T* add up to more than two right angles is incoherent (the claims are incompatible). And no further premises can cure that incoherence" (*RLLR*, 78). This claim could turn out to be false if we discovered a race of two-dimensional extraterrestrial beings calling themselves "Euclidean triangles" who can distort their general shape at will.[8]

The strongest candidates for monotonicity rather seem to be the so-called "*logical*" truths[9]. Brandom & Hlobil themselves believe that "purely logical implications, implications that hold in virtue of logic alone—that is, the connective rules (plus Containment)—hold regardless of what base vocabulary one uses those connective definitions to extend" (*RLLR*, 81). Simultaneously, logical truths surely seem distant enough from contingent matters to hold "come what may". Yet is it impossible to take a more *critical* stance towards those dogmatic hunches?

One can notice that the truths of logic are true under a set of rules and assumptions (about *which* logic we are using, for instance), within a specific *context*. There are many truths provable with different postulates, connectors and principles, depending on the logic we choose: classical, linear, intuitionistic, etc. We *could* select a specific set of rules (for instance, those of classical logic) as "the correct" logic of the world, but then this would be an empirical matter based on the actual workings of worldly reason relations. Our account of logic could thus be *corrected* by an improvement in our *grasp* (or a possible *change* in the nature) of reason relations, and it would not hold *monotonically*.[10]

Therefore, the truths of logic seem very much dependent on their context, and different truths will hold in different contexts. An example may serve as an illustration. In the following claim: "A⇒A (in classical logic)", the clause "in classical logic" works very much like a *ceteris paribus* clause; both specify a context in which the inference *can* hold monotonically. But remember what Brandom says about the *ceteris paribus* clause:

> [*Ceteris paribus* clauses] should not be understood as somehow *removing* defeasibility and rendering implications monotonic. (A Latin phrase whose utterance can do *that* is proper-

based on polysemy and equivocation are sufficient to count as defeasors, because what it takes to defeat the monotonicity of an inference is simply to find a case where the inference would turn out to be invalid. Claiming that an inference is monotonic is a challenge for anyone to find *any* circumstance in which the inference could not be endorsed: and this is exactly what these examples attempt to provide.

[8] In other words, the conceptual content of "*T* is a Euclidean triangle" may come to change through successive explicitations and recollections, and what appeared to be a necessary part of this content may turn out to vanish. A similar case applies to: "Atoms are indivisible". Ancient atomists considered this statement a tautology; John Dalton saw it as (what we might call) necessary a posteriori; yet today we hold it to be false. Thus, the relation of incompatibility between "being an atom" and "being divisible" was progressively *weakened*, until it *disappeared*. In any case, it was never *necessary*.

[9] In fact, it is quite tempting to construe Brandom & Hlobil's position as one for which the *base vocabulary* is rigorously non-monotonic, while its logical extension, being an *extension*, is monotonic. But this construal is inaccurate, since their examples of monotonicity, cited above, include statements (for instance, about colors) which are very much part of the base vocabulary. Yet, even if they *did* believe in this "separation of powers" between empirical and logical/categorical concepts (as Brandom sometimes seems to), there are still many reasons, as we shall see, to doubt that the logical extension isn't subject to the same non-monotonic constraints as the base vocabulary.

[10] In fact, this strategy is one that logical expressivists *may be* entitled to. Indeed, if logic is a tool whose main purpose is to make explicit reason relations, then logic is *subservient* to, and *dependent* on, reason relations. The primordial nature of reason relations would thus justify Brandom & Hlobil's preference for classical logic (beyond its simplicity and expressive power): because classical logic turns out to be the formal system closest to the *actual workings* of reason relations. The strategy would nonetheless fail to provide for monotonic reason relations, as we just saw. For a further discussion of some difficulties surrounding the "adoption" of a logical theory, see Fairbank & Hlobil 2025.

> ly called a "magic spell.") **The real expressive function of *ceteris paribus* clauses is just to acknowledge explicitly that the implication being endorsed *is* defeasible**. Such a concession is not a taking-back of the argument to which it is appended. Rather, it pragmatically marks the openness of a conversational pathway in which some of the open-ended set of possible defeaters are actually asserted, and so themselves become subject to critical rational challenge and defense. (*RLLR*, 74, bold added for emphasis)

In other words, to specify a monotonic context for an inference *just is* to acknowledge that it *doesn't hold monotonically* beyond that setting. Therefore, truths "protected" by logical rules or by the *ceteris paribus* clause are not monotonic *beyond* those protections, which is to say that they are *non-monotonic*. Logical truths are not held "come what may"; they do not *persist* throughout contexts. Rather, they have an implicit, local *ceteris paribus* clause that suspends their nonmonotonicity within that context.

A final consideration on logical truths can be mentioned. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that those truths *are* necessary in any significant sense[11]. Then one can bring up Wittgenstein's age-old insight that those truths would be tautologies: vacuous, senseless, and trivial[12]. Such truths would simply never play *any* role in the game of giving and asking for reasons: they would never need to be made explicit. Therefore, it is simply pointless for Brandom & Hlobil to speak of "islands of monotonicity" (*RLLR*, 75)[13] emerging from an ocean of nonmonotonic reason relations, because the former can simply be ignored by the cartographers! This may be why Brandom's examples of necessary truths mentioned above were all *a posteriori*: because at least those would have *some* reason to pass through the explicitative mill. In other words, to hold (despite the evidence brought forth in this paper) that logical truths are monotonic is to estrange them from the process of explicitation, and from the purposes of logical expressivists[14].

By this point, many readers, from transcendental idealists to adepts of logicism, may have lost any hope to agree with the present paper. They cannot shrug off the feeling that there *must be* necessary features in our world, our minds or our concepts. What would be the purpose of philosophical inquiry, if not to look for such necessary truths? Meanwhile, readers of Quine, Rorty, or even J.S. Mill[15] may already be won to the cause that the distinction to be made is between the *actual* and the *possible*, not between the necessary and the contingent. They will be content with discerning *conditions* of *actuality*, rather than of *possibility*. And indeed, the rest of this paper is undoubtedly written for these foes of necessity. But there are good reasons to believe that many logical expressivists will recognize themselves in that group. For such expressivists, attempts to bring necessity into our conceptual practices are worthy of suspicion.

Ever since C.S. Peirce took his stand against the "doctrine of necessity"[16], some pragmatic minds have been reluctant to accept any such notion. Metaphysicians often tend to disguise features of their existence as *necessities*, simply because they fail to imagine how things would go if those features were absent. They pride themselves in demonstrating that something is "necessary" or "impossible". Yet again and again, most of those "necessities" (Euclidean space, the universality of the idea of God, the Prime Mover...) have turned out to be dispensable, contingent postulates in their theories about the

[11] As should be clear from the earlier paragraphs, I am not endorsing this claim. Rather, I aim to show one of its (unappealing) consequences.
[12] Wittgenstein 2001 [1921]), especially §6.1 and §4.463.
[13] See also *RLLR*, 97, where Brandom speaks of "local islands of topological closure of reason relations within the larger sea of open-structured ones."
[14] This consideration leaves open a question regarding the relation between logical inferences and rational hysteresis. If, as I hold, logical inferences are indeed nonmonotonic, then they may be open to explicitation and to rational hysteresis like the rest of reason relations. Future logicians may have some work before them!
[15] See Quine 1976, 68–76; Rorty 1980; 742–755; and Mill 1973 [1843].
[16] Peirce 1892, 321–37. Peirce was specifically targeting *causal necessitarianism*, but his attitude may be generalized to one that understands all necessities as nothing else than more-or-less stabilized contingencies. In fact, one may read the entire history of pragmatism as the tense coexistence of those (Dewey, Quine, Rorty...) who remain faithful to the spirit of Peirce's tychism, and those (Lewis, Sellars, and now, alas, Brandom & Hlobil) who do not.

world. Just because these thinkers couldn't grasp a world without said features does not imply that it is *impossible* to do so. Something can be useful and long-lasting (like an inference that remains undefeated in a good many cases), without ever being *indefeasible*[17].

Translated into the expressivist setting, this insight means that there is no reason to hold that there is any *essential* conceptual content, or any *necessary* reason relation. Logical expressivists can be content with actuality and possibility and rightfully view any other modality with distrust. Therefore, the room given to monotonic reason relations in *RLLR* appears worthy of criticism. To supplement the point of this chapter, it may be time to observe where, in the edifice of logical expressivism, the problem takes root.

3 Brandom's doctrine of necessity

In the founding document of modern logical expressivism, *MIE*, Brandom was committed to a Quinean, non-necessitarian conception of reason relations:

> There do not seem to be any inferential connections that are unrevisable in principle, immune to being undermined by suitable empirical evidence, and so a priori for those who grasp the concepts involved. (*MIE*, 634)

Nonetheless, he also hinted at Sellars's way to distinguish between "privileged and unprivileged" inferences, as compatible with the principles of inferentialism:

> [Sellars]picks out the privileged concept-constitutive inferential connections as those that support *counterfactual* reasoning, and so count as having *nomological* force. […] Since the laws involved are not a priori, unrevisable, or immune to factual evidence, this is not a version of analyticity. (*MIE*, 634)

Brandom's Sellarsian insight is that some inferences are "constitutive of the concept" because they are "counterfactually robust": for instance, a *green* object is *colored* because if it *weren't* colored, it *wouldn't* be green. On the other hand, a *green* object may be *small*, but if it *weren't* small, it *could still* be green. Therefore, "color" is *essential*, whereas "smallness" is *contingent*, to the concept of "green".

This way of privileging inferences based on their counterfactual robustness would be more clearly detailed (and endorsed) in Brandom's Locke Lectures, published as *Between Saying and Doing* (Brandom 2008, hereafter *BSD*). There, Brandom calls it the *Kant-Sellars modal thesis*, and uses it to argue for the inherent *modality* of concepts. It claims that: "**The ability to use ordinary empirical descriptive terms such as 'green', 'rigid', and 'mass' already presupposes grasp of the kinds of properties and relations made explicit by modal vocabulary.**" (*BSD*, 96-97, bold in the original) It is implied by the fact that "*every* claim, whether contingent or not, supports *some* counterfactual inferences, and if one grasped none of them one would not qualify as understanding those claims." (*BSD*, 105)

The Kant-Sellars modal thesis is supposed to render modalities innocuous by showing how the ability to make counterfactual reasoning is part of the ability to make claims at all. As such, it seems reasonable: if the grasp of a concept depends on grasping its implicational role, then this role may also have *counterfactual* implications. After all, someone doesn't understand the concept of "green" if one is unable to apply "green" to all relevant cases, including counterfactual (and hypothetical) cases. Similarly, if one didn't distinguish between what defeats an inference and what does not, then one could not be said to *understand* said inference. Therefore, with any given inference, we must be able to distinguish between "collateral premises that would, or would not, if true infirm the inference" (*BSD*, 105). So, in that sense, not everything is immediately relevant to the validity of an inference[18].

