

**DRAFT**

## INTRODUCTION

**W**e are suffering from a democratic deficit, the story goes. Our democracy has been systematically undermined, or perhaps it has not yet been truly realized, or perhaps it can never be *truly* realized. Our emancipation lies in its restoration, or its expansion, or its creation, or in striving toward its impossible ideal. We must escape this false democracy and achieve, or at least try to achieve, a true democracy. These are the key terms for a critique of contemporary society, we are told, and the way forward lies in increasingly refined and sophisticated forms of a qualitative and quantitative demand: *more democracy!*

All but ubiquitous, this story is arguably the dominant narrative of political resistance today, and yet conspicuously absent from its account is a sustained reflection on what is actually, at least from an etymological point of view, the most crucial aspect of democracy: the demos. We know the setting of the play: the democratic form and its iconography (popular sovereignty, equality, speech, debate, difference, *doxa*, plurality, and public space). But who are the characters? This is a most pressing question, not only because the entire relation between democracy and critical resistance hinges there but also because some of the characters we are confronted with today are so unsavory. If we were to take a sober look at the state of things, which would include looking at racist and xenophobic popular movements, mass protofascist demonstrations, and commonplace climate skepticism, then our chant of “more democracy!” might be effectively answered by the proverb about wishing carefully in case the wish comes true.

This book examines the limits of the figure of democracy as a critical category in contemporary political thought. I frame the analysis around a structural tension that pervades the work of several theorists who make use of democratic iconography in an axiomatic way, a tension I term “the elitist-populist ambivalence.” This theoretical tendency regards democracy as a categorical imperative—that is, as a foundational normative principle and an end in itself—but selectively focuses its attention on certain elements of the demos and categorically disqualifies others, thereby violating the parameters of a categorical imperative by specifying conditions. In other words, it appeals to formal categories but decides the political content in advance. It advocates democracy on its own terms: democracy in spite of the demos. But if democracy has critical purchase only under certain conditions, then our theoretical intervention must be based on these conditions rather than on the figure of democracy.

There are situations, to take the point a bit further, when what constitutes a problem is not a “democratic deficit” but, in fact, the opposite. In a time of pervasive popular ignorance and delusion, a reliance on democratic iconography obfuscates the potentially questionable character of the demos, rendering us incapable of comprehending or confronting dangerous and pathological political tendencies (e.g., climate skepticism, xenophobia). What is called for in this case is not a theory of “false democracy” but a theory of false demos. The question then would not be “how do we give the people a voice?” but “why do the people speak so wrongly?”

This book focuses on three main bodies of literature: the work of Hannah Arendt, the tradition of radical democracy (exemplified by Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Ernesto Laclau), and early Frankfurt School critical theory (Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse). Though Arendt betrays no particular commitment to the term “democracy,” she has been decisively influential for the democratic turn in Continental political theory. Her work is of interest to this project because, in my estimation, it represents the clearest and starkest expression of the democratic categorical imperative and its concomitant elitist-populist ambivalence. The discussion of Rancière, Mouffe, and Laclau highlights the extent to which these figures reproduce not only Arendt’s democratic motifs but also her constitutive exclusion (even if it is not the same exclusion). Albeit with divergent political commitments

and disparate theoretical concerns, both Arendt and radical democratic theory appeal to democracy in spite of the demos. Finally, Adorno and Marcuse provide an alternative to the categorical imperative of democracy. By critically confronting popular ignorance, irrationality, and delusion, and by understanding these phenomena as inextricably linked to the contradictions of a given social totality, the early Frankfurt School perspective displaces the normative force of the figure of democracy by a critique of the actually existing demos. This critique, I argue, allows us to steer a theoretical course between the perils of elitism and the equivocations of populism.

Contemporary political theory abounds with competing claims to offer the most “robust” account of democracy at both normative and descriptive registers.<sup>1</sup> The only thing taken for granted across the spectrum is that democracy as such is a political-theoretical baseline—“we’re all democrats now,” as Wendy Brown remarks ironically.<sup>2</sup> As I noted at the outset, theorists with a critical orientation focus their attention on the distance between the realities of prevailing nominal “democracies” and something (a structural change, a better procedure, an impossible ideal) that would constitute a “real” or “true” democratic politics.<sup>3</sup> My concern in this book is not with determining the right theory or model of democracy, nor with envisioning its as yet unrealized true form. Rather, I am interested in whether democracy (however understood) functions coherently as a critical category in our present political moment. The central question is: If we are interested in thinking the conditions for the possibility of a less antagonistic, oppressive, and self-destructive world, can the figure of democracy and its accompanying iconography function as a critical tool of analysis? By answering in the negative, I do not mean to suggest that critical theory become “antidemocratic,” which would simply trade one formalism for another. Still less do I mean to proscribe the use of the term in situations where it might be strategically effective. The figure of democracy has historically served an important function in various emancipatory movements that have produced positive results. The same could be said for the figure of nationalism, but this does not establish the critical-theoretical force of nationalist iconography for the present conjuncture.

Defining at the outset what I mean by “democracy” would be counterproductive, as the analysis will be guided in each case by how

the philosopher under discussion understands it. The word, as Robert Dahl notes, “is like an ancient kitchen midden packed with assorted leftovers from twenty-five hundred years of nearly continuous usage.”<sup>4</sup> I refer to “the figure of democracy” because “figure” captures the rhetorical function and kaleidoscopic connotations of the term while allowing variation in its theoretical content in a way that “idea” or “concept” does not; a figure is less than a concept but more than an empty signifier. My use of “iconography” is likewise meant as a placeholder to track all of the evocative markers or indicators of democracy without reducing it to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions in advance. The suggestive homage to religious reverence is intentional and will, I hope, be justified by the end of the discussion.

