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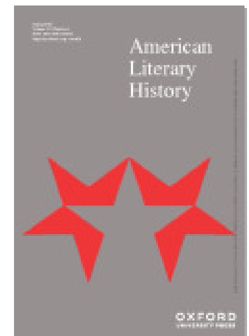

American Literary History, Volume 35, Number 1, Spring 2023, pp. 452-470 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

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Contours of Dread

*John Brenkman**

Degenerations of Democracy, Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor. Harvard University Press, 2022.

Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought, Adriana Cavarero, trans. by Matthew Gervase. Stanford University Press, 2021.

Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin: Freedom, Politics and Humanity, Kei Hiruta. Princeton University Press, 2021.

Donald Trump's 2016 election provoked an intense sense of crisis across a spectrum from traditional conservatives to liberals and leftists. *Angst* in the strong sense of dread has been continually amplified by Supreme Court decisions, assaults on decades of fair-minded supervision of elections by dedicated elected officials and countless civic-minded volunteers, the fading of global democracy promotion and rise of elected autocrats, waves of working-class voters turning to the far right, the weakening or outright demise of center-left parties along a path from Israel to Germany and France and on to Britain and the US, public opinion addled by separated echo chambers and conspiracy theories, and an upsurge of xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and racist agitation and policy.

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The authors of the books under review brush against the grain of foreboding in fresh reflections on traditions in Western political thought, putting concepts to the test under the stress of the current crisis and, conversely, mining those concepts for their power to grasp the crisis. Shunning prophetic exhortations on how democracies die, these political thinkers nevertheless take the fragility of democracy seriously. Americans take pride in the durability of our constitutional democracy, but in fact it has at least twice had to be saved and renewed through harrowing ordeals. The country's darkest decade, the 1850s, threatened an unlimited expansion of slavery, the institution that openly violated the nation's founding principle that "All men are created equal"; the Civil War saved the republic at terrible cost, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments launched democratic renewal, a renewal whose unraveling after Reconstruction culminated when the Supreme Court undid the Fourteenth Amendment and declared segregation

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American Literary History, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 452–470
https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajac245
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constitutional in *Plessy v. Ferguson*; not until the civil rights movement's court cases, protests, and civil disobedience in the 1950s and 1960s was the promise of the post–Civil War Amendments revived. A half century later the Alito-Thomas Supreme Court, buoyed by the late Justice Antonin Scalia's disdain for the Fourteenth Amendment, has eviscerated enforcement of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and, wittingly or not, inspired Trump supporters' nationwide effort to delegitimize elections and suppress voting. Such are the contours of dread.

Political theory's account of democracy often calls itself *democratic theory*, and the terms point to the ambidextrous, often ambiguous nature of the undertaking. They mix analysis and advocacy, facts and norms, diagnoses and aspirations, concepts and opinions, objectivity and partisanship. The political realm itself is doubly animated by cooperation and strife. *Democracy* eludes definition because it is an intrinsically contested term and is itself the site and the stake of the contestation. It is useful to think of three primary conceptions of democracy: the liberal, the civic, and the social-democratic, which combine and conflict in various way. Liberal-democratic and civic-democratic (or civic-republican) ideas and values stand in an agonistic relation to one another. The highest liberal-democratic values emphasize individuals' right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness and extol constraints on the state's power over the governed. The highest civic-democratic value is individuals' participation on a par with others in the very processes and institutions of governing.

I was excited to learn of the publication of Kei Hiruta's *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin: Freedom, Politics and Humanity* (2021) because I have long considered Arendt–Berlin to be one of the great missed dialogues in twentieth-century thought.[1] She held to the civic values of participation and citizenship as tenaciously as he held to the liberal values of individuality and self-direction. For her, the political realm creates the public space that guarantees freedom; for him, freedom occurs in the space opened by the suspension of the political realm and the state's power. The differences between Arendt and Berlin are often cast in the terms that Berlin himself introduced as the two concepts of liberty, according to which he prizes *freedom from* and Arendt *freedom to*, negative liberty and positive liberty.