[17] Similarly, to find something "impossible" is only to show that the theory currently examined fails to provide for it. Humans deemed flying "impossible" when flying was inconceivable for wingless creatures; but our technological progress today reveals a broader horizon of achievable possibilities.

[18] But of course, that does not imply that there is a limiting case where *nothing* can ever infirm the inference.

Yet Brandom's interpretation of the Kant-Sellars thesis goes a little further: it distinguishes between essential/necessary and accidental/contingent parts of conceptual content. This kind of modal distinction "is in play wherever material inferences have a range of counterfactual robustness [, which] corresponds to a judgment as to what is and what is not *possible*" (*BSD*, 182fn4). It differentiates between the possible and the impossible, the actual and the necessary, even though it is not "restricted to metaphysical necessities in the Kripkean sense" (*BSD*, 182fn4) and is happy to deem *any* counterfactually robust inferences (including revisable natural laws) to be necessary.

Still, Brandom owes us a justification as to why there *are* any such counterfactually robust inferences. He acknowledges that

> Every change of belief, no matter how small, is *potentially* relevant to the justification of every prior belief. Acquiring a new belief means acquiring what, for any material inference the believer endorses and relies upon for justification, might possibly turn out to be a defeasor. And giving up any belief means giving up not only a premise that might previously have been relied upon in justification, but also a potential counter-defeasor (for instance, a magnetic field's not being a defeasor to the match's lighting if there is a Faraday cage inside the field). (*BSD*, 108)

Therefore, in *BSD*, Brandom is quite aware that every inference/belief is open for revision and possibly defeasible. So where exactly lies the necessity, the monotonicity? Brandom provides it through a *pragmatic* insight:

> Now, it is not practically feasible explicitly to review all of one's beliefs every time one's beliefs change, in order to check which are and which are not still justifiable. If that were what epistemic responsibility demanded, then it would be a pointless, impossible ideal. Language users who *do* not (because they *can*not) do *that*, must *practically* distinguish, among all the inferences that rationalize their current beliefs, which of them are update *candidates*, in the light of the current change of belief (let us say, for simplicity, a newly added belief). That is practically to associate with the new belief a set of material inferences of which it is a potential defeasor. The potential defeasors in this way associated with each material inference endorsed in turn define (by complementation) the range of counterfactual robustness practically associated with that inference. (*BSD*, 108)

In other words: since it would be too demanding to check which of the inferences we endorse would be defeated by an upcoming defeasor, we distinguish between the inferences that *we connect* with the defeasor (the nonmonotonic ones) and those we *do not* (which remain unaffected, and *de facto* monotonic). This is an original, pragmatic-sounding account of monotonic reason relations, because it holds that monotonicity doesn't arise out of nowhere, but rather from our own *inability* to treat the "newly-arrived belief" *as a defeasor* for the relevant inferences. Inferences are not monotonic *per se*, but rather treated *as* monotonic in practice. They are "*held*" come what may, not because they *stick* to our hands, but because we are unwilling to loosen our *grip* on them.

The problem is that this attitude (refusing or being unable to count the belief as defeating an inference held to be valid) is a *dangerous* one. To treat certain inferences as monotonic when, in fact, they *can* be defeated is an elaborate way to "block the road of inquiry". This is hardly the kind of attitude that Brandom (or anyone else) can *encourage*. A much more responsible stance would be to acknowledge the nonmonotonicity of all inferences and try to spot whichever inferences may be defeated by the newly acquired belief[19]. And if our practical ability to associate inferences with their range of subjunctive robustness is "partial and fallible" (*RLLR*, 75), as Brandom says it is, then it seems only reasonable to hold *any* such range to be *partial*, and not *total*.

Simultaneously, this pragmatic account of monotonicity will hardly satisfy those who hold some inferences (including Brandom & Hlobil's examples) to *be* monotonic in the fullest, indefeasible sense. They want to read that monotonic inferences, e.g., logical truths, are *indefeasible*; not that the contest was cancelled, and that the

[19] Of course, the Popperian undertones of this proposal should be tempered with Quinean holism: newly acquired beliefs may not always count as defeasors if we are willing to make *other adjustments* somewhere else along our web of commitments.

champion only remains undefeated until further notice.

Therefore, Brandom's argument in this paragraph tries to have it both ways: to claim that there *are* monotonic inferences, while acknowledging that those inferences *could* be defeated if we could "review all of one's beliefs every time one's beliefs change". As such, it cannot convince the pragmatically inclined logical expressivist to consider that there are, in any way, nonmonotonic inferences that constitute the essential content of a concept.

4 Hegel and History

Let us move to *A Spirit of Trust* (Brandom 2019, hereafter *ST*), where Brandom translates (among other things) the Kant-Sellars modal thesis into an explicitly modal Hegelian vocabulary: here, he commits himself to *modal realism*, i.e., "the claim that some states of affairs necessitate others and make others impossible" (*ST*, 54). This account is informed by the Hegelian tenet that "The determinateness of a thought or state of affairs (predicate or property) is a matter of its modally robust *exclusion* of other thoughts or states of affairs, those it is materially incompatible with." (*ST*, 95)

In other words, the concept of "determinate negation" which lies at the center of Hegel's whole enterprise relies on the modal tango between *necessity* and *impossibility*. Therefore, we are faced with a challenge: if, as Brandom claims, the only way to make sense of conceptual content is to subscribe to Hegel's modalities, then any logical expressivist is bound to fall into line. Brandom argues for this in the following manner:

> The contrast between *It* and *Not It* required for something to be determinate (for a feature to have definite boundaries) requires that nothing *can* be both *It* and *not It*. [...] For a point *can*not be both inside and outside a closed plane figure. In this same modal sense, sets—for instance, those representing the extensions of properties—have exclusive "boundaries." For it is *impossible* for something to be both an element of a set and not an element of that set. The "not" of *Not It* is an *exclusive* not. That is the point of the *law* of noncontradiction. It is not just that some regions or sets contingently do not both contain and not contain any points. That is a *necessary* feature of regions and sets. (*ST*, 138)

This paragraph seems to establish the essential relevance of "*necessary*" and "*impossible*" to the notion of conceptual content itself. Yet, once examined critically, it fails to do so. It is perfectly possible to make sense of determinate negation without even using *impossibility*: instead of saying that it is "impossible for a piece of pure copper to remain solid at temperatures above 1085°C" (*ST*, 65), one can just say that pieces of pure copper *do not* remain solid at temperatures above 1085°C. It is *part* of the conceptual content of pure copper to melt at those temperatures; but this is no *necessary* part. Brandom acknowledges this when he asserts that "rational incoherence (incompatibility) need not be persistent" (*RLLR*, 77). We can very well grant that something is *probably not* copper if it doesn't melt at 1085°C, and still agree that, in *some* context, there *could be* solid copper above 1085°C.

To take the example from Brandom's paragraph cited above, a point is simply *not* both inside and outside a closed plane figure. Since no point is ever both inside and outside such a figure, one can hold this inference to be undefea*ted*; but that doesn't mean it is indefea*sible*. We could just drop the "necessary" and say: "That is a [...] feature of regions and sets" and we wouldn't lose any determination in our concept.

In fact, there are reasons to believe (though I will not argue for it here) that the treatment of modality in the first part of *A Spirit of Trust* ("Semantics and Epistemology") would be left almost unchanged if one were to remove, or qualify the words "necessity" and "necessary" in it. One can perfectly accept a form of *modal expressivism*[20] without accepting the dubious sort of modality named *necessity*. One can accept that "Modal statements express the

[20]Rephrased as the claim that some states of affairs nonmonotonically *imply* others while making others *unlikely*. This redefinition also allows us to see likelihood as a spectrum with varying degrees of possibilities. For instance, the likelihood that I spontaneously combust is much smaller than, e.g., the probability of the New York Giants winning the Superbowl (whatever Jets fans say!).

exclusive differences in virtue of which any actual state of affairs is the state of affairs it is" (*ST*, 225) without committing to those exclusive differences being *necessary*.

Regarding Hegel, a final point should be noted. In an earlier essay (Brandom 2005), Brandom dealt more extensively with (what he perceives as) Hegel's distinction between empirical and logical concepts: the former make explicit *features* of the world, whereas the latter make explicit features of the *process* of explicitation *itself* (Brandom 2005, 156). But this process is *part* of the world, thus making any "semantic optimism" about logical concepts (i.e., the belief that those concepts will forever remain consistent) illegitimate. And if Hegel himself is such a semantic optimist, as Brandom claims, then so much the worse for Hegel. More to the point, Brandom sometimes turns out to entertain quite the same doubt:

> The metaconceptual reading of [philosophical] concepts offers room for such a distinction from ground-level concepts. The sensuous immediacy that always confronts and must be absorbed and digested into conceptual form is an inexhaustible normative motive force for change. It does not follow that what is true of empirical theories must be true of metatheories of them. Perhaps here, full expressive adequacy can be achieved. **Perhaps not. It is possible that expressive progress in our metaconcepts, driven by inevitable experiences of error, inadequacy, and failure, requiring repair and recollective vindication of those repairs, is also a never-ending process. On this question, I think we should be prepared to be critical.** (*ST*, 726, bold added for emphasis)

If the process of explicitation itself belongs to the world, and metatheoretical concepts are susceptible of becoming inadequate, then Brandom's doubts were indeed warranted, and recollection of *any* concept (empirical or not) is a never-ending process.

Thus, it appears that Brandom's Hegelian argument for necessary conceptual content is unconvincing. So, if *MIE* was offering a satisfying, Quinean account of logical expressivism; if *BSD* failed to make necessity a crucial feature of conceptual content; and if *ST* failed to ground determinate negation in *necessary* reason relations; where can we stand with *RLLR*?