This book dwells in a particular domain of democratic theory. Different theoretical models—deliberative, participatory, liberal—make use of somewhat different iconography. Through the examples in chapter 1, we will see an elitist-populist ambivalence present in deliberative theorists, Marxists, liberal humanists, and others. But I focus on radical democratic theory because it represents the most explicit and sustained attempt to suture the figure of democracy to the projects of critique and resistance. It is my hope that, *mutatis mutandis*, the terms of the analysis will apply to other variations on the democratic theme as well, insofar as they posit a relationship between democracy and the emancipatory aims of critique.<sup>5</sup>

**DRAFT**

I

## THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE OF DEMOCRACY

“It is the task of the left,” writes Todd May, “to think and act upon democracy. In many ways, it has always been the task of the left to do so. . . . Conservatism by its nature seeks to resist change, or at best to allow change to happen slowly.” If this is true, then the problematic of this project becomes a kind of non sequitur: there is no need to explain why the formal terms of democratic iconography are inevitably instantiated with a particular content, because this content is synonymous with the democratic form. “Democracy is about everyone,” May continues, “not simply those in power. Democracy almost always is a challenge to tradition. That is why its creation is a task belonging to the left.”<sup>1</sup> Democracy, then, is a critical, emancipatory category by definition.

There are a few peculiarities in May’s train of thought, however. Notice that “change” is taken to mean “change for the better” or “change in a Left-progressive direction”; the changes demanded or accomplished by the Right—for example, the dismantling of social welfare programs, restrictions on immigration—apparently do not count. If one takes *these* changes to be good or necessary, then one could easily reverse May’s formulation and say that “the Left by its nature seeks to resist change.” The notion of “challenging tradition” is equated with Leftism, without further specification about *which* traditions and *what kind* of challenge, as if being oppositional or heterodox as such were enough to determine the content of one’s politics. There is a similar

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problem with his claim that “democracy is about everyone.” Is the Right not included in this “everyone”? If it is, then how is democracy both about *everyone* and about the Left? The category May opposes to “everyone” is “those in power.” Are we to believe that the Right covers the category of “those in power” while everyone without power is, by default, a member of the Left?

This passage and its peculiarities represent, in microcosmic form, the current of thought that I want to challenge in this book. The idea that there is some immediate relationship between democracy and a particular kind of politics, that more democracy necessarily translates into a less oppressive or regressive social world, has become a largely unquestioned presupposition in numerous quarters of critically oriented political theory. With this democratic turn, the figure of democracy has taken on a self-evidently emancipatory aura. At the same time, this emancipatory currency depends on the careful delimitation of the demos, a qualification of *which* “people” are to be given “power.” Implicitly or (in May’s case) explicitly, democracy is understood at once as a formal armature and as containing particular content within it.

This ambivalent moment is ubiquitous enough to show up in figures as otherwise distant from one another as Cornel West and Larry Diamond. In *Democracy Matters*, West states that “the basis of democratic leadership is ordinary citizens’ desire to take their country back from the hands of corrupted plutocratic and imperial elites.”<sup>2</sup> He also, however, explicitly connects “the deterioration of democratic powers” to the rise of “the Christian Right.”<sup>3</sup> Members of the latter apparently do not qualify as “ordinary citizens,” and *their* “desire to take their country back” is not democratic enough. Diamond’s *In Search of Democracy* doubles down on this collapsing of form and content:

Imagine a world in which all states were democracies. . . . A world of universal democracy would not be a perfect world. Many democracies would no doubt still be illiberal, but the framework of democracy and an open society would generate public pressure to gradually move them in a more liberal direction. . . . It would be a world of dramatically fewer human rights abuses, greater personal and press freedom, less corruption, less violent conflict, and quite conceivably a world that had put an end to interstate war. It would be a world that no longer sponsored or tolerated mass killings like the Rwandan

genocide. . . . It would be a world without famine. . . . It would be a more just world.<sup>4</sup>

If only Rwanda had more of the “qualities of democracy”—according to Diamond: universal suffrage, elections, multiple parties, access to information, public accountability, and “citizen satisfaction”<sup>5</sup>—the mass slaughter of the Tutsis by the Hutus might have been avoided. Setting aside the gross oversimplification involved in this claim, notice that it assumes a direct correlation between democratic “qualities” and particular results; this denies from the outset the possibility that elements of the demos, and even decisive elements, might still condone or participate in genocide, interstate war, and human rights abuses in spite of fair elections, government transparency, and “public pressure”—they might *be* the public, after all.

Theorists with avowedly Marxist commitments have also made the democratic turn, as exemplified by the opening question of Jerry Harris’s *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy*: “Can the power of democracy overcome the power of global capitalism?”<sup>6</sup> Along these lines, Ellen Meiksins Wood’s *Democracy against Capitalism* traces the historical lineage of the concept of democracy back to its etymological roots as “rule by the laboring class,” while Richard Wolff’s *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* argues for employee ownership and management of business enterprises. Also worth mentioning in this context (although she is not a Marxist) is Brown’s *Undoing the Demos*, which presents neoliberalism as a system bent on the destruction of democratic values and traditions.