Before he constructs their missed encounter, Hiruta's research unearths why it didn't happen. Berlin despised Arendt, and Arendt thought Berlin inconsequential! So much for one's romance of a spirited, illuminating exchange between two impassioned exponents of freedom, two European Jews who escaped the ravages of totalitarianism and anti-Semitism, two charismatic teachers, two

scintillating writers. They produced virtually no public acknowledgment of one another. Mentions in their private letters and notes, along with memoirs of mutual acquaintances, paint the picture of antipathy without engagement. The first document in Hiruta's account is the savage confidential appraisal that Berlin gave to Faber & Faber in 1958 when asked to evaluate *The Human Condition* for British publication rights: "I could recommend no publisher to buy the UK rights of this book"; "it will not sell, and it is no good"; "inadequate command of English"; "her comprehension [of what she's read] has too often been incomplete"; "obscurity"; "the author's characteristic weaknesses" (209–10). By 1972, he confided in a letter to Ursula Niebuhr, "my allergy vis-à-vis Miss Arendt is absolute and her mere presence in a room gives me gooseflesh" (45).

Their incomprehension of one another stems at least in part from the differing philosophical traditions in which they were schooled, European philosophy, phenomenology, and Martin Heidegger for Arendt and British empiricism and ordinary language philosophy for Berlin. Ironically, each of them rejected the designation of philosopher because of deep reservations about their own philosophical formation. Berlin approached political and social philosophy as a historian of ideas, which allowed him to engage a wide variety of thinkers by penetrating the existential drama of their thinking; his creative power of ventriloquizing thinkers in order better to grasp the circumstances in which their thought took shape is the very thing he cast aside when it came to Arendt's thought and existence. Arendt called herself a political theorist rather than political philosopher because of the totalitarian impulses of philosophers from Plato to Heidegger who applied the philosophical aim of systematic thought to the political realm; had she taken Berlin seriously, she would have recognized in his concept of negative liberty a meaningful, perhaps indispensable bulwark against totalitarianism. In short, neither Berlin nor Arendt had adequate grounds for repudiating the other's concept of freedom. That's the core of the missed dialogue.

Hiruta anchors his wide-ranging analysis of Arendt and Berlin in their differing concepts and convictions regarding freedom. It is a rich account. Regarding Berlin, he highlights that the concept of negative freedom is far more compelling and nuanced than Berlin's critics recognize, and certainly cannot be reduced the sort of libertarianism associated with Friedrich Hayek or the "possessive individualism" criticized by C. B. Macpherson. Rather, it is founded on Berlin's idea of value pluralism, according to which, as Hiruta puts it, "the number of ultimate and objective values that human beings pursue and live by is neither one nor infinite, but plural; and . . .

those values are not always harmonious or commensurable with each other" (62). As Berlin put it in "Two Concepts of Liberty," "the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition. This gives its value to freedom . . . as an end in itself, and not a temporary need" (169). The implication for political theory, then, is that a space must be secured where individuals can meaningfully exercise their value commitments. Berlin's concept of negative liberty is as nuanced as his concept of positive liberty is limited and polemical. He thought of totalitarianism as the implacable outcome of positive liberty. Ancient Stoicism introduces the idea of freedom as self-mastery, control over one's impulses and appetites, which then in Berlin's scheme is taken up by modern rationalism in which self-mastery distinguishes the rational from the irrational self. "To conceptualize liberty as self-mastery," as Hiruta encapsulates the argument, "entails the distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' ends of action, pursued by two corresponding selves, because the idea of one's being a master of *oneself* would otherwise be unintelligible" (59). For Berlin, this opened the path for totalitarian ideology and power to lay claim to the rational self and higher ends, subjecting empirical individuals to a mastery outside themselves. True freedom as subjugation. Such a narrowing of positive liberty clearly had a Cold War provenance, especially in Berlin's tracing of the intellectual genesis of totalitarianism to thinkers as diverse as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, and Karl Marx.[2]