5 Ceteris Paribus, *et cetera*

The point of this paper was to make more fully explicit the claim that there "*is* no totality of potentially relevant considerations, no full specifications of the further circumstances under which an implication could fail. Any finite list will be found to have left out some outré possibilities" (*RLLR*, 74). Even though "all implications in which any bearers with the same content occur on the left side and also on the right side are indefeasible implications" (*RLLR*, 239), one can reasonably say that there *are* no such implications, in particular because there will never be a time when we have the totality of bearers in view. Within the formal framework of logical expressivism, one can see that for every inference P→Q, adding premises on the order of ~(P→Q) will defeat that inference.[21] So, every inference whatsoever has one (or more) potential defeasor. Such a defeasor can always come up, because our tangled web of inferential connections, commitments and entitlements is a sprawling, organic whole. In certain historicist passages of *ST*, Brandom makes a similar point:

> [E]*very* conception will eventually turn out to be inadequate, as evidenced by its *correct* application (according to the norm determined by the content of the conception) leading to incompatible commitments. (*ST*, 604)
>
> The manifestation of stubborn, residual immediacy in thought is the inevitability of the experience of error. Every recollectively vindicated, rationally harmonious constellation of commitments achieved along the way is fragile, precarious, and temporary—doomed eventually to be riven by incompatibility and unmasked as presenting one more appearance of a reality that is thereby shown to be elusive. Such a view licenses the fallibilist metainduction. Every previously adopted view has been found wanting—indeed, incoherent—so the way things are presently taken to be, and every way they will be taken to be in the future, also will turn out to misrepresent them. (*ST*, 690)

Those passages seem difficult to reconcile with Brandom's claims about monotonic inferences. The reason

[21] Note that ~(P→Q) counts as a _defeasor_ of P→Q because Hlobil & Brandom reject the principle of explosion following the fact that incoherent premise-sets are "tractable" in practice). See _RLLR_, 78 and 242-244.

why experience (*Erfahrung*) is a never-ending process is because new defeasors, new incompatibilities are guaranteed to arrive through the contingencies of the natural world. All concepts and inferences, even grasped to the best of our abilities, are bound to be temporary signposts along the recollective path. The game of giving and asking for reasons is a shaky one, that neither recollection nor explicitation can make *fully* rational.

Furthermore, in Brandom's words: "The experience of error obliges not only change of belief, but change of meaning" (*ST*, 693). This implies that a "crisis" such as the emergence of a defeasor can justify, through recollection or explicitation, an *amendment* of the content of the inference in question. In such cases, the content is refined so that it can deal better with the newly discovered defeasor; for instance, the claim that "rational people deserve rights" may be faced with the arrival of reason-mongering androids: should *they* be counted as such? To answer this question, one must make the concept of "people" explicit, which will *develop* its content so as to clearly *include* or *exclude* those androids. Therefore, each crisis (including defeasors) is a petition for explicitation and recollection of every relevant reason relation.

Coming back to *RLLR*, the reader will have understood, by now, that the problem lies in the idea of a *total range* of subjunctive robustness for an inference. Whether relativized to a single vocabulary or boldly considered in relation to *all* possible vocabularies, a total range of subjunctive robustness is a *myth*, because vocabularies evolve and give us no guarantee that this range *is*, at any point, *total*[22]. And a range of subjunctive robustness that *may* not be total renders its inference unworthy of the "necessary" epithet. In other words, it is pointless to assert that a given inference *will* hold in every case, because there is always at least *one* possible case (that of a new development in our conceptual practices) in which it wouldn't.

But one may ask: since the present paper holds that nothing is *absolutely* impossible, does it leave open the *possibility* of such total ranges of subjunctive robustness? The answer is yes: persistent, monotonic inferences *would be* possible, if vocabularies were stable enough to allow for a *total range* of subjunctive robustness. But vocabularies would have to work quite differently than they do: they would need to be immune from time and the contingency of conceptual practice. Furthermore, the *possibility* of monotonic inferences does not entail that we will ever spot one in *actuality*, just like it is *possible* to go somewhere you will never reach within your lifetime. And there is no time to waste looking for *possible*, yet *inexistent* things, like the golden goose or the Fountain of Youth.

Finally, it is difficult to assess whether *other* features of *RLLR* are relying on monotonic reason relations. As Brandom & Hlobil are aware, doing away with monotonicity does not imply a refusal of *cautious monotonicity* (CM). This principle states that for *some* reason relations, it is "safe to add further premises that are already implied by the original premise-set" (*RLLR*, 82). But since *RLLR* is unable to make explicit reason relations in which CM holds[23], I would refrain now from judging whether CM constitutes a problem or not. Given what the book says about CM, I would infer that it should "be rejected as a global structural constraint" (*RLLR*, 88) but that it seems locally acceptable; yet like all inferences, my commitment to this claim remains defeasible... In other words, since Brandom & Hlobil don't do anything with CM, but do quite a lot more with "regular" monotonicity, only the latter appeared to be a worthy target.

[22] Indeed, no vocabulary ever stays put. Like any tradition, a vocabulary is constantly impacted by the uses speakers make of it. Every time we apply a concept, we readjust our vocabulary like a web of belief. This applies equally well to Homer's poems or to Euclid's axioms: their readers still continue to discover inferences that their authors didn't know about their own vocabularies. Even if we maintained some "According to Homer/Euclid..." clause, we would still be able to find inferences whose validity would remain disputable, based on the vocabulary so far specified (for instance, whether Achilles was right-handed, or whether Euclid's axioms are equally consistent with a variety of topologies). As such, no vocabulary is ever *completely* and *exhaustively* specifiable, because we do not know the present or future extent of any such vocabulary.

[23] See *RLLR*, 141 for Brandom & Hlobil's dismissal of CM because of an "expressive paradox": "While there may be ways to make explicit when CM holds locally that do not give rise to expressive paradoxes, we shall not pursue this project any further here."

Regarding the extent to which the core of *RLLR* would have to be modified to account for the non-existence of monotonic reason relations, here is an educated guess: *not much*. As it stands, *RLLR* allows for both monotonic and *non*monotonic reason relations, apparently *without* relying on one kind to *derive* the other. All one must do, when reading it, is to consider the set of monotonic reason relations to be *empty*. The ocean of nonmonotonicity *is* simply boundless, without islands. So-called "necessary truths" *are* true, but not *necessarily so*, in that they should not be held "come what may" and considered to be *in*defeasible. Those phantom islands of monotonicity, in fact, are as *possible* as anything else; but that doesn't mean there actually is a single one of them. And one of the many beauties of logical expressivism is that it can transport hopeful settlers and seabound sailors alike.

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Book reviews

SAMUEL MOYN'S *LIBERALISM AGAINST ITSELF: COLD WAR INTELLECTUALS AND THE MAKING OF OUR TIMES*: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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Samuel Moyn's *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times*, published by Yale University Press in 2023, is an ambitious and provocative work of intellectual history. Moyn argues that the Cold War did more than place liberalism in opposition to fascism and communism: it transformed liberalism itself. According to his interpretation, liberal intellectuals confronted by fascism, Stalinism, totalitarianism, war, and nuclear destruction increasingly abandoned older liberal commitments to progress, emancipation, equality, and human development. In their place they developed a more defensive conception of liberalism, centred on protecting individual liberty from political power and avoiding the catastrophes associated with ambitious projects of social transformation.[1]

The book focuses on six intellectual figures: Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hannah Arendt, and Lionel Trilling. These thinkers differed enormously in their philosophical and political commitments, and some of them explicitly rejected the label "liberal." Moyn nevertheless brings them together as representative figures in a portrait of what he calls "Cold War liberalism.[2]" His purpose is not simply to reconstruct their individual philosophies but to explain how their intellectual responses to totalitarianism, political violence, and the perceived dangers of utopianism contributed to the transformation of liberal thought.

The book's argument is also explicitly directed toward the present. Moyn believes that contemporary liberalism has become better at explaining what it opposes than what it positively seeks to achieve. His proposed solution is a renewed liberalism capable of recovering commitments to emancipation, equality, and human development.[3] The argument is provocative, but its historical foundations are less secure than Moyn suggests.

Moyn is more successful in identifying a tendency toward greater intellectual caution in postwar liberal thought than in demonstrating that this tendency constituted a coherent "Cold War liberalism" or that the philosophers associated with it were responsible for the subsequent political failures of liberalism. The postwar experience clearly encouraged many intellectuals to become suspicious of utopian politics, historical determinism, and comprehensive projects of social transformation. But this does not establish that they abandoned liberalism's emancipatory possibilities, nor does it demonstrate that their philosophical positions caused the later political weakness of liberalism. The problem is especially apparent in Moyn's treatment of the philosophers themselves. His readings are often selective and organized around a relatively small number of themes—fear, pessimism, anti-utopianism, negative liberty, and hostility toward progress. These themes are genuinely present in the writings of his subjects, but they do not exhaust their philosophies. Berlin's pluralism and romanticism, Popper's theory of democratic reform, Arendt's conception of political action and public freedom, and Shklar's moral concern with cruelty all complicate Moyn's characterization of them. The danger is that the philosophers become illustrations of Moyn's historical thesis rather than complex thinkers whose arguments have to be understood on their own terms. This methodological problem matters because Moyn ultimately assigns considerable responsibility to these intellectuals for the subsequent condition of liberal politics. If the philosophical positions of his subjects have been simplified in order to

[1] Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 1–11.
[2] Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself*, 7–19. The book's central figures are Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hannah Arendt, and Lionel Trilling.
[3] Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself*, 10–11.

fit the larger narrative, then the causal argument built upon those positions becomes correspondingly weaker. The book therefore raises an important question about liberalism but does not fully establish its answer.

The Transformation of Liberalism

Moyn's central argument begins with a contrast between nineteenth-century liberalism and the liberalism that emerged after the Second World War. He portrays earlier liberalism as possessing a comparatively optimistic understanding of human possibility. Liberal thinkers could believe that reason, education, individuality, political reform, and institutional development would contribute to human emancipation. Progress was not necessarily understood as inevitable, but the possibility of deliberate improvement remained an important element of the liberal imagination.[4]

The catastrophes of the twentieth century challenged this confidence. The First World War, fascism, Nazism, Stalinism, the Holocaust, and the Second World War demonstrated that modernity and rationalization could produce mass violence rather than emancipation. The development of nuclear weapons intensified the problem by making technological progress itself appear potentially catastrophic. Moyn argues that many liberal intellectuals consequently came to view the ideals of the Enlightenment with suspicion. Rather than regarding political transformation as an opportunity for emancipation, they increasingly regarded ambitious political projects as potential sources of tyranny.[5]

There is an important historical observation here. It would be difficult to deny that twentieth-century experience changed the way many intellectuals thought about progress and political power.[6] Moyn is right to identify a movement away from confidence in historical progress and toward greater political caution. His argument is particularly persuasive when he shows how the experience of totalitarianism altered the moral vocabulary through which liberal thinkers understood freedom. The difficulty arises when this tendency is elevated into a comprehensive explanation of the transformation of liberalism. To show that postwar intellectuals became more cautious about progress is not the same as showing that they abandoned liberalism's emancipatory possibilities, which they did not.[7] Nor does it demonstrate that their caution was responsible for subsequent political developments.