Underpinning all of these analyses is the premise—illustrated by the cover of Harris’s book—that people are everywhere clamoring for less capitalism, neoliberalism, and the like, and that certain institutions or certain powerful individuals are thwarting this demand.<sup>7</sup> It then becomes a question of “the people” versus a small handful of elites, as if the people are already opposed to these systems and emancipation is just a matter of giving them a power they lack. This prevents us from considering the possibility that the demos is in some way complicit with the systems under critique and is thus part of the problem. Harris attacks the “market fundamentalism” of politicians such as Jeb Bush<sup>8</sup> but does not dwell on the fact that millions of people have voted for Bush (and many others like him). Wolff asserts that “worker self-

directed enterprises” would be more environmentally friendly<sup>9</sup> but does not entertain the prospect that the workers directing a given energy firm may not believe in climate change. In diametrically opposing neoliberalism and democracy, Brown obscures the fact that substantial elements of the demos (the Tea Party in the United States, for example) are in favor of and have even struggled for the neoliberal “stealth revolution.” And if, to take up Wood’s argument, the actually existing laboring class does not understand its oppression as a product of capitalism, then democracy versus capitalism is a false dichotomy insofar as increased power for this class would not, automatically, translate into anticapitalist politics. This is no mere logical point, as it indicates the terms by which capitalism is to be critiqued and the place of democracy in such an undertaking.

This ambivalence is also present in attempts to demarcate a conceptual boundary between democracy and “populism.” While some theorists (such as Mouffe and Laclau) regard these terms as essentially synonymous, others have sought to define populism as antagonistic to truly democratic institutions, procedures, or movements; still others, such as Panizza, regard populism as “neither the highest form of democracy nor its enemy, but a mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself, warts and all.”<sup>10</sup> In the most common of the proposals for a sharp division, democracy is understood as “open” and “limited,” that is, as recognizing that no single movement or form of politics could ever encompass “the people” in a final and definite way, whereas populism represents “closure” insofar as it imposes a fixed and monolithic vision of who the *real* people are. “Populists reject any limits on their claims to embody the will of the people,” Ochoa Espejo writes. “Liberal-democratic movements, by contrast . . . frame this appeal [to “the people”] in a way that guarantees pluralism and presents any particular cause as fallible, including their own.”<sup>11</sup> In a slightly different register, Mudde and Kaltwasser distinguish between “inclusionary” and “exclusionary” populism; the former wants to include those “people” that have been excluded, while the latter wants to exclude, in the name of the “people,” those who have been included too much.<sup>12</sup>

The problem with these distinctions is that they require an *interpretation* of their key categories (openness and closure, inclusion and exclusion), which is itself incompatible with a consistent application of these categories. Suppose a right-wing populist movement claimed that

secular, liberal multiculturalism represented a “closure” of democratic embodiment, enforcing coercive recognition of a particular set of universalist values, while *its* intervention represented a pluralistic affirmation of *different* cultures, *different* peoples, *different* races. A response to this claim would require a subsequent distinction between *real* openness and *false* openness, a distinction that would categorically decide which political interventions *really* conform to democratic values and which do not, thus enacting the same “closure” the original distinction was meant to criticize. With regard to Mudde and Kaltwasser’s terminology, this movement might likewise claim that *its* people have been “excluded” by the political correctness of globalized liberalism and that it is now only demanding their rightful “inclusion.” As we will discuss further in chapter 3, this is the actual rhetoric of many right-wing populist parties, and the distinctions made by Ochoa Espejo and Mudde and Kaltwasser cannot justify any negative appraisal without collapsing under the weight of their own formalism.

Distinctions like these function as ways of maintaining the normative value of democracy while refusing to acknowledge the potentially troubling results of democratic politics. Instead of recognizing the limits of democracy, we simply recategorize movements with offensive content as not *truly* democratic, as “populist” (or “exclusionary populist”) instead. Panizza’s approach falls in line with this tendency, too, as when he describes populism as “representing the ugly face of the people<sup>13</sup>—“ugly” according to what standard of political beauty? Why is this face “democratic” when it is attractive and “populist” when it is not? By drawing a distinction that relies on the difference between the Ancient Greek word for “people” and the Latin word for the same thing, these theorists surreptitiously reveal what is really at stake: some people and the political movements that coalesce around them are good, others are bad. But the impulse to base a normative political theory on “the rule of the people” is so strong that the latter group must be conjured away into another category altogether, one made up of people who want to rule but that somehow does not express the rule of the people. This is the equivocation involved in the elitist-populist ambivalence. It echoes a comment made by Adolphe Thiers in the middle of the nineteenth century: “It is the masses [*la multitude*], not the people [*le peuple*], that we want to exclude.”<sup>14</sup>

All of the figures mentioned so far take for granted that certain Left-progressive content is automatically implied by the term “democracy,” be it liberal humanist (Diamond, Ochoa Espejo) or socialist-communist (the Marxists). This project will focus on a more self-conscious justification for the democratic turn, one that not everyone mentioned so far would assent to but one that offers an argument for treating democracy as an end in itself.

### AUTONOMY AND INDETERMINACY

It is difficult to give a singular name to this argument, because its advocates employ widely varying vocabularies. It operates according to two basic, closely related hypotheses. First, it states that “the political” is “autonomous” and irreducible with regard to other categories like “the economic”; the former possesses its own structure, its own problems, and its own rewards.<sup>15</sup> Second, it understands the political as the realm of opinion and debate, of *doxai* in confrontation with one another, and not as a matter of truth, guided by reason, struggling to overcome illusions and establish the definitively right kind of society—a characterization that would lend the political the qualities of a science or a metaphysics and thus deprive it of its specificity.