This is not at all the meaning that *freedom to* has in Arendt's thought. Hiruta deftly touches on the three determining moments in Arendt's concept of freedom. First, "[t]o be free is to exercise an opportunity for political participation. . . . Freedom, for her, is 'a state of being manifest in action.' . . . Citizenship makes people equal for political purposes, abstracting various natural differences that they have as human beings" (66). Second, the space in which such participation can take place is a legally guaranteed public realm, and as in her well-known image of a table around which equals gather together and face each other but with a civilizing degree of distance from one another, this public realm enables the manifestation of the plurality of unique yet equal individuals. In Hiruta's words, "it is the politicised 'in-between,' or the 'space of appearance,' where men and women as citizens gather together, show the courage to speak and act in public, express the willingness to hear what others have to say, and form and exchange opinions about others' words and deeds" (67). Third, the freedom of political participation is the highest form of realizing a unique feature of the

human condition, which Arendt calls "natality" (in parallel with mortality); every new birth, every "newcomer," brings the possibility of something new being introduced into the world shared with others. It is the principle of initiatives, undertakings, inaugurations, innovations. In her scheme, such is the nature of *speech* and *action*, word and deed, as distinct from behavior and of freedom as distinct from necessity.

I don't want to belabor the points of connection within the vast differences between these thinkers' respective understandings of the human condition and the nature of freedom, except to note that both emphasize the individual and individuality. For Berlin, that emphasis lies in each person's ordeal of choosing which ideals and values to live by; for Arendt, it lies in the possibility of manifesting one's uniqueness within a field of words and deeds in relation to others. *Freedom from* and *freedom to*—two compelling and incompatible values, neither of which refutes the other.

2

Arendt makes a hard distinction between the political realm and the social, restricting the latter, as the etymological link of *economy* and *oikonomos* suggests, to household management on a large scale. It's an idea that can seem utterly anachronistic, as opposed, for example, to Max Weber's blunt assessment several decades earlier that "bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern mass democracy, in contrast to the democratic self-government of small homogeneous units" (244). Opposition or complementarity? In my view, Arendt's thought is not anachronistic, or even nostalgic; rather, she draws on the discontinuous heritage of inaugurations and practices of self-government as inspiring benchmarks of democratic participation, that is, of the civic facet of democracy. What then is the relation between the civic-democratic values by which she defines the political realm and the *social*-democratic values which are associated with progressive politics today? This question was on my mind as I read *Degenerations of Democracy* (2022), an ambitious assessment of the current state of democracy in which Charles Taylor and Craig Calhoun, writing separately and as co-authors, contribute chapters focused on US–European developments, and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar expands the view to India's democracy in relation to ancient and modern ideas of the *demos*.

The broad strokes of the three authors' project are established by Taylor at the outset. Today's democratic crisis is said to combine "three axes of degeneration," namely, "[d]ecline of citizen efficacy, waves of exclusion, and polarization" (45). The historical frame

employed in *Degenerations of Democracy* contrasts the postwar period 1945–1975 and the nearly half century since, what the French call *les trente glorieuses* succeeded by the era of what critics call neoliberalism. The social programs initiated by the New Deal in the 1930s and renewed by the Great Society in the 1960s brought economic growth and prosperity, a relative decline in inequality, expansive public education, a broadened safety net, and strong public- and private-sector unions. Western Europe likewise thrived, with even stronger workers' organizations and an even greater state provision for health, education, and retirement. In the vocabulary Calhoun employs, the US refined "organized capitalism" during those years and Europe honed social democracy. The unraveling began with the oil crisis of the mid-1970s, and then the Thatcher government and Reagan administration started down the neoliberal path.