Liberal political thought has always contained competing tendencies. It includes traditions of individual development, social reform, and emancipation, but it also contains strong traditions of limited government, private property, constitutionalism, political restraint, and suspicion of concentrated power. These tensions did not begin with the Cold War. Indeed, some of the supposedly "defensive" features of twentieth-century liberalism have deep roots in earlier liberal thought. Moyn's formulation that "Cold War liberalism was a catastrophe—for liberalism" is therefore rhetorically powerful but historically difficult to sustain.[8] The phrase captures his thesis very effectively, but it also risks assuming what the historical analysis is supposed to demonstrate. The Cold War may have encouraged a particular configuration of liberal thought, but this does not demonstrate that the thinkers associated with that configuration caused liberalism's later political difficulties. The issue is particularly important because Moyn's book is only 240 pages long and covers an enormous intellectual and political territory. He therefore necessarily relies upon selective portraits rather than a comprehensive reconstruction of the intellectual history of the period. This is not in itself a defect.

[4] Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself*, 13-62.
[5] Ibid., 173.
[6] See for example: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).
[7] See: Marcin Kilanowski, *W obronie ludzkiej godności i solidarności. Erich Fromm i Isaiah Berlin ku nowym filozoficznym podstawom dla państwa i prawa* (Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press, 2018).
[8] Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself*, 1.

A book of intellectual history can illuminate a large historical transformation through carefully selected individuals. But in that case the selection of individuals becomes crucial. Moyn should demonstrate why these six thinkers are sufficiently representative to sustain the larger argument, but he does not.

Judith Shklar and the Liberalism of Fear

Judith Shklar provides Moyn with perhaps his most persuasive case. Her intellectual development appears to illustrate the transformation that Moyn seeks to describe. In *After Utopia*, published in 1957, Shklar criticized the pessimism and lack of imagination she perceived in contemporary liberalism.[9] She objected to the abandonment of utopian thinking and worried that liberalism had become intellectually passive.[10] Shklar later became associated with the concept of a "liberalism of fear," according to which liberal politics should begin from the prevention of cruelty and the protection of individuals against arbitrary political power. This conception was profoundly shaped by the historical experience of the twentieth century. Rather than beginning with an ideal conception of the good society, Shklar began with the dangers of cruelty and oppression.

Moyn interprets Shklar's development as almost tragic. The thinker who initially criticized liberalism for its pessimism eventually produced one of the most influential formulations of a liberalism centred on fear.[11] The example is certainly suggestive. It provides Moyn with an unusually clear narrative of an intellectual moving from dissatisfaction with liberal pessimism toward a position that appears to confirm precisely that pessimism. Yet even here Moyn's interpretation risks reducing a complex intellectual development to a simple movement from optimism to pessimism.[12] The "liberalism of fear" is not merely an expression of political resignation. It contains a substantive moral claim about the priority of preventing cruelty. One could argue that this is not an abandonment of emancipation but an attempt to establish the minimum political conditions under which human beings can pursue different conceptions of the good. Shklar's argument can therefore be read not simply as an expression of Cold War pessimism but as a distinctive account of the moral priority of avoiding certain forms of political domination.

Moyn is right to ask whether fear alone can provide a sufficient political ideal. Liberal democracy presumably requires more than the avoidance of dictatorship. Citizens need reasons to participate in politics and to believe that political institutions can improve their circumstances. But this criticism does not establish that Shklar's approach was itself responsible for liberalism's later weakness. At most, it establishes a tension within liberal political thought between the prevention of political evil and the pursuit of positive political goods. Indeed, Shklar's importance may be better understood as demonstrating the difficulty of Moyn's own project. She shows that liberalism can be simultaneously concerned with emancipation and with the prevention of cruelty. The choice between "hope" and "fear" may therefore be less clear-cut than Moyn suggests.

Isaiah Berlin and the Problem of Negative Liberty

Moyn's treatment of Isaiah Berlin is more problematic. Berlin is famous for distinguishing negative liberty—freedom from interference—from positive liberty, which concerns self-government or the realization of one's purposes.[13] Moyn interprets Berlin's emphasis on negative liberty as emblematic of the Cold War retreat from emancipation.There is an important point in this interpretation. Ber-

[9] Judith Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).
[10] Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself*, 13-32.
[11] Ibid.
[12] See: Becca Rothfeld, "Samuel Moyn's 'Liberalism Against Itself,'" *Washington Post*, August 11, 2023.
[13] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72.

lin was deeply suspicious of political projects that claimed to know what human beings truly needed and then attempted to impose that conception of human fulfilment upon society. The history of twentieth-century totalitarianism provided powerful reasons for such caution. Berlin's defence of negative liberty can therefore reasonably be understood as an attempt to prevent political power from turning conceptions of collective emancipation into instruments of coercion. But Moyn's interpretation becomes too narrow when it treats Berlin primarily through the category of negative liberty. Berlin's philosophy cannot adequately be reduced to his famous distinction between positive and negative liberty. His writings on romanticism, pluralism, nationalism, culture, individuality, history, and the Counter-Enlightenment reveal a thinker deeply concerned with human creativity and self-development.[14] His defence of value pluralism was not simply a defence of limited government. It rested on the philosophical conviction that human beings pursue genuinely diverse and sometimes incompatible values.

This complexity matters because it weakens Moyn's attempt to place Berlin straightforwardly on the side of pessimistic Cold War liberalism. Berlin was not simply an advocate of political restraint who rejected human creativity. Indeed, his interest in romanticism and individuality suggests a conception of human life that is in important respects highly emancipatory. This criticism is not merely an external objection. Even a sympathetic contemporary review of Moyn's book in the *Washington Post* acknowledges that Moyn's interpretations can be idiosyncratic, particularly in his treatment of Berlin, and argues that Berlin's commitment to pluralism and cultural diversity gives liberalism a positive dimension that Moyn underestimates.[15] Moyn's interpretation is therefore strongest when he points out that Berlin feared the coercive consequences of positive liberty. It becomes much weaker when he treats this fear as evidence that Berlin had abandoned a positive conception of human flourishing. The two propositions are not equivalent.

There is a deeper philosophical issue here. Berlin's rejection of monistic conceptions of value does not necessarily imply rejection of human development. It may instead imply that there is no single authoritative form of human development. A liberal society can promote human flourishing precisely by allowing different individuals and communities to pursue different forms of it. In this sense, Berlin may actually offer an alternative to the dichotomy Moyn constructs. Liberalism need not choose between an ambitious political programme and a merely defensive protection of rights. It can understand freedom as the protection of a plural world in which different forms of life and different conceptions of excellence can develop.[16]

Karl Popper and the Rejection of Utopia

Karl Popper represents another important case. Moyn interprets Popper's attack on historicism and utopian social engineering as part of the Cold War rejection of progress. Popper believed that attempts to discover laws governing the inevitable development of history could generate political fanaticism. If political actors believed that history guaranteed a particular future, they could regard violence and coercion as justified means of accelerating that future.[17] This criticism of historicism is an important element of Popper's philosophy. But Moyn's presentation risks turning opposition to historicism into opposition to political progress itself. Popper's concept of "piecemeal social engineering" was not simply a defence of political stagnation. It was an argument for reform through experimentation, criticism, institutional re-

[14] See: Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
[15] Rothfeld, "Samuel Moyn's *Liberalism Against Itself*."
[16] Kilanowski, *W obronie ludzkiej godności i solidarności,* 229-256.
[17] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1945); Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1957).

vision, and the correction of identifiable social problems. Popper rejected the idea that political actors could possess comprehensive knowledge of how society should be transformed; he did not therefore reject the possibility that societies could be improved.[18]

This distinction is essential. There is a profound difference between rejecting the inevitability of historical progress and rejecting progress altogether. A democratic society can believe that institutions should be improved without believing that history is moving inevitably toward a predetermined end. Moyn's criticism of Popper therefore risks constructing a false opposition between utopianism and resignation. There is a large intellectual territory between these positions: democratic reform, institutional experimentation, social democracy, welfare reform, civil rights, and incremental but substantial improvements in human freedom.

Popper may reasonably be criticized for being too cautious, and his philosophical and historical criticisms of thinkers such as Hegel and Marx are certainly open to substantive philosophical criticism. But demonstrating that Popper's historical interpretations were inadequate is different from demonstrating that his philosophy contributed to the abandonment of liberal emancipation. Indeed, this is one of the broader problems with Moyn's treatment of his subjects. A philosopher can be wrong about another philosopher without thereby being responsible for the political consequences that Moyn associates with his intellectual position. The historical argument requires another step—from philosophical error to political causation—and that step is frequently asserted more readily than demonstrated.

Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Moyn's Category

Hannah Arendt presents an even more serious challenge to Moyn's classification. Arendt explicitly rejected the description of herself as a liberal. Moyn nevertheless includes her because of her analysis of totalitarianism and her suspicion of attempts to transform society through revolutionary political projects.[19] This inclusion is intellectually interesting, but it demonstrates the difficulty of Moyn's category. If a thinker who explicitly rejected liberalism can nevertheless become evidence for the transformation of liberalism, the category begins to encompass intellectuals whose relationship to liberalism is indirect and contested. More importantly, Arendt's conception of political freedom cannot easily be reduced to the defensive liberalism Moyn criticizes. Her writings on action, plurality, public life, revolution, and political participation contain a highly active conception of freedom. Political freedom for Arendt is not simply the absence of interference; it involves appearing and acting together in a public world.[20]

Moyn is certainly justified in emphasizing Arendt's suspicion of attempts to institutionalize comprehensive emancipatory projects. Her analysis of totalitarianism gives her powerful reasons for doubting political programmes that seek to transform human beings and society completely. Yet this does not make Arendt simply another theorist of political restraint. The complexity of Arendt's thought should instead force Moyn to question larger dichotomy he uses. Arendt can reject comprehensive emancipation while simultaneously presenting political action as one of the highest forms of human freedom. That is not easily described as a retreat from emancipation into mere fear.

A recent review in the *American Historical Review* makes a related point in describing Arendt as a "fellow traveller" rather than straightforwardly as a liberal, precisely because she rejected the liberal label while sharing some of the period's concerns about institutionalizing emancipatory politics.[21] The qualification is important. It

[18] See: Marcin Kilanowski, "Przeciw pewności. Karla Poppera zmagania z koniecznością", in: *Kultura i Edukacja/Culture and Education*, No. 1 (2016): 34-48.

[19] Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself*, 115-140.
[20] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 175–247.
[21] Annelien de Dijn, "Review of Samuel Moyn, Liberalism Against

indicates that Moyn's category may be useful as an interpretive construct, but it should not be mistaken for a straightforward historical description of a unified intellectual movement.

Himmelfarb, Trilling and The Problem of Moyn's Philosophical Method

The chapters on Gertrude Himmelfarb and Lionel Trilling further broaden Moyn's narrative, but they also make his category more difficult to define. Himmelfarb represents a more conservative trajectory. Moyn is interested in her engagement with the Enlightenment, modernity, religion, and political change and in the way criticism of revolutionary politics could become connected to a more conservative conception of liberal society. Her inclusion is useful for demonstrating that the Cold War transformation of liberal thought could move toward conservatism. Yet this also raises a methodological question. Is Moyn writing a history of liberalism or a history of a broader intellectual reaction against progressive politics? If the latter, then the category "Cold War liberalism" becomes increasingly expansive.