A succinct and oft-cited expression of the first thesis can be found in Paul Ricœur’s 1957 essay “The Political Paradox,” where he posits “the relative autonomy of the political [le politique] compared to the socio-economic history of societies.”<sup>16</sup> If “the political” has a specific and autonomous logic, then there are specifically *political* goods and harms, and it is this specificity that endows the figure of democracy with its normative force. The second thesis is encapsulated in Claude Lefort’s frequently quoted phrase from a 1983 essay: “[D]emocracy is instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*.”<sup>17</sup> The basis of legitimate political power, his argument goes, has been unmasked as an “empty place,”<sup>18</sup> historically contingent and lacking any ultimate foundation that might be uncovered through rational inquiry or analysis. A democratic society is one that organizes itself around this indeterminacy, while totalitarianism attempts to deny the absence of an ultimate ground by appealing to some substantial foundational myth. Both of these moments entail a renunciation of the philosophical ambi-

tion to prescribe definitive or authoritative political content (both Ricœur and Lefort articulate this explicitly).<sup>19</sup> Because the political is autonomous and because its markers of certainty have dissolved, Plato's philosopher kings and Rousseau's general will appear at best as hopeless intellectual endeavors and at worst as oppressive totalitarian fantasies. Politics is about *doxa*, not about truth, and it is likewise not a mechanism for bringing about the "right" kind of society. The only political system—or axiological principle—adequate to this understanding of "the political" is democracy.

Through various iterations and formulations, these two theses inform a current of the democratic turn in political theory concerned with suturing the critical project of emancipation to the figure of democracy.<sup>20</sup> Insofar as its appeal to democratic iconography as a critical foundation draws on these two ontological postulates, I will refer to this tendency as *the categorical imperative of democracy*. The reference is, of course, to the Kantian moral system, and specifically to the way Kant characterizes the relationship between the categorical imperative and autonomy:

If the will seeks the law that is to determine it anywhere but in the fitness of its maxims for its own legislation of universal laws, and if it thus goes outside of itself and seeks this law in the character of any of its objects, then heteronomy always results. The will in that case does not give itself the law, the object does so because of its relation to the will. This relation . . . admits only of hypothetical imperatives: I ought to do something because I will something else. On the other hand, the moral, and hence categorical imperative says that I ought to act in this way or that way, even though I did not will something else.<sup>21</sup>

The categorical imperative is capable of prescribing a moral law because it is not determined by any external demand or circumstance but only by the internal structure of the will itself. The democratic categorical imperative likewise establishes its normative currency on the formal structure of "the political" over against any specific political content. Acknowledging the ontological priority of autonomy and the dissolution of certainty means granting democracy the status of an end in itself, not consigning it to merely instrumental or conditional value (i.e., rendering it a hypothetical imperative); determining the "correct" kind of poli-

tics by means of something other than its own nature—reducing it to economic interests or deciding it by appeal to facts—is to introduce something heteronomous into the political and thus distort its status as such.

At the same time, however, this formalism is supposed to coincide with an emancipatory, progressive political orientation, just as Kant's rarefied and abstract moral law, ostensibly cleansed of anything empirical, ends up conforming to the Christian mores of his time.<sup>22</sup> More or less surreptitiously, the heteronomy that was banished reasserts itself. The formal categories are infused with a content that does not essentially belong to them, and this unsanctioned admixture is what really lends the figure of democracy its critical purchase. This is accomplished by delimiting the demos, that is, by selectively focusing theoretical attention on instantiations of formal democratic iconography that coincide with a particular content and relegating other, undesirable content to a status beneath or opposed to the formal categories, or by simply ignoring it. This is what I mean by "democracy in spite of the demos." As we have already seen, this logic is present in the democratic turn at a broad level, but since my project focuses on a particular manifestation of this turn (the categorical imperative), I will concern myself with how it shows up in the context of this manifestation.

Let me cite a few examples of the tendency I have in mind. Over the course of several books, William Connolly has developed an account of "deep pluralism," which he sums up succinctly as a "bicameral orientation to political life." This orientation involves maintaining two sometimes conflicting perspectives: first, a commitment to one's own "faith, doctrine, creed, ideology, or philosophy," be it "Marxism . . . a branch of Christianity . . . orthodox Judaism, Kantianism, Rawlsianism, neoconservatism, or pragmatism," and second, an appreciation of "how [this creed] appears opaque and profoundly contestable to many who do not participate in it," together with a "struggle against the tendency to resent this very state of affairs."<sup>23</sup> Connolly's approach goes beyond advocating for formal legal protection of private beliefs, insisting that deep pluralism requires a "public ethos" and that its understanding of politics must be "multidimensional" (i.e., not limited to representative government).<sup>24</sup> Although he does not articulate it in exactly these terms, his account of bicameral pluralism draws on a conception of the political as autonomous and indeterminate in the ways described above. He also

understands this form of pluralism as essential to democracy and vice versa.<sup>25</sup>

Against this backdrop, Connolly occasionally remarks that the contemporary political situation has dimmed the prospects for a realization of this democratic aspiration. “The agenda of deep pluralism,” he writes, “is not in the cards ‘today’ because the right wing holds so many of those cards.”<sup>26</sup> Side by side with a leveling of content—Christianity, Marxism, and neoconservatism are all so many “creeds”—there is the suggestion that certain (“right wing”) political commitments are fundamentally inappropriate; content is exiled as irrelevant and then returns as decisively important. Ostensibly, the explanation for this is that right-wing politics is inherently antipluralist, and therefore violates the categorical imperative demanded by “bicameralism.” But with pluralism defined in such formal terms, there is no a priori reason why the Right should be denied admittance on the basis of its content. Connolly gives no account of how or why certain “creeds” would lend themselves more easily to bicameral political life than others; both liberal humanism and Christian conservatism could be pluralist (cognizant of and comfortable with the contestability of its creed) or antipluralist (dogmatic and closed to discussion). There is consequently no explanation of why one is necessarily more democratic than another. By equating Left-progressive politics with pluralism and excluding the Right, Connolly collapses form and content at the same time as he defends a strictly formal normative political theory.