Taylor organizes the narrative of democracy's degeneration on the theoretical principle that democracy is *telic*, that is, intrinsically oriented toward a goal, a kind of final cause in Aristotle's sense of *telos*, toward which it trends and from which it can deviate and degenerate. He acknowledges that the *telos* cannot be reached, but it nonetheless furnishes the standard for identifying the quasi-organic difference between progress and regression, the generation and degeneration of democracy. His conception of what the *telos* is turns out to be a fully achieved social democracy. The democratic gets defined by the social-democratic.

Equating democracy with the *social*-democratic reduces the *civic*- and emphatically devalues the *liberal*-democratic dimensions of democracy. Unlike Arendt's emphasis on individuals, in their uniqueness, participating on a par with others in the public realm and politics, Taylor gives civic life a more communitarian emphasis on solidarity and a commonality of values, beliefs, and interests. As regards the liberal-democratic dimension, with its emphasis on individual right and freedom, his classic essay "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty" (1979) disputes the very notion of liberty as *freedom from* interference or constraint by the state or others. His argumentation is overtly tendentious, for he starts by identifying how their respective opponents caricature *freedom to* and *freedom from* and then proceeds to say that the core of the *freedom from* caricature is exactly what its adherents believe! He casts negative liberty as license: "The advantage of the view that freedom is the absence of external obstacles is its simplicity. It allows us to say that freedom is being able to do what you want, where what you want is unproblematically understood as what the agent can identify as his desires" (215).

Berlin himself, uncaricatured, says no such thing. He does not hold to the psychology or the metaphysics implied by the fiction of

the individual as a self transparent to itself and doing what it wants. Rather, negative liberty is the kind of freedom the individual can exercise in an area cordoned off from the state's interference and protected, by the state, from others' interference. His concept does not specify what that cordoned-off area should include, nor whether and how particular individuals would exercise the freedom they enjoy. Negative liberty does not in fact require democracy, since an area of liberal right and freedom can exist, however limited, under monarchy or even dictatorship. At the same time, it is my view that democracy needs negative liberty even as the area of individual right and freedom is continually contested, and this liberal-democratic dimension remains in tension and often strife with the civic- and social-democratic dimensions. Rights are *individual* rights because they are the point at which state power fractures and creates a space in which individuals are free to exercise those rights. No one is compelled to exercise their negative liberty and, by the same token, exercising it can innovate and expand the forms of freedom.

The devaluing of the liberal conception of individual right combined with the communitarian interpretation of civic participation leads to some striking lapses of political judgment. Two examples: *The Satanic Verses* and *Roe v. Wade*. Taylor does not join other prominent intellectuals and writers in denouncing the Iranian *fatwa* calling for the murder of Salman Rushdie for blasphemy in his great novel *The Satanic Verses*. Nor does he dwell on the ramifications of a theocratic regime calling on the devout to commit murder within liberal societies abroad to punish an apostate. In "The Rushdie Controversy" (1989) he instead shifts the focus to India's banning of the novel and evokes a certain cultural relativism while privileging religious beliefs and sensibilities when it comes to the use of political power to censor literary expression and sanction, and even punish, offenses:

> For me, as a Canadian, it goes without saying that there should be full freedom of publication. We have to defend this right, particularly against death threats. So much is clear.
>
> That applies to us. But does it necessarily apply across the board? Can we say that the ground rules which apply here ought to apply everywhere? And in the international arena as well? (218)

Taylor calls Rushdie's letter to Rajiv Gandhi protesting his banning of the book "a little absurd, even surreal" in light of "the existence and threats of communal riots in India." The key question in relativizing the value of free expression lay for Taylor in the greater weight

a society of the faithful gives to the "harm" felt from the words expressed:

> Where blasphemy laws are widely accepted (which was almost everywhere until very recently), there is widespread agreement that religious sentiment is especially important; and that the interests which are restricted by the ban are not equally weighty. . . .
>
> But why give such a special status to religion? Because in societies where most people believe even where their faiths differ, it seems obvious that religion makes a uniquely powerful demand on its adherents, that it touches matters of transcendent importance. Even looking at it from a secular humanist point of view, the fact that someone's religion is the locus of his/her stand on the deepest and most fundamental issues—death, evil, the meaning of life—seems to justify its exceptional protection. This all still seems obvious outside of the West, but no longer so clear here. (218)