Lionel Trilling creates a similar problem. His importance lies largely in his engagement with literature, psychology, psychoanalysis, and the complexity of modern personality. Trilling was skeptical of simplistic accounts of rational progress and emphasized the contradictions and irrational elements of human nature. This certainly fits Moyn's broader theme of declining confidence in human perfectibility. But the connection to the political failure of liberalism is much less obvious. Showing that a literary critic developed a pessimistic view of human psychology does not establish that his ideas produced or even significantly contributed to the later political transformation of liberalism.

Again, the problem is one of scale. Moyn moves from particular intellectual arguments to a general diagnosis of liberalism and then from that diagnosis to the political condition of the present. Each transition requires evidence. The further the argument moves from the texts themselves, the more difficult the causal claim becomes. Thus the most important criticism of *Liberalism Against Itself* concerns therefore not whether Moyn identifies any real intellectual shift, but how deeply he establishes that shift through his readings of the philosophers. Moyn is a historian of political thought, but his method is not primarily a detailed philosophical reconstruction of the arguments of Berlin, Popper, Arendt, Shklar, and the others. He reads them comparatively and genealogically. Individual texts are selected for what they reveal about a broader transformation in intellectual culture.There is nothing inherently wrong with this method. Intellectual history need not become philosophical exegesis. But Moyn's conclusions are sufficiently dependent on the philosophical meaning of his subjects' ideas that a more sustained engagement with their arguments is necessary.

The danger of a surface reading is that a philosopher's position can be reduced to its most convenient formulation. Berlin becomes the theorist of negative liberty; Popper becomes the anti-utopian; Shklar becomes the theorist of fear; Arendt becomes the critic of emancipation. Each description captures something real, but each also leaves out substantial portions of the thinker's philosophical project. This matters because Moyn's argument depends on establishing that these thinkers represent a movement away from liberal emancipation. If their philosophies contain substantial positive conceptions of freedom, individuality, plurality, political participation, or reform, then the contrast between "emancipatory liberalism" and "Cold War liberalism" becomes considerably less sharp. Moyn is therefore at his best when he identifies patterns across the intellectual culture of the period and at his weakest when he attributes those patterns to the philosophical positions of individual thinkers without sufficiently engaging the full complexity of their arguments.

Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times", *American Historical Review* 130, no. 1 (2025): 436–37.

From Intellectual Transformation to Political Responsibility

The problem becomes even more serious when Moyn moves from interpretation to responsibility. His book does not merely say that Cold War liberals thought differently from nineteenth-century liberals. It suggests that their transformation helped produce the contemporary crisis of liberalism. The Yale University Press description itself presents the book as an argument that these intellectuals "transformed liberalism" and left a "disastrous legacy" for the present.[22] That is a much stronger claim than the identification of an intellectual tendency. To establish it, Moyn would need to demonstrate at least three things. First, that "Cold War liberalism" constituted a sufficiently coherent intellectual formation. Second, that the philosophers he discusses exercised substantial influence over political institutions and political actors. Third, that this influence was an important cause of later developments such as neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and the weakening of liberal politics. The first claim is debatable. The second and third are even more difficult.

In a recent review also Riccardo Bavaj has pointed out that Moyn provides relatively little contextual analysis of the Cold War itself and that the causal chain connecting mid-century intellectual developments to "the making of our times" appears tenuous. Bavaj also questions Moyn's selection of figures and the absence of major figures such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.[23] These omissions are significant because they raise the question of whether Moyn has selected the thinkers most representative of Cold War liberalism or those whose writings most readily support his thesis. This is not a minor criticism. A portrait gallery can be highly illuminating, but it cannot automatically be treated as a representative history. If Moyn wants to attribute responsibility for the later condition of liberal politics to a particular intellectual formation, he needs a clearer account of who belongs to that formation and why. The political transformation of liberalism after the Second World War, however cannot plausibly be explained by philosophy alone. Economic transformations, the development of welfare states, the crisis of postwar social democracy, globalization, decolonization, changes in political parties, social movements, technological developments, and transformations in capitalism all played major roles. Ideas matter, but ideas operate through institutions and historical circumstances. Moyn's account sometimes moves too quickly from intellectual history to political causation.

What Moyn Gets Right

These criticisms should not obscure what is genuinely valuable in Moyn's book. His most important insight is that liberalism cannot survive indefinitely as a purely defensive political doctrine. A political philosophy needs some account of what human beings can positively achieve. Liberal democracy cannot depend forever on the argument that authoritarianism is worse. This point is important today. Liberal institutions require defence against authoritarianism, populism, nationalism, and political violence. But citizens also need positive reasons to value democratic institutions. They need to believe that democracy can provide meaningful freedom, social equality, opportunity, education, cultural development, and participation. Moyn is therefore right to insist that liberalism should not abandon the language of emancipation merely because some historical projects of emancipation ended in catastrophe. Moreover his critique also challenges a certain complacency in contemporary liberalism. If liberalism becomes synonymous with the preservation of existing institutions, it risks becoming indistinguishable from political conservatism. A political philosophy that cannot imagine substantial improvement

[22] The publisher explicitly describes Moyn's argument as one in which Cold War liberals transformed liberalism and left a "disastrous legacy" for the present.
[23] Riccardo Bavaj, "Review of Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself*," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (2025): 1-4.

may find itself incapable of responding to legitimate demands for social change.

In this respect, Moyn's book raises a genuine philosophical question: what should liberal freedom mean? Is freedom simply the absence of interference? Or does it require social and material conditions that enable individuals to develop their capacities? Can a society be genuinely free when enormous inequalities prevent some people from exercising formally equal rights? These are important questions, and Moyn is right to bring them back to the centre of liberal political thought. But Moyn does not resolve the problem that his criticism creates. If liberalism is to recover emancipation, what prevents emancipatory politics from becoming coercive? If liberalism is to become more egalitarian, how should equality be defined? If the state is to promote human development, how can it avoid imposing an official conception of human flourishing? And if liberalism should recover confidence in progress, how should it distinguish genuine political progress from the dangerous belief that history guarantees a particular destination? These are precisely the questions that motivated some of the thinkers Moyn criticizes. Berlin's suspicion of positive liberty was not simply a rejection of human flourishing. It was motivated by the danger that political authorities might claim to know what human beings truly needed. Popper's rejection of utopian social engineering was not simply a rejection of improvement. It was an attempt to reconcile reform with epistemic humility. Shklar's liberalism of fear was not simply political pessimism. It was a response to the moral priority of preventing cruelty. Arendt's suspicion of totalizing political projects emerged alongside an unusually rich conception of political action and freedom. Moyn might be right to challenge these thinkers. But to overcome them he would have to engage more deeply with the problems they identified. That is where the book ultimately falls short. Moyn is more convincing in showing that liberalism needs a positive political vision than in showing that the philosophers he criticizes were wrong to emphasize the dangers of political ambition. The challenge is not simply to recover hope. It is to develop a form of hope that is compatible with pluralism, institutional restraint, individual rights, and the lessons of twentieth-century history.

Overall Assessment

Liberalism Against Itself is an ambitious and controversial book. Its central insight—that postwar liberalism became more cautious, pessimistic, and defensive in response to the catastrophes of the twentieth century—is interesting. Moyn succeeds in drawing attention to an important transformation in the moral vocabulary of liberalism. But he is less successful in demonstrating that this transformation constituted a coherent "Cold War liberalism." The six thinkers he examines are too philosophically diverse to fit comfortably into a single category, and some explicitly rejected the liberal label altogether. The selection is also difficult to justify as representative of the entire intellectual history of Cold War liberalism.

More importantly, Moyn's philosophical readings are often too selective. His treatment of Berlin is particularly revealing. By emphasizing negative liberty, Moyn underplays Berlin's pluralism, romanticism, concern with individuality, and positive appreciation of cultural diversity. Similarly, Popper's rejection of historicism is not equivalent to rejection of progress, while Arendt's criticism of emancipatory projects coexists with a highly active conception of political freedom. The problem is therefore not that Moyn misunderstands every philosopher he discusses. Rather, he tends to read each philosopher through the particular aspect of his thought that is necessary for Moyn's larger historical argument. This makes the book rhetorically coherent but philosophically not persuasive. Moreover, the causal argument is problematic. Even if one accepts that Cold War intellectuals contributed to a more defensive conception of liberalism, Moyn does not adequately establish that they were re-

sponsible for the later political failures of liberalism. The relationship between intellectual ideas and political developments is mediated by institutions, economic structures, political parties, social movements, and historical events. The connection between six intellectual portraits and "the making of our times" therefore remains more suggestive than demonstrated.

Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding the book is productive. Moyn forces liberalism to confront an uncomfortable question: what is liberalism for? It is not enough to say that liberal democracy is preferable to authoritarianism. Liberalism must also explain what freedom makes possible. A liberalism that exists only to prevent disaster may eventually lose its capacity to inspire. Citizens need not only protection from arbitrary power but also opportunities for education, participation, creativity, equality, and self-development. But recovering these possibilities does not require dismissing the intellectual inheritance of the Cold War. The better conclusion may be that liberalism needs both sides of the tradition: the emancipatory ambition Moyn rightly emphasizes and the caution about power that the twentieth century made impossible to ignore. The task, therefore, is not simply to replace the "liberalism of fear" with a "liberalism of hope." It is to understand how hope and fear, emancipation and restraint, positive freedom and negative freedom, can coexist within a democratic political order.

Moyn's book does not provide a fully developed answer to that problem. Nor does it convincingly establish that the philosophers he criticizes are responsible for liberalism's present difficulties. What it does provide is a provocative challenge to the complacency of contemporary liberalism and a reason to reconsider the relationship between freedom and political aspiration. Ultimately, Moyn is more successful in identifying an intellectual shift than in explaining its causes or assigning responsibility for its consequences. He shows convincingly that the catastrophes of the twentieth century encouraged liberal intellectuals to become more suspicious of progress, utopianism, and political perfectionism. He is much less convincing when he turns this tendency into a coherent historical movement called "Cold War liberalism" and then treats its philosophers as responsible for the later failure of liberal politics. The enduring value of *Liberalism Against Itself* therefore lies less in its historical verdict than in the question it poses. Liberalism should not be reduced to a philosophy of fear, but neither can it afford to forget why fear became such a powerful element of twentieth-century liberal thought. If liberalism is to recover an emancipatory ambition, it must do so soon, but without losing the philosophical insight that political power itself can become an instrument of domination.