Connolly might argue that the Right, once in power, tends to be antipluralist by universalizing its particular creed (free market fundamentalism, traditional Christian mores, etc.) in the form of legislation that marginalizes or oppresses other viewpoints. But from the perspective of those who subscribe to this creed, the secular liberal humanism of the other side does the same thing once in power; they could (and do) understand legalized abortion, for example, as an attack on their religious belief system, a coercive universalizing of secular values at the expense of others. If the Left held more cards, the Right would have equal cause to denounce the monochromatic political climate and accuse its opponents of stifling pluralism. By eliding this possibility, not recognizing that the Left seems as antipluralist to the Right as vice versa, Connolly performs the very failure of bicameralism that his theoretical intervention was meant to address.

We find a more detailed example of this ambivalence in Nancy Fraser's *Scales of Justice*. Her central thesis is that a political theory concerned with justice must combine the economic and cultural dimensions of "redistribution and recognition" with an attention to specifically *political* inequities and misrepresentations. Appealing to "the irreducible specificity of the political,"<sup>27</sup> she argues that a unique form of injustice occurs when certain actors are denied access to the process of "frame setting," that is, determining who can be counted as a political subject and what can be counted as a political issue—"the meta-discourses that determine the authoritative division of political space."<sup>28</sup> Disparities in access and representation occur not just at the level of particular policy decisions but also at the level of the "grammar" through which politics is made intelligible, at the level of social ontology. The persistence of the "Westphalian model," in which politics concerns only "citizens" and takes place strictly within and between "states," has led to a "democratic deficit" that is not appropriate to an increasingly globalized and complex world. It thus becomes necessary for a theory of justice to include "struggles for meta-political democracy,"<sup>29</sup> establishing avenues through which politically marginalized actors can express grievances of "misframing" and enact change at this level. The point is not to arrive at the final or "right" frame but to provide mechanisms by which frames can be contested and multiplied.

Both moments of the categorical imperative are present in Fraser's approach: the political has a specific logic, but its content is indeterminate and open to contestation. A normative political theory must therefore root itself in democracy. But notice that Fraser appeals simultaneously to the necessity of democratizing the process of frame setting and to a notion of "misframing." Will those who endorse the outmoded "Westphalian" model of politics be included in the democratic frame-setting process, even though we have decided in advance that their frame is inadequate? The response might be that this model is the dominant one, while democracy at the level of frame setting is meant to give voice to forms of oppression unintelligible within the prevailing system. The consequence of this, however, would be an indiscriminate legitimization of any novel "grammar" insofar as it is understood as novel by its advocates. I have already alluded to the Tea Party; one might well conceive this movement as the struggle for a previously unrecognized hyperlibertarian "frame" in which taxation and social wel-

fare programs are forms of oppression against “entrepreneurs.” The objection that such a social ontology is not truly novel does not go very far: for devotees; this “oppression” is sufficient to warrant a new movement and new vocabulary.

Of course, Fraser is not interested in endorsing all novel political grammars as such. “Social movements disclose new dimensions of justice,” she writes, “when they succeed in establishing as plausible claims that transgress the established grammar of normal justice, which will appear retrospectively to have obscured the disadvantage their members suffer.”<sup>30</sup> A new question forms: What counts as success and plausibility? By any quantifiable metric, the Tea Party movement has had success in shifting public discourse and policy in the United States (and by extension the world).<sup>31</sup> Fraser does not want to say that all political contestations are automatically legitimate, and so she combines the “multi-dimensional social ontology” informing the project with a “normative monism”: “As soon as we accept that injustices of misframing can exist in principle, we require some means of deciding when and where they exist in reality. Thus, a theory of justice for abnormal times requires a determinative normative principle for evaluating frames.”<sup>32</sup> She finds this monism in “the all-subjected principle,” which states that “all those who are subject to a given governance structure have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it.”<sup>33</sup> With this criterion, we could determine that the feminist movement’s appeal to “misframing” is legitimate and that the claims of the “men’s rights activists” are not.<sup>34</sup> This is because women *are* subjected to the governance structure of patriarchy, while men *are not* actually oppressed in any way by feminism, “political correctness,” and the like.

At this moment the argument becomes circular, as an account of who is subject to what “governance structure” will depend upon a particular “frame”—a given social ontology or “grammar”—and so the criterion for adjudicating between legitimate and illegitimate frames already assumes what it is meant to appraise. In other words, we can only apply the normative principle from within a given frame, and so it cannot function as a means of evaluating when a social movement has “established a plausible claim.” If one’s political grammar includes “the war on Christmas,”<sup>35</sup> to take another example, then this frame passes the test of “the all-subjected principle” insofar as, in this imaginary, devout Christians are subjected to a form of governance by secularism,

academic elites, or whatever. Normative monism cannot determine if this contestation represents a genuine injustice of misframing without reinstating the same “democratic deficit” that it sought to remedy. While the entire project hinges on a democratic multiplication of frames that rejects “appeals to authority,”<sup>36</sup> a particular frame is taken as a *fait accompli*. Again, the gulf between form and content cannot be bridged without sacrificing one or the other.