In the guise of being "sensitive to cultural differences" and not "endorsing the superiority of some culture over others" (220), this line of argumentation fails to affirm that the principle of free expression and the expectation that believers or nonbelievers tolerate criticism, even mockery and parody of their convictions are values worth affirming and cultivating beyond their Western context. Not least because in multiconfessional societies, sectarian violence cannot be overcome except by tolerance not by the suppression of offending voices. To put it differently, the reason the separation of church and state is necessary is precisely that politics and belief are inseparable.

Roe v. Wade makes a brief but telling appearance in *Degenerations of Democracy*. Taylor and Calhoun broach the analysis of contemporary populism through their notion of modern society's rhythm between socioeconomic disruption and inevitably belated political and governmental responses to the disruptions. "Populism needs to be understood as part of a larger struggle to forge an effective 'second movement' response to the 'first movement' disruption." Moreover, "populism is almost always part of a dialectical pair: elite self-dealing and populist response. Populism substitutes the demands and neediness of the self-styled *people* for more reflective and balanced pursuit of the *public* good" (italics original). To illustrate elites' "self-interested understanding of the public good" and tendency to disqualify rather than debate contrary views, Taylor and Calhoun point to the "technocratic policymaking" of liberal and left-liberal governments which "have relied heavily on the expertise of unelected officials." Furthermore, in the US "judges

have made more and more public policy," which has often "left citizens feeling they lack efficacy" (212).

And to illustrate this elite undemocratic judicial overreach, Taylor and Calhoun turn to *Roe v. Wade*:

> [D]ecisions are especially likely to be based on identifying and discriminating among absolute rights rather than mediating multiple rights or negotiating competing interests. For example, in *Roe v. Wade*, the US Supreme Court held that a right to privacy guaranteed access to abortion. It did not say "this is a hard choice because multiple rights and interests are involved, and we think on balance that this is the best decision." (322 n.8)

What Taylor and Calhoun criticize as "absolute rights" is precisely individual right, most basically, the individual's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and in this instance a woman's right—her negative liberty—to make decisions about her own reproductive life. What "multiple rights" do Taylor and Calhoun think were overlooked in *Roe v. Wade*? Is this some kind of thinly veiled appeal to fetal rights? And whose "competing interests" need to be negotiated with women's biological and political uniqueness? Some "religious communities" or "church authorities?"

The implication of some unspecified community interest or collective vantage point to be weighed against a woman's reproductive rights reveals the communo-authoritarian streak in Taylor's thought, as does the claimed sensitivity to cultural differences in his defense of religious communities' actions against blasphemy. He justifies his aversion to individual right and negative liberty via a critique of their supposed metaphysical appeal to the transparent self, absolutes, and "culture-independent criteria" (220). But the rights in question did not drop from the metaphysical ether, for they have been hard-earned in multifaceted struggles for the emancipation of women and those for writers' freedom, from Milton's *Aeropagitica* (1644) to twentieth-century controversies over *Ulysses* (1920), *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (1928), and *Lolita* (1955).

Now is a good moment to reaffirm and rejuvenate those struggles as the *Dobbs* decision has eviscerated *Roe v. Wade* and Salman Rushdie has suffered a nearly fatal knife attack while preparing to give an open-air lecture on safe havens for exiled writers.