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REVIEW
HANS JOAS, *UNIVERSALISMUS. WELTHERRSCHAFT UND MENSCHHEITSETHOS [UNIVERSALISM. WORLD DOMINION AND HUMAN ETHOS]*. SUHRKAMP, BERLIN 2025, 975 PP.
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When facing a new book by Hans Joas, it is reasonable for his readers to expect that the main argument will be dealt with an instructive and prolific amount of historical information, sociological elaboration, and philosophical analysis. His latest work is no exception. Although many central ideas of *Universalismus. Weltherrschaft und Menschheitsethos* go back to years of research, it is to be read as the final contribution to a trilogy that began in 2017 with *Die Macht des Heiligen* and continued in 2020 with *Im Bannkreis der Freiheit.* The purpose of these volumes is to offer an alternative historical sociology of Modernity, free from the common assumptions we see in mainstream positions. Topics such as religion, sacrality, freedom, and moral universalism are interpreted in the light of empirical historical evidence, philosophical argument, and sociological discussion with the founding fathers of the discipline.

After reading such a comprehensive book as *Universalismus*, it is challenging to offer a review that provides an interesting access to its core without falling into generalities or getting lost in the details. With this precaution in mind, we will firstly state Joas's main hypothesis and methodological approach used in the book. Then we will expose the sequence of chapters that purport to argue for and underpin the initial hypothesis. Afterwards, we will concentrate on the conclusion, since the concluding chapter is less a summary of results than an opening to current problems and practical situations. Finally, we will conclude with an assessment of Joas's endeavor and some reflections that his work poses.

1. Theoretical framework and methodological approach

Joas's book sheds light on the relationship between moral universalism and the sociopolitical conditions that encourage the adoption of that point of view. Before him, other authors have explored the philosophical and moral psychological aspects underlying moral universalism, but few have concentrated on the sociological dimension of that phenomenon.

Before introducing Joas's hypothesis, it is convenient to clarify some of the key notions employed in the text. First, by 'moral universalism', the author understands the normative position according to which every human being is morally relevant and therefore deserves (equal) moral consideration. In his words, it is the:

> moral orientation that does not measure goodness according to its usefulness for a particular human community and that also questions what is considered good in itself in terms of what it means for other people outside a particular community. (p. 40)

Moral universalism is the opposite of moral particularism. But this contrast needs further clarification. Given that a universalistic normative position can concretize in different ethical systems (Christian ethics, Buddhist ethics, Kantian ethics, etc.), it is advisable to use the plural form here (p. 234). In this sense, we can say that the different crystallizations of moral universalism are the opposite of varied moral particularisms.

> Moral universalism can and must be culturally articulated in various religious and secular forms. It does not exist and will never exist without the form of cultural articulation. (p. 69)

It is important to point out that, historically, universalistic positions come out of the adoption of an impartial point of view and the perspective of others. Universalism is the outcome of the process of overcoming particularism.

Rather, it must deal with the impulse toward moral decentering of the entire collective, regarding the ability and willingness to see an event from the perspective of others and to evaluate actions according to what they mean for those who do not belong to one's own collective. (p. 121)

We can now present Joas's main question in a twofold way. Firstly, which sociopolitical processes explain the emergence of moral universalism as a new way of valuing and norming human interactions? Secondly, which sociopolitical processes explain the adoption of the morally universalistic point of view by a community or, at least, by a considerable number of its members?

Notice that the first and the second questions are of a rather different kind. The emergence of a new philosophical or religious position is a process that should not be confused with the adoption of that new point of view by the whole community. In other words, moral universalism is not something we can take for granted. Quite on the contrary, it has slowly emerged through complex and long social and cultural processes. Indeed, these processes started at the beginning of the great civilizations in the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe and developed over many centuries.

Following Karl Jaspers, Joas maintains that the idea of moral universalism appeared and developed during the Axial Age, a period that arguably extended approximately from 800 B.C. to 200 B.C. That development was possible thanks to the emergence of a series of religious and philosophical leaders. Joas concentrates on four of them: the Jewish prophets of the Old Testament, the Greek philosophers and tragedians, Buddha, and Confucius. These intellectual and spiritual movements had one fact in common: they developed ethical systems that were universalistic or, at least, that laid the foundations for the flourishing of moral universalism. The notion of humanity (*Menschheit*) as an all-encompassing whole had its origins there.

The fact that the idea of moral universalism arose inside of - and thanks to - a certain cultural movement does not imply that the whole movement was universalistic. For example, the Hebrew prophets paved the way for the moral universalistic point of view, but not every prophet was equally willing to abandon their traditional particularism (pp. 96-97; 138).

As already noted, Joas's focus does not lie on the moral-psychological developments that have made possible the emergence of moral universalism. As a sociologist, he is interested mainly in the new social and political formations that permitted and even fostered that emergence. That remark allows us to state his hypothesis. In his view, the emergence and consolidation of moral universalism were made possible by processes triggered by the parallel inception and consolidation of empires, that is, sociopolitical unions that aspire to world dominion. In other words, moral universalism could not have emerged and spread (as an idea, first, and as an ethos, afterwards), without the challenge presented by the simultaneous growth of empires, when confronted by foreign populations with the demands for moral recognition (pp. 97; 561).

It is worth mentioning that Joas uses the phrase 'political universalism' in a particular way: the structural tendency of a given political-military unit to expand beyond its borders, conquering first neighboring societies and then distant ones. This is an inherent property of many states, that is, of political-military formations, since antiquity. It means

> the phenomenon that archaic states differ from their non-state neighbors and tribes in their greater capacity for organization, and at the same time have an inherent tendency to encroach on other territories. (p. 25)

There is no natural limit to this structural tendency. Theoretically, an empire could expand all over the world, seeking to dominate the entire planet.

> [...] the claims of empires to world domination, their attempts to unify the world through power. (p. 42)

Since ancient times, once established and consolidated, states have tended to expand over larger territories, de-

feating their rivals and taking control over their population and resources. In the end, the result is an empire.

Clearly, political universalism is a sociological concept, not an ethical notion. The empire of Alexander the Great, the Spanish Empire and the Third Reich are three different examples of political universalism. Their various effects on moral universalism were born out of the impact of their policies on other populations and the further social and institutional response to those effects (see chapters 2.6; 6; 8). Interestingly, here is Joas's main point. The different philosophies and religions that promote moral universalism (Buddhism, Christianity, Humanism, etc.) did not emerge in a sociological vacuum. On the contrary, they developed and expanded within empires. The consolidation of an empire paves the way for the emergence and consolidation of moral universalism. Notice, though, that it is not a sufficient condition.

> We [must] understand moral universalism as a product of the debate surrounding this political universalism. (p. 26)

Joas is neither a materialist nor a determinist. For him, the emergence of political universalism is not deterministically followed by the emergence of moral universalism, nor is there a secure teleological outcome. A new, expansionist state and even a world-empire may emerge without providing for the emergence of a universalistic moral system.

Joas conceives of human action as a creative act. When we act, we are indeed conditioned by the social structures but not determined by them. There is always room for creativity. This means that structural conditions (the emergence of a state or an empire) can trigger the development of a morally universalistic way of thinking among people, thanks to human creativity but not automatically cause it. In other words, we can speak of the "constitutive role" of empires in the formation of moral universalism (p. 231). Also, with the adoption of a normative universalistic system, empires could support and maintain their power and dominion.

The relationship between political and moral universalism is complex. As Joas recognizes, religious and social leaders who adhere to moral universalism can criticize the politically universalistic tendencies of their empires and try to correct them (for example, a religious leader can criticize the injustices committed during the expansion of an empire). But it is also true that moral universalism can be used and manipulated by statesmen and emperors (for example, a political leader can instrumentalize a morally universalistic religion to legitimate his ambitions; in this case, a religion becomes an imperial ideology). Both dimensions are equally important. Joas characterizes the first one as the tension between the ideals and the reality (*Spannung zwischen Idealen und Wirklichkeit*), while he calls the second phenomenon "*Selbstsakralisierung*". (p. 26-29).

In sum, Joas's purpose is to make an "affirmative genealogy" (*affirmative Genealogie*) of the "ethos of humanity" (*Menschheitsethos*) (p. 43). To that aim, he uses the historical-sociological approach of Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber. Notice that both elements are essential. It is a *genealogy*, because it does not assume a linear and necessary development towards a defined aim (teleology). Different societies have developed different versions of moral universalism, but those developments were not a necessary result. In this regard, Joas employs Nietzsche's approach. The main difference with Nietzsche, nevertheless, lies in the fact that Joas sees in moral universalism a genuine ethical possibility. Nietzsche saw in universalistic systems such as Christianity and Buddhism an expression of decadence, submissiveness, lack of vitality, resentment, etc. (p. 31)

2. Empirical evidence

Although a detailed reconstruction of the successive chapters of a book of this magnitude is virtually impossible, it is convenient to mention some major contributions regarding the constitution of moral universalism, while

attending to key connections between periods and ideas. In this case, fairness in the review lies less in attending to argumentative intricacies or fine historical connections than in seeing it as a whole regarding the historical developments that connect moral universalism and political expansion, and how they are interpreted.

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Chapters 1 and 2 set the theoretical framework for the whole book. The first chapter analyses the heritage of Nietzsche, Weber, and Troeltsch regarding the possibility of a genealogy of moral universalism. The second chapter argues for Joas' own theory, starting with the axial age and the transformed role of political expansion when it is confronted with the moral demands of extended societies.

The process of humanity achieving self-consciousness has a long history. Different approaches were proposed as explanations, but few paid attention to the history and role of moral universalism as the heart of this process. This helps understand the role of Nietzsche and the answers of Weber and Troeltsch, the first triggering idea in the book. Nietzsche identified the contingency of the origin of values and the lack of any support for a teleological presupposition. While admitting this premise, Troeltsch and Weber offer alternative interpretations. Resorting to his concept of "affirmative genealogy", Joas sees that contingency and historicity of values in Troeltsch lead him to explain how, in concrete contexts, Christianity allowed for certain experiences to create encompassing ideals and an ethos. This ethos includes the liberation of tribal reductive conditions and discovers "the human and humanity" (p. 52). At the same time, it sets the conditions for the long and varied relationship of the Christian church and the State. Yet Troeltsch remains too ethnocentric. His prejudices hinder him from understanding non-Western religions, such as Buddhism and Islam (pp. 64ff). Therefore, Joas intends to employ Troeltsch's approach to Christianity to other religions, even to Orthodox Christianity. He keeps this constructivist view of universalistic ideals merging with Weber's universalistic perspective. His main criticism of Weber is that he is too focused on explaining the origin of capitalism. Instead of paying attention to the religious phenomenon as such and its other capabilities, he analyses world religions as an obstacle or as a trigger to the capitalistic economy.