A final example: Oliver Marchart’s *Post-Foundational Political Thought* offers a self-conscious reflection on the problem I have been articulating, drawing explicitly on Ricœur and Lefort. He insists on the ontological (as opposed to merely ontic) consequences of the autonomy and indeterminacy of the political; the “post-foundational turn” does not only mean that the “ground” for any particular politics is undermined, but also and more significantly that the notion of a “final ground” itself has become untenable.<sup>37</sup> Political movements can and should still attempt to provide grounds for themselves, but always against the backdrop of this constitutive limit (what he calls a “quasi-transcendental”<sup>38</sup>), the impossibility of arriving at an uncontestable and exhaustive foundation. Drawing on Mouffe and Bonnie Honig, Marchart argues that traditional political philosophy is an attempt to “displace” politics itself by appealing to a fixed and final foundation.<sup>39</sup> The interesting moment for our purposes comes when he considers the implications of this ontological thesis for our ontic concerns:

If we take seriously the notion of a politico-ontological difference, then we should recognize that we will never be able to secure an ontological ground that would found or determine a particular ontic politics (emancipatory or not)—such a move would clearly be self-contradictory. And . . . we can easily imagine a conservative post-foundational skepticism which is not necessarily democratic or emancipatory. [*Notice the distancing of conservatism and democracy.*] So, if to derive a particular politics from a post-foundational stance would be a clear *non sequitur*, then it seems that the only political argument which can be made starting from the political difference is a *non sequitur* argument.<sup>40</sup>

To a certain extent, his line of thought here seems to mirror my own: a recognition of the autonomy and uncertainty of the political does not entail or correspond to any political content. He goes so far as to say—

*pace* Ricoeur and Lefort, Connolly and Fraser—that it does not even entail democracy. He explicitly criticizes the equation of “post-foundationalism” and Leftist/progressive political aims, referring to this false equivalence as “emancipatory apriorism.”<sup>41</sup>

Marchart then retreats from this conclusion, first by reattaching the postfoundational turn to the figure of democracy and then by bringing emancipation back into the fold:

[D]emocracy is to be defined as a regime that seeks, precisely, to *come to terms* with the ultimate failure of grounding rather than simply repressing or foreclosing it. . . . Claude Lefort’s argument as to the dissolution of the markers of certainty and as to the emptying of the place of power in democracy implies that democracy is the regime which comes closest to *accepting* the absence of an ultimate ground.

[T]he displacement of politics is an act that tries to conceal its own political nature, and thus its own contingency, historicity, conflictuality and ungroundable status. If, on the other hand, democracy and emancipation must be conceived of in a post-foundational way . . . then it is of vital importance for an emancipatory project to defend a post-foundational approach.<sup>42</sup>

Through this gesture, he sutures the categorical imperative of democracy and emancipatory politics from the other direction—claiming that emancipation necessarily entails “the specificity of the political” and “the dissolution of the markers of certainty,” rather than vice versa. Though the categorical imperative of democracy is no longer a sufficient condition for Left politics, it is still a necessary condition. In this case, content is not surreptitiously introduced into form, but form into content. Our critical question can likewise be reversed: Would it not be of equally vital importance for a conservative right-wing project that regarded itself as democratic to defend a postfoundational approach? If, as Marchart argues above, there is no necessary connection between a postfoundational understanding of the political and emancipatory politics, then there is also no necessary connection between the latter and democracy—which is defined by the extent to which it “comes to terms” with its indeterminate situation. To say that an emancipatory project demands a postfoundational approach is another non sequitur,

as this approach is demanded by *any* project that does not “conceal its own political nature,” regardless of its content. In foregrounding the relationship between postfoundationalism and Left-progressive political content, minimizing the potential relationship between the former and any other project, Marchart rehearses the categorical imperative of democracy in spite of his critique of “emancipatory apriorism.”

These examples are only sketches. The next two chapters of this book attempt to trace in detail the ambivalent structure of the democratic categorical imperative, first in Arendt and then in the “radical democracy” of Rancière, Mouffe, and Laclau. Beginning with Arendt may seem counterintuitive, as she does not advocate a Left-progressive political project in any unambiguous way. Her work is of central importance for this discussion not only because of its strong influence on the Left’s democratic turn but also because it lays bare the elitist-populist ambivalence at work in the categorical imperative. She develops a political ontology anchored in democratic iconography—conforming to the two theses articulated by Ricœur and Lefort above—but at the same time excludes much of the demos from the status of “the political.” My argument in the third chapter is that Rancière, Mouffe, and Laclau repeat this basic Arendtian maneuver, albeit with a different object of exclusion. In their hands, this democratically oriented political ontology is meant to coincide with a critical, emancipatory political project—but this coincidence is accomplished by, as it were, staying faithful to Arendt and disqualifying parts of the demos from consideration.

In pointing to an elitist-populist ambivalence, I do not have in mind the “paradox in the theory of democracy” as described by Richard Wollheim and others. In this account, there is a potential contradiction between one’s desire for a certain outcome and the desire that this outcome be decided democratically.<sup>43</sup> If I support democracy and also support policy *x*, and if policy *x* is decided against by the democratic process, then I both support and do not support policy *x*. Theorists in the critical milieu, however, do not typically understand democracy as proclaiming, “Whatever policy the majority supports should be enacted,” nor are they content to combine this principle with liberal-constitutional safeguards to protect against “the tyranny of the majority” or with “proceduralist” caveats that insist on a fair and open deliberation process. If democracy is to be critical, the argument goes, it must have a more fundamental, deeper, or (as we will explore in chapter 3)

more “radical” meaning than just “majority rule.” The ambivalence comes when this democratic depth is taken, without justification, to coincide with particular political projects and to exclude others a priori. The problem does resemble Wollheim’s inasmuch as it relates to the tension between form and content. Here, however, it is not a matter of two potentially conflicting commitments (a commitment to democracy and a commitment to certain outcomes) but the supposition that these commitments are actually identical.<sup>44</sup>