3

Postulating social democracy as democracy's *telos* implies but does not deliver a cogent standard. Taylor's *telos* lays claim to the

"double meaning" of *demos* as at once the "whole population of the nation" and "the nonelites": "In the end, ideally, these two senses of the word would be fused: there would be a society ruled by the whole people, but without an elite that manages to put the rest in the shade and to operate to their disadvantage." Does that mean an ideal society would not have an elite? Or does it mean that the elite would never do anything to the disadvantage of others? Under what form of social life would it even be imaginable that decisions in the interest of a "whole people" would not disadvantage some? Taylor's answer compounds the question: "In other terms, democracy would be a truly equal society." Yet there is no vision of *truly equal* that even a relatively homogenous, let alone a modern heterogeneous polity would plausibly agree on. The last such vision that was militantly pursued was the classless society, and there is no hint that Taylor advocates that. A final clarification simply leaves all manner of questions, disputes, struggles, and aspirations unresolved: "Democracy is a telic concept, necessarily a matter of purposes and ideals, not merely conditions or causal relations. It is defined by standards that can never be met" (19). Unlike a regulative ideal, however, this *telos* cannot claim universal validity as a standard by which to measure actual states of affairs, nor does it ground a consensus since virtually any social relation or political outcome can be accused, from some concrete perspective or another within the social field, of not being *truly equal*. A *truly equal society* is a slogan not a concept.

By attributing deviations from the *telos* to antidemocratic tendencies, it is easy to overlook that they quite likely are unwanted outcomes *of* the democratic process. For example, the theme of the "decline of citizen efficacy" tends to cast the defection of "nonelites" from the Democratic Party as a symptom of the breakdown of class solidarity under the neoliberal impact of job-displacing technologies and globalization. There is certainly truth in this, but the New Deal bloc was already fracturing at the height of America's *trente glorieuses* in the late 1960s and early 70s. Workers, especially those with good, unionized jobs, began to turn away from the Democratic Party out of opposition to the student and antiwar movements, mandates for racially integrating schools and housing, and the feminist and gay movements. This revolt, largely by white workers dubbed hard hats during Nixon's presidency and Reagan Democrats in 1980, gradually melded with the Republicans' "Southern strategy" of using scarcely disguised racial appeals to law and order to peel away traditionally Democratic voters in the South. It also enlisted the politicizing of previously quiescent evangelicals, who abhorred homosexuality, opposed abortion rights, and adhered increasingly to the prosperity gospel. In short, not a decline in

citizen efficacy so much as a multipronged mobilization of a new coalition of diverse citizens actively participating in politics.

What then of the undeniable role of globalization and technology in displacing workers and fostering their estrangement from liberal and progressive perspectives? Here too a different emphasis is needed, first as regards the onset of globalization and then as regards policy responses to it. Taylor and Calhoun omit or underplay significant aspects of the end of *les trente glorieuses* and origins of globalization. In 1975, the US, Western Europe, and Great Britain accounted for more than 50% of global GDP, while constituting an ever-declining share of world population. China and India already accounted for 37% of the world's 4.1 billion people. Something had to give. Today, China and India account for 36% of the world's 7.8 billion people (2.8 billion), while the US, Europe, and the UK for just 10.6% (832 million). One need not share Thomas Friedman's original the-world-is-flat enthusiasm to recognize that US industry and unions, as well as the government, poorly foresaw the pressures that would see Mexican welders take jobs from Peoria's Caterpillar workers, Japan's steel and auto industries outpace Pittsburgh and Detroit, and China's low wages feed Americans' demand for consumer goods.

The West exported manufacturing jobs abroad and outsourced services and supplies; embraced technologies to reduce workforces; recentered the economy on consumption, lower-paying retail and service jobs, and higher-paying technical and managerial jobs that required college credentials; and established finance and global capital flows as a major economic motor. Calhoun's chapters provide a condensed but highly detailed and illuminating account of these social and economic developments. It is uncontestable that their effect has included dramatic increases in income inequality and concentrations of wealth in the US, even as it has helped millions across the globe rise above extreme poverty. Calhoun gives needed specificity to the ever more imprecise term *neoliberalism*. Even so, its usage as the umbrella term for today's economy and its political and ideological underpinnings hides a web of tendencies and countertendencies under a monolithic label.