Moral universalism is key to humanity's self-understanding and it relates to the history of political universalism. In this regard, the choice of the axial age in chapter 2 as a starting point is two-edged: on the one hand, it did not immediately encompass every human being; on the other, ancient restrictive visions did not lose power. But at the same time, it evidences concrete historical events regarding the birth of an ideal that provides a solution to a social need and gives way to a sensibility that creates an image of humanity. Not every creation and self-sacralization of humanity tends to an all-encompassing ideal, because limits and backlashes remain.

We identify the development of moral universalism from the axial age onwards, when archaic states are replaced with world powers that need to deal with other peoples and their demands. The Hebrew prophets, the Greek philosophers and tragedians, Buddha in India, Confucius in China, and later developments of Stoics and Christianity, are milestones of this process. Every step shows potential for moral universalism as well as obstacles, which are resumed in later chapters. They were not fully universalistic developments. In them, we can see "tentative attempts," "half-hearted approaches", towards universalism (p. 186), where steps towards universalism may also retain aspects of particularism. For example, Stoicism developed a cosmopolitan position, and primitive Christianity endorsed the idea of a community open to all classes and nations. Nevertheless, the first accepted slavery as a social institution, while the second tended to exclude those who did not want to become Christians.

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So far, we have sketched Joas's theoretical framework, methodology, and main hypothesis. The rest of the book, which covers 10 chapters, is devoted to different case studies. In a first group of chapters, Joas confronts the opinions and arguments of Weber, Troeltsch and other sociologists regarding the relationship between religions and politics, while addressing them from the perspective of the formation of moral universalism. Whereas a detailed reconstruction of these chapters is impossible, it is crucial to mention the following contributions:

Chapters 3 and 4 show in different historical and geographical locations how "imperial universalism", that is, the conditions provided by the expansion and structure of empires, served to trigger and develop universal moral intuitions. They also show that political institutionalizations may succumb without affecting the universalistic core that they had used to guarantee their own stability. This is a historical key element to understanding how religious configurations have an independent life in spite of attempts to subordinate them to political programs.

Chapter 3 explores the interplay between political universalism and moral universalism in the Roman Empire under Constantine and the Chinese Empire under the Han dynasty. The first part centers on the officialization of Christianity during the reigns of Constantine and Theodosius, the expansion it enables, and the risk of becoming an imperial ideology. The second part is devoted to the Chinese Empire and the role of Confucianism. In both cases, we see the influence of moral universalism on the political sphere, but also the political tendency to instrumentalize religion.

Chapter 4 investigates what happens when empires that had adopted a morally universalistic religion fall. Can a universalistic ideal survive the empire that previously adopted and fostered it? The answer seems to be affirmative. Both cases, Augustine of Hippo's sociological interpretation of the separation of Church destiny from that of the Empire, and the historical comparison to the evolution of Buddhism after the fall of the Maurya Empire, offer a contrast to Weber's interpretation of the social role of religions and their leading bearers. Joas shows how attempts at reform in the spirit of a universalist religion are confirmed, as well as its functionalist intentions. At the same time, we recognize that independence of state configurations emerges together with egalitarian tendencies, as well as a genuine sense of belief which is autonomous from established institutions. This inspires modes of expansive mission beyond the political and temporal limits and function of political power.

Chapter 5 deals with universalism without egalitarianism in the Middle Ages, focusing on two incarnated figures: organic social ethics and the metaphor of the body of Christ and its projections. Joas takes over Bellah's notion of "religious evolution" (p. 332) to understand the successive religious formations and developments. One of them is the "organic social ethics" that Weber already identified in India and may be recognized in the Catholic Middle Ages: "For Weber, in this *organic* vocational ethics lies *the* alternative to *ascetic* vocational ethics and therefore to Protestant asceticism", essential for modern capitalism (p. 335). This doctrine differs from modern egalitarianism yet creates the conditions for a moral universalism related to a notion of transcendence and inclusive moral commitments, surpassing even religious institutions and temporal political formations. This Thomist perspective also serves to reinforce the organic metaphor. In Troeltsch, Joas underlines how the shared life (and love) of the organism, no matter how different the functions of each part, nourishes the whole, but also that the praxis of the cultic community unites all parts and levels (p. 359). The body metaphor has a rich history and is intended particularly to justify the connection of rulers and Christ. In relation to political universalism, it is essential to remember how very different philosophical and political traditions drew from it to explain practices of incorporation, immunization, eviction, etc. This is a fertile research field, where we may underline only one,

albeit essential, aspect: the notion of a personal God and the sacralization of the mystical body allow for the sacralization of the particular person, instituting a restriction regarding how far secular powers can affect it. Future effects of this notion regarding the sacralization of every human being are incommensurable. It shows an unattended transformation of the Middle Ages, essential for the modern understanding of the human person: "from a metaphysics of things to a metaphysics of moral beings and human action" (p. 421).

Chapter 6 focuses on the challenges of Universalism to Humanism in early modern States and the "discovery" of new peoples. The expansive nature of empires from the 16th Century onwards presented a new challenge for moral universalism: the "new" peoples and their impact on early modern (European) institutions. With the concept of "*Entgrenzung*" (boundarylessness or un-limitation), developed by Hans Schelkshorn,[1] Joas assesses the new type of Empire, the legal debates and institutions, and the role of Catholic theology after the Reformation. It focuses on three religious characters of this period, who, with their reflection, self-critique, and practical initiatives, allowed for an assessment of laws and practical effects of Spanish imperialism in America: Bartolomé de las Casas, the Jesuits in Paraguay and Vasco de Quiroga in Mexico. They provide *in nuce* elements for what later will be known as Human Rights and international law. Essential here is how Joas contrasts the ambivalences of both Reformation and Humanism. Hegel and Weber see the Reformation as the birth impulse of modern political freedom and capitalism, when in reality it underlined human lack of freedom and criticized human dignity as based on the likeness to God. On the other hand, Renaissance humanists considered that human dignity depends on the *actualization* of potential universal capability. With Troeltsch, Joas sees no real social transformation or moral universalism, only the creation of utopias and a strengthening of State sovereignty (p. 431). But the advance did happen in the mixture of counterreformation, humanist heritage, and the challenge of the encounter with the American populations. Without turning a blind eye to the horrors of the conquest, Joas shows the deficits of reductive interpretations. The writings of Las Casas after witnessing how the *colonizadores* treated aboriginal peoples - and the Spanish discussions on international law during this period -, the achievements of the Jesuit missions in Paraguay, and the "communism of love" in the institutions created by Vasco de Quiroga in Mexico, vouch for a creative encounter and generation of moral universalism.

Chapter 7 places us in the revolutions of the 18th Century: the disputes regarding their origins and effects, achievements, and ambiguities. Something that honors this book is the enhancement of the often-forgotten Haitian revolution, the role of French imperialism, and how a universalist perspective is limited when the conditions of feasibility are hindered. Ideas with a long tradition - such as "medieval natural right with its universalist traits" - were an "extra-legal measure for rights", with great influence in Spanish colonial policies but without a real legal corpus; whereas "with the American and French Declaration of Rights there was a successful step towards a higher obligatoriness in State order" (p. 494). Following Jellinek and Troeltsch, Joas revises the discussion on the origins of Human Rights in a US-American born sensibility towards suffering and the role of religion, as well as its reverse interaction with Enlightenment theories in France. A crucial lesson is how moral universalism serves as mutual correction for religious or philosophical traditions, when they are faced with the experiences of unacceptable suffering. History also shows how concrete economic interests - such as those of Great Britain or France - impeded the advance of those rights. Haiti, its revolution and its present situation, are a brutal reminder of those failures.

[1] This notion is helpful to reasess the problem of colonialism under the criteria of universalism, and to consider the multiplicities of modernity from this vintage point, see H. Schelkshorn, Rethinking European Modernity. Reason, Power and Coloniality (Bloomsbury, 2023).

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Chapters 8 to 11 constitute a third block regarding the 20th Century. Experience - particularly that of violence and damaged human dignity - and the ideals born out of claims provoked by suffering, play a key role in Joas' understanding of the origin of values and their institutionalization. Until now, this structure was historically reconstructed in dialogue with the interpretations of Troeltsch and Weber. From this point on, the inquiry follows events after their deaths. These chapters are incisive historical examinations of the relationship between moral and political universalism following the birth of an transnational order based on Human Rights, born out of the catastrophic experience of totalitarianism (8), the Civil Rights movement in the US and the tensions within Christianity regarding racism (9), the religious impulse in anticolonial resistance in India (10), and Mao's attempt of a universalistic utopia while destroying religion (11).

Fascism presents inner political traits and expansive imperialist tendencies with a particular justification beyond historical or geographical dimensions: its sacralization of politics (and race). Chapter 9 shows how this sacralization differed from others due to its non-inclusive character. The legitimacy of violence not as a means but as an end and meaning-giver, the amoral interpretation of man and of war as the place of virtue, the notion of renewal at the expense of a violent attack on all "undesirable" social elements, are all ways to justify political expansion and their "leader". Following the collapse of this political expansion and confronted with the evidence of its atrocities, one reaction was the Declaration of Human Rights. But Joas also asserts how victorious powers limited many expansive attempts at moral universalism through Human Rights. Therefore, the text is not definitive, although it remains a fundamental reference for further claims.

In large areas of the "land of the free," racism and segregation were in force until the better part of the 20th Century. Chapter 10 reconstructs the Civil Rights Movement, particularly the figure of Martin Luther King, to show how discrimination presented tensions not only within Christianity, but also for the self-understanding of the movement itself, regarding the question whether it was a fight for moral universalism or of one particularism against another. Religions have contradictory effects and Christianity is no exception, yet the prophetic testimony and personal experience of Luther King meant not just a struggle against segregation but also a broader claim for justice (economic, social, political). The detailed reconstruction of the roles of pastors during this process and the theological support of their prophetic expressions, means a process of evolving experience, intelligent decisions (i.e. regarding non violent resistance) and an awareness of the conditions for the success of moral universalism, such as influence on public opinion, the constellation of exterior politics and inner self contradictions (like the fight against a racist regime while upholding racist policies at home), and the necessary transnational organization. Something analogous to anti-slavery movements from the late 17th Century onwards.