### DOXA OR DELUSION?

The categorical imperative of democracy and its elitist-populist ambivalence would be an innocuous theoretical oversight if the object of its exclusion were only a negligible extremity. If the examples we consider (France’s *Front national*, men’s rights activism, climate denial) were only liminal or speculative cases, my critique would likewise remain at an abstract, ahistorical level, content to point out the surreptitious and ambivalent introduction of content into the nominally formal iconography of democracy. The Left democratic turn carries a more serious danger, however, when its “other”—the part of the demos that it refuses to esteem as democratic—attains a dominant or decisive position in actually existing politics. When ignorance, right-wing extremism, and delusion solidify into active and successful political movements, the theory that maintains the figure of democracy as a critical foundation is forced to make one of two choices: either grant these phenomena an emancipatory or progressive status or ignore them altogether. Except in occasional and cautionary moments, typically accompanied by an unjustified disqualification (as we have already seen and will see again throughout chapter 3), the democratic turn has opted for the second option. At best, it characterizes pernicious political tendencies as the responsibility of a small handful of elite powers exerting their will over and against the will of the people (e.g., Harris, as discussed above). The possibility that “the people” also will these pernicious tendencies is thus denied from the outset. By its very structure, the categorical imperative of democracy prevents us from acknowledging the *popularity* of regressive or pathological political positions, thereby also preventing us from critically analyzing or confronting them. West, for example, writes:

As I've traveled across this country giving speeches and attending gatherings for the past thirty years, I've always been impressed by the intelligence, imagination, creativity, and humor of the American people, then found myself wondering how we end up with such mediocre and milquetoast leaders in public office. It's as if the best and brightest citizens boycott elected public office.<sup>45</sup>

This becomes less mysterious if we admit the unpleasant reality that drastically more people in this country attend sermons by evangelical preachers than lectures by public intellectuals. The real danger of the democratic turn does not lie in any logical incoherence but in its failure to come to terms with this disturbing fact about the present political conjuncture.

The “other” of the democratic turn, in other words, is not a thought experiment. Around 50 percent of the US population remains skeptical of the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change, and many do not believe that the climate is changing at all.<sup>46</sup> Elected officials like Senator James Inhofe—who brought a snowball to the floor of the Senate to discredit climate science, authored a book on the subject called *The Greatest Hoax*, and served as chair of the Committee on Environment and Public Works—continue to command decisive constituent support.<sup>47</sup> Around a third of this population also disbelieves that human beings have evolved to their present state, and 29 percent think that former president Obama is a Muslim.<sup>48</sup> In several states, school textbooks are rewritten to expunge the history of American racism—one actually referring to slaves as “workers.”<sup>49</sup> On the public stage of political discourse, we can hear major politicians claim that the United States has never supported dictatorships.<sup>50</sup> During one of the 2016 primary debates, former Senator Rick Santorum opined that “Islam is not just a religion. Islam is Sharia Law. It is also a civil government. It is also a form of government. The idea that that is protected under the First Amendment is wrong. There will have to be a line drawn.” The large audience then applauded.<sup>51</sup> These widespread and egregious misrepresentations—by no means limited to the United States and by no means exhausted by this list—are not mere harmless mistaken beliefs; at our present historical moment, they are assuming a position of momentous political significance. Shortly after the US presidential election, Oxford English Dictionaries named “post-Truth” the word of 2016,<sup>52</sup> and a top advisor in the new administration made

headlines when she referred to “alternative facts.”<sup>53</sup> Facing all of this, one is tempted to invoke Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and declare that “a new political science is needed for a totally new world.”<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the increasing visibility of this phenomenon should not lead us to think that it is new. What we are experiencing now is only a particularly stark expression of a politics of delusion that long predates the 2016 election and that made this historic moment possible.

When the democratic turn appeals to “the people” (which it does in various sophisticated ways), it does not mean the people who applauded Senator Santorum’s “Islam is Sharia Law” comment. When it valorizes “new social movements,” it does not mean the Tea Party or “men’s rights activism.”<sup>55</sup> When it ontologizes *doxa* as the essence of the political, it does not have in mind the *doxa* that anthropogenic climate change is the greatest hoax. But are these people not also people, these movements not also movements, these *doxai* not also *doxai*?

This line of thought may invite an objection from democratic theorists of a deliberative persuasion. They might argue that democracy can only fully function, and thus maintain its normative force, if the democratic citizenry is “informed.” What democracy holds in esteem is not “raw public opinion,” to use James Fishkin’s terminology, but the voice of the people “after it has been tested by the consideration of competing arguments and information conscientiously offered by others who hold contrasting views.”<sup>56</sup> Or, following Joshua Cohen’s formulation, we might say that a commitment to democracy requires a recognition of “reasonable pluralism” rather than an indiscriminate legitimization of all values that any element of the demos might hold. A value is “reasonable,” according to Cohen, “just in case its adherents are stably disposed to affirm it as they acquire new information and subject it to critical reflection.”<sup>57</sup> Ostensibly, then, climate skeptics and xenophobic nationalists would be excluded from the normative winners’ circle because their positions, according to the intellectually demanding conceptions of democracy established here, are not “informed” or “reasonable” and thus not yet fully democratic.<sup>58</sup>

If we take this objection at its word, we arrive at the bizarre conclusion that the demos may be thoroughly undemocratic, and that democratic values may bear absolutely no relation to “the people” as they are presently constituted—an oxymoronic result expressed by the title of Yascha Mounk’s *The People vs. Democracy*. We should ask, in this case,

why the term “democracy” is maintained even if its form is entirely divorced from the empirical demos. This question is especially pertinent insofar as the “informed opinion”/“reasonable value” stipulations posit a divide between the current “voice of the people” and something that would constitute its *true* voice, raising the further question of how this divide could be bridged while respecting democratic principles.<sup>59</sup> Unless the criterion for establishing what counts as an “informed opinion” or a “reasonable value” is also arrived at through the democratic process, in which case the proviso becomes meaningless, the stipulation that the demos be of a certain rational caliber shifts the normative force away from democracy and toward rationality or reasonableness, but still identifies the former with the latter. The peculiarity of this Rousseauian conclusion—that the people must be *shown* how to properly exercise their own will—is expressed succinctly by Carl Schmitt: “The consequence of this educational theory is a dictatorship that suspends democracy in the name of a true democracy that is still to be created. . . . [O]nly political power, which should come from the people’s will, can form the people’s will in the first place.”<sup>60</sup>