A 2020 MIT report on the future of work emphasizes that the US, unlike other affluent Western countries, did little "to blunt, and in some cases magnified," the negative effect of globalization and technology on workers. It "has allowed traditional channels of worker voice to atrophy without fostering new institutions or buttressing existing ones. It has permitted the federal minimum wage to recede to near-irrelevance, lowering the floor under the labor market for low-paid workers. It has embraced a policy-driven expansion of free trade with the developing world, Mexico and China in

particular, yet failed to direct the gains toward redressing the employment losses and retraining needs of workers" (Autor et al. 5). On the left, "neoliberalism" often just means capitalism. Sweeping gestures decrying neoliberalism hide a scarcely tenable anticapitalist imaginary, and when specific changes, like those espoused by democratic socialists—free college, Medicare for all, and the Green New Deal—are advanced to address the economic and social ills of globalization, they have found little traction with the working-class, rural voters, or minorities, whether during Bernie Sanders' two presidential campaigns or since. Populist rhetoric did not spawn a populist movement. The dissociation only worsened when Trump's 2016 victory over Hillary Clinton intensified the left's populism-envy.

Gaonkar makes an essential point regarding the right-wing populism associated with Trump, Viktor Orbán, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Narendra Modi, and others. He calls such regimes "ugly democracies" (166), since the populist autocrat comes to power via elections and proceeds to "consolidate power by undermining democratic culture." Playing off of a remark made by Steve Bannon, "This is not an era of persuasion, it's an era of mobilization," Gaonkar stresses that it is a matter of both in the sense that "mobilization runs on a dual track: rhetoric *and* logistics. One must persuade as well as organize. On the persuasive track, ugly democrats mobilize by deploying polarizing, scapegoating, and exclusionary rhetoric and by disseminating misinformation (not just the 'Big Lie' but a daily tide of little lies)." Trump's permanent mobilization has lasted beyond his 2020 loss and even been intensified by it. By contrast, Democrats have faltered. As Gaonkar puts it, Barack Obama "effectively combined rhetoric and logistics . . . augmented by the organizational genius of a team that incorporated resources from newly emerging social media into the traditional arsenal of mobilization," but it all "disappeared with him. Neither Hillary Clinton nor anyone else inherited it" (167).

There is, however, also a darker side to this story. Obama's digital genius bar refined the use of voter profiles to target ever more precisely those voters most likely to support Obama and channeled effort and resources toward them. This was of a piece with another trend. As chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Rahm Emanuel, Obama's future chief of staff, had resisted the so-called 50-state strategy that Howard Dean advocated and attempted to implement as chair of the Democratic National Committee between 2005 and 2009. Emanuel's view eventually prevailed and set in motion Republicans' utter dominance of state legislatures and governorships, which in turn gave them inordinate power in carving out legislative and congressional districts after the 2010 and 2020 census. As Democrats increasingly addressed those most

likely to agree with their candidate and policies, their mobilizations significantly shifted the strategy of political persuasion and in effect evacuated and left large swaths of the public sphere and the electorate unaddressed and uncontested. Their strategy anticipated, and never effectively counteracted, the national trend away from pluralistic dialogue and toward self-amplifying monological discourse. As for the ugly democrats, as Gaonkar concludes, "Mobilization on a permanent footing has rendered their rhetoric respectable by repetition and acclimation" (168).

4

Various historical sites inspire theorists of democracy: the Athenian *polis*, the Italian city-states, the Republic of Geneva, the Mayflower Compact, New England town meetings, the Constitutional Convention and the ratification debates between Federalists and Anti-Federalist, the French Revolution, the pre-1917 soviets and Hungarian workers' councils. These primal scenes of democratic inauguration furnish rich, and richly contradictory, resources for ideals and values of self-government. The current turmoil in Western democracies associated with globalization, increasing economic inequality, and right-wing populism has given rise to a different focus with the renewed interest in protest movements, mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, and even riots as forms of participatory democracy.