Chapter 10 explores the transformation of Gandhi's self-understanding and his struggle on the background of the religious, political, and social tensions within anticolonial movements in the Indian subcontinent. Every colonization disguised and justified its economic interests under a civilizing mission. It presupposed a self-perceived moral superiority and the impulse to expand and uphold it with violence. Yet in India, there were previous tensions: segregation within the caste system in Hinduism and conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. Joas underlines these aspects because the relationship between morals and religion runs the risk of postulating their synonymy, while their difference is essential for moral universalism. Religions may contribute to consolidate morals; but if morality is seen as dependent on religion, it would not explain the rise of moral universalism beyond religion nor its upholding in secular milieus. Joas also draws upon "idiovariation" to understand how someone

may transform the interpretation of their religion, when traditional views go against moral universalism. This happened to Gandhi: the expansion of traditional religious concepts and the recreation of other notions along with concrete experiences, allowed him a renewed understanding of his mission, his religion and his political struggle. It also provided him with the practical understanding of the conditions for a successful struggle regarding practical consequences of universality, and the mediating role of self-risk, i.e., the acceptance of personal costs.

Whereas the former chapters deal with the difficulties and tensions between moral universalism and religion, chapter 11 analyzes the radical perspective of moral universalism against religion. Starting with the Marxist critique of religion, Joas focuses upon Mao's evolution regarding religion in general and Confucianism in particular. While the revolutionary Chinese Constitution granted religious freedom, Mao provoqued an increase in conflict. Weber had already noticed some traits of Chinese popular religion about the understanding of the universe together with a mixture of traditions. But while Weber interpreted this amalgamation as an instrument of State support, Joas sees there a potential for moral universalism without Western confessionalization. Even more, he criticizes Weber, because only if we notice this capability we may understand the ambiguity of State behavior even today; for example, it destroys Confucian temples but names State institutions after him. Thus, when Mao's successive attacks on religion and his own personal sacralization created a new cult to the leader and violence was unleashed against religion, there emerged a form of secular universalism without sacralization (except that of the leader). There, the human person lost every protection. Despite this process, Chinese tradition preserved the capability of recognizing every person's sacrality, something impossible for Maoism with its characteristic rejection of human global dignity and concrete human ties.

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Chapter (12) deals with Islam and its universalism. It is an important chapter due to its contribution to a better understanding of the history of Islam that overcomes some present assumptions, not supported by historical and scientific evidence. This chapter works somehow separately, since it draws from classical sources and history, but attending to current dilemmas. It also shows how any moral universalist doctrine may run into trouble and disregard some of its main ethical achievements when facing conflictive contexts, clashing with other formations that struggle for hegemony or restrictive self-sacralization. Many assumptions regarding Islam spring from Hegel's interpretation and its effects. Hegel does not see Islam as a moral universalism, because its advance of oriental particularism towards universalism allows neither a liberation of concrete divine determination nor the liberation of the subjectivity of believers. Thus, the effects of desert experience remain in its understanding of the divine and the imposition of this belief. Troeltsch and Weber are influenced by these views but operate a change. Weber sees affinities between Islam and protestant asceticism - regarding the conditions of modern capitalism in a religiously influenced context -, yet he also considers its militarism as characteristic, as opposed to other Western alternatives. Joas criticizes Weber's forcing of Islamic multiplicity into a direct sequence and his reduction of its complexity to one phase or localized characteristic (i.e., war religion). On his side, Troeltsch also shares some assumptions, like predestination and the problem of the independence of religion. Joas points at Troeltsch's assertion of church organization as a characteristic trait of religious universality. For Joas, Weber's critique of the incapability of Islam to develop capitalism and Troeltsch's critique of the failure in creating an organized church, are less a failure in moral universalism - since traits in Islam like rationality, individual piety and universal brotherhood prove the opposite - than a pervasive comprehension mostly born out of centuries of mutual threat.

This chapter is significant for two reasons. It identi-

fies the role of anciently rooted prejudice against Islam, especially when attending its potential for moral universalism, and it shows the relevance of a committed scientific and philosophical approach when dealing with evident injustice and the possibility for addressing it.

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The conclusion of the book begins with a crucial question: What is the criterion to judge Western ideals, or any ideal for that matter (p. 853). Joas offers moral universalism as an answer often missing when pragmatic approaches mingle with utilitarian criteria. That is, his approach presents a perspective beyond quantification or success. In other words, it evaluates meliorism with a criterion that, at the same time, has historical origins and therefore may be corrected, while simultaneously providing an argument for normative validity.

The conclusion has two purposes. The first is to clarify some aspects of the notion of moral universalism that had not received proper treatment in the initial chapters. Is it possible to integrate our particular duties into moral universalism? Should moral universalism include other sentient beings? Both issues are highly disputed in contemporary philosophy. Joas does not delve into philosophical analyses but seems to arrive at a middle ground between the extreme positions. In fact, the answer to the first question is that moral universalism can and must make room for particular obligations. A universalistic position can recognize the particular loyalties to families, communities, nations, etc., without ending in a particularistic stance.

Universalism grows out of a desire to transcend particularism, but without completely detaching the individuals or groups driven by this desire from their embeddedness in particular social obligations. On the contrary, as moral universalists, we are obliged to maintain and strengthen the "moral ecology" of particular social structures, and we must resist the temptation to adopt an abstract universalism that ignores the immediate context (p. 882)

The main argument that Joas advances for his position is a pragmatic one. "Abstract" universalism is impracticable.

In the same manner, Joas defends the "golden mean" when answering the question about the moral status of animals: yes, they must be morally considered, but they will not receive equal treatment as human beings, for animals cannot be considered moral agents. Of course, one could ask whether we were allowed to treat fetuses, babies, and patients with dementia as animals, since they cannot easily be considered moral agents in the usual sense. Again, the point seems to be that Joas seeks a common ground between extreme positions.

The second and closing part of the conclusion takes up again the central hypothesis of the book, the relationship between the rise of moral universalism and of political universalism. What is the future of moral universalism? The answer to this question depends, of course, on many aspects that nobody can foresee. Nevertheless, nuclear weapons pose a serious threat to humanity. But even without considering the possibility of a nuclear war, it could be possible that one of the current superpowers will end up conquering the whole globe. This perspective of a global empire is not reassuring for moral universalism. According to Joas, the best chances for the further development of moral universalism arise from the interplay among multiple, balancing state powers. But even if this more optimistic scenario becomes true, Joas concludes that it is no guarantee for the final consolidation of moral universalism.

Religious institutions that embody moral universalism; a global organization that commits all States to respect the dignity of all human beings; social movements that also base their forms of struggle on this respect for the dignity of their opponents — all of this is necessary and helpful. But the situation of moral universalism will always remain precarious everywhere. (p. 899)

4. Closing reflections

Such consciousness of precariousness serves as a starting point for a general reflection about *Universalismus*. In a moment of world history where we witness the crisis of institutions and regulations which provided for a - certainly insufficient - international order with some recognition of moral universalism, and where biases of "self-sacralization" are growing, this book means not only an academic contribution for scholarly discussions. It also provides historical and sociological examples, arguments, and feasibility criteria in the face of the pressing need for an encompassing moral recognition for humans and for other mutually dependent and entwined beings of our vulnerable planet.

Several valuable teachings stem from *Universalismus.* The key idea is that no moral ideals are created *in abstracto*, that is, without a particular sociopolitical dimension. Experience is required not only as a necessary condition to set the question, that is, to create the sensitivity and propose ways to recover, evaluate or transform moral notions from traditions - or new creations - to answer a concrete challenge; it is also necessary to evaluate results and deficits. Experience and possible failures are also required to keep every construction from self-absolutization or, in Joas's terms, self-sacralization.

A second lesson is that we may identify potentials for moral universalism in different traditions (p. 770). It is not mere tolerance or recognition facing different cultural systems, but an active impulse and interaction. A question immediately arises when considering what authors with a different perspective, such as Habermas, have also argued for decades regarding the value of rational cores in religious or worldviews narratives, that can be utilized by means of rational discussion. Without eliminating this aspect, Joas proposes a more comprehensive understanding of experience and the possibilities that arise from it. Grounded upon his main sources—that go from Schleiermacher to pragmatism and phenomenology—his proposal does not eliminate the need for a rational evaluation of experiences and their effects, but considers them far broader, more inclusive, and previous to rational or doctrinal arguments. It also includes the experience of sensibility, the formation of values, the communal arousal of moral sentiments, etc.

A further contribution of the book regards the practical concerns in the struggles for moral universalism. We see this objective not only in the research about the mutual conditioning of political and moral universalism, but also - attending to concrete endeavors such as the resistance against slavery from the 18th Century onwards, Gandhi's movement of independence and Martin Luther King's fight for civil rights - in its attention to concrete requisites. Thus, when Joas mentions situations such as the necessary international recognition of a moral-political struggle, the turn of public opinion and sensitivity, etc., he is not only describing but also implicitly providing practical guidance for interventions regarding moral universalism.

One last teaching to be underlined is how we learn from the interaction of experiences, doctrines and worldviews. An extreme case we find in the book is China. Already before the attempt at a secular antireligious utopia by Mao Zedong, and especially after the flexibilization towards religion, China had a non-confessionalized relationship to religions. In this sense, it followed - and radicalized - something present in other Far East regions: the enablement of people to take and integrate beneficial elements from different traditions. Joas sees how this plasticity allowed for learning processes that have enriched personal and community experience (p. 741).

While reading this book, it is important to keep in mind that several ideas now focused upon the relationship between political universalism and the universalist ethos of mankind precede this inquiry and were elaborated over decades by Joas. Only to name a few: human creativity regarding values in face of traumatic experiences; the relationship of encompassing values and religious

commitments regarding freedom; the independence of religious formations from State interests; the origin of Human Rights, etc., are all steppingstones of this process. They also open interesting communication channels with other philosophical approaches that may lead to shared conclusions starting from different points of departure.

The core hypothesis of the book opens a few interrogations. Central to them is the possibility of a universalistic moral perspective not grown out of, nor spread from, the confrontation of political and moral universalism. That is, a possible moral universalism free from the compromises of political universalism, that may grow without the biases of imperial power. Joas also admits this possibility, at least *ab initio*:

> Even if the thesis of the dependence of explicit moral universalism on the political universalism of empires is correct, then it does not necessarily follow that religions were not universalistic at their core before their confrontation with empires and without them. (p. 676)

This serves to ask if those universal values could spread and consolidate independently of the dangers and compromises demanded by their inclusion into political universalisms and expansive empires. In the paragraph before this last quote, Joas mentions the potentials of African community experience (analogously, we might suggest the heartfelt connection to earth in Latin American aboriginal religions, which consider themselves of universal value even if not traditionally qualified as *Weltreligionen* by scholars). If we attend to those universalist moral inputs not spread by means of their insertion in the culture and institutions of an empire, it is valid to extend the inquiry of *Universalismus* to those traditions and moral universalist experiences *not* mediated by the expansion of political universalist drives.

In a world again at war - yet this time without a clear justifying alibi of a morally universalist value - this book by Hans Joas not only reminds us as mankind of our history of "affirmative genealogy" and the experiences that spurred our better institutions. It also recalls their fragility and the need for awareness, sensibility and new creations.

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