The ominous implications of Schmitt’s argument aside, the reasonable/informed caveat has devastating consequences for a theory that regards democracy as an end in itself. If we are confident that proper deliberation will yield results that point away from positions like climate skepticism and xenophobia, then we have decided the correct political result in advance of the democratic process. We are, in effect, identifying democracy with the right politics and then dismissing the wrong politics on the grounds that it is undemocratic, no matter how much popular support it commands. If a commitment to democracy means that we want the people to have power *provided that* the people hold certain values and believe certain things—which may not coincide with what they actually believe and value—then everyone is a democrat, and our differences come down to differences of content. Christian absolutists could profess a faith in democracy provided that everyone is a Christian. Commitments to democracy with provisos about “informed” or “reasonable” views—where “informed” is taken to mean “believes in climate change” and “reasonable” to mean “has a critical perspective on the history of racial oppression”—accomplish the same thing. Liberal constitutionalism fares no better in maintaining the normative specificity of democracy, as the power of the people can always be checked by

an appeal to the protection of rights, the understanding of which is not itself established democratically. Even a monarchist could support democracy, provided that the demos always defers to the monarch, and this is why Schmitt claims that “dictatorship is not antithetical to democracy.”<sup>61</sup> These are so many forms of democracy in spite of the demos. As soon as we assume that certain results will follow from democratization, and justify democracy on that basis, the critical weight is placed on the results rather than the democratization. If, on the other hand, we are *not* confident that deliberation will point away from climate skepticism and xenophobia, and regard the success or failure of democracy strictly on the basis of its procedure,<sup>62</sup> then we must ask ourselves if a commitment to democracy is worth these potentially troubling outcomes.

The categorical imperative of democracy rejects the notion that there is some definitively correct political result external to its democratic iconography, rightly seeing that this would void the normative specificity of democracy; its theorists likewise distance themselves from majoritarian understandings of democracy, and so the problem of “bad majorities” is something of a nonstarter. Yet the impulse to disqualify certain political movements as undemocratic on the basis of their content remains intact, as we have already seen and will see again in chapter 3. But the right-wing demos, unfortunately for the democratic turn, is still the demos. Climate skepticism and xenophobia are still parts of its voice, its potential *kratos*. I am not suggesting that critical political theory should begin taking these positions seriously in that sense that one takes well-given advice seriously; rather, my claim is that we should take these phenomena seriously in the sense that one takes an eminent danger seriously. The categorical imperative of democracy prevents us from doing the latter and, if it were consistently maintained—which it rarely if ever is—would demand that we do the former. It wants it both ways: to avoid conferring legitimacy on these pathological and far-Right views and to avoid a critical analysis of them that might drift into “anti-democratic” territory. Given the increasingly evident dangers harbored by the politics of delusion, we can no longer remain in abeyance here; we are forced to make a choice.

The last two chapters of this book explore what form this choice might take. Chapter 4 engages with Adorno and Marcuse, focusing on the former’s “Opinion Delusion Society” and the latter’s “Repressive

Tolerance.” In these pieces and elsewhere, they develop an account of pathological political “opinion” as an expression of antagonistic, contradictory social relations. This culminates in what I will call a theory of “socially necessarily delusion,” otherwise called “ideology.” I argue that our present political conjuncture is better theoretically understood and critically confronted by a theory of social delusion than by the logic of democracy as a categorical imperative. The democratic ethos of the Left, as I hope to have indicated already and to explore more deeply in chapter 3, is fraught with a tension between its political content (whereby it excludes certain perspectives as inadmissible in some way) and its formal normative categories (which preclude the possibility of such exclusion). The theory of ideology developed by Adorno and Marcuse allows us to go beyond this elitist-populist ambivalence by confronting the normative force of the figure of democracy with a critical appraisal of the actually existing demos. Rather than providing and defending a formal concept of “the political” while surreptitiously or unjustifiably determining its content, they orient their analysis at the level of the latter.

The final chapter responds to one of the criticisms of ideology critique that has led to its perceived obsolescence in recent years: the charge of “elitism.” Ideology critique, its opponents suggest, presupposes a fundamentally antidemocratic division between intellectual knowledge and mass culture, a division that preserves the power of an elite intelligentsia by making it the guardian of a truth inaccessible to the multitude. To address this concern, I will provide a brief history of the argument for elitism—which I call “the incompetence principle”—that has been part of Western political philosophy since Plato. I will then distinguish this argument from the approach of the early Frankfurt School. For the incompetence principle, the prevailing ignorance and irrationality of the demos reveals an essential characteristic of its nature; for Adorno and Marcuse, however, the phenomenon of “socially necessary delusion” reflects a contingent, historically specific situation that can and must be transformed through critical education and practice.

This distinction will allow me to respond to the charge of elitism. The democratic turn criticizes ideology critique as elitist, but this judgment depends on an equivocation between an essentialist claim about the abilities or prerogatives of a given class or group of people (the



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incompetence principle) and a diagnosis of the momentous political problem of mass delusion, which is not necessary and eternal but reflects a historically specific reality (Adorno and Marcuse). The latter, I argue, should not properly be called elitism. In fact, insofar as it insists on withholding altogether the title of “the political” from certain (right-wing) political movements, the elitist label belongs more appropriately to the categorical imperative of democracy than to ideology critique. Returning to the early Frankfurt School, we are in a position to avoid both the classist implications of the incompetence principle and the equivocations of the democratic turn, both elitism and populism.