Jacques Rancière, for whom representative democracy is inescapably oligarchical and the contemporary state an instrument of finance capitalism, provides a motto for participatory as against representative democracy in a 2020 interview, "The Crisis of Democracy": "When collective protest develops in the streets and occupied squares, it becomes not simply a demand for democracy addressed to the disputed power but an affirmation of democracy effectively implemented (*democracia real ya*)"—effectively implemented in the sense that the protest's organization and the protesters' experiences embody, and prefigure, participatory democracy.[3] Such assemblies do more than petition the government for a redress of grievances and are something other than a step toward seizing state power. They stand firmly athwart representative democracy. In Rancière's scheme of things, it is absurd to attribute the rise of today's right-wing "populist" leaders to the people: "It is as if Trump, [Matteo] Salvini, [Jair] Bolsonaro, [Jarosław] Kaczyński, Orbán and their like were the emanation of a suffering people in revolt against the elites. In fact, they are the direct expression of the economic oligarchy, the political class, conservative social forces

and authoritarian institutions (army, police, churches)." This leaves unanswered the question of the source and nature of their persuasiveness and successful mobilization of popular support.

The question of populism has revived discussions of the relation of representative democracy and the people in other ways as well. It is a problematic made all the thornier by the now-widely acknowledged notion in political theory that the people cannot manifest "itself" except symbolically, as when a movement, a demonstration, a crowd, a protest, claims to embody (that is, *represent*) the people. When such actions challenge and shake the constituted forms of power, it is argued, they amount to a "constituent moment" of popular contestation and democratic renewal.[4]

Dilip Gaonkar and Adriana Cavarero take up this problematic from two distinctive perspectives. Gaonkar contributes two chapters to *Degenerations of Democracy*, and there is much to be learned from his excavation of the complex, largely negative idea of the *demos* from Plato through the US Constitution. The provocation in his reflection comes in the argument that "direct action," including riots, counts as a manifestation of the people in its deepest meaning as the poor and those excluded from the halls and chambers of political decision-making. He rejects the valorization of the square over the street, that is, protests in the public square over action in the street, as the good and ill forms of participation in the polity. Cavarero probes the bearing of Arendt's conceptions of freedom and public happiness on today's political struggles and the experience of democratic political action. Her title, *Democrazia sorgiva*, is appropriately translated *Surging Democracy* (2021), but as I read the book her idea struck me as *democratic upsurges*, interruptions more than flows, contestation at the same time as inauguration.

Cavarero follows Arendt in considering the primal scene of Athenian democracy as first and foremost an actual space, the *agora*, "a horizontal plane for the interaction of equals" (3) and "a communal space of reciprocal appearance, where a plurality of unique beings act in concert" (4). In her preface to the English translation Cavarero points to two democratic upsurges that she herself experienced shortly after the book's Italian publication, the "Sardines" movement in Italy in 2019 and the widespread protests in the US and beyond after George Floyd's murder by police in Minneapolis. The Sardines movement filled public squares in Italian cities in response to the rise of Lega Nord leader and former interior minister Salvini and his movement's anti-immigrant campaign. Nonetheless, "the piazzas crowded with Sardines were not framed by the typical marks of protest and struggle, and even less by rage and insurgency, but rather by the thrilling emotion of participating in political demonstrations within a shared public space" (ix–x). In

Verona, where Cavarero joined a Black Lives Matter demonstration "held in an old piazza," the participants "took a knee and whispered for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, 'I can't breathe'" (xiv). For the protesters, the phrase was also associated with the innumerable migrants who drown trying to cross the Mediterranean. Salvini, as interior minister a few years before, had "closed Italy's ports to ships carrying rescued migrants" (xv).

Cavarero's public square experiences in the BLM and Sardines demonstrations confirmed key Arendtian themes she had explored in *Surging Democracy* regarding the

> emotion that wells up from interaction in a public space. There is a common language that accounts for the pathos, individual and collective, inherent in participation. As if surging democracy, on the emotional level, had its own specific lexicon. As if to thrill people in terms of shared joy and happiness were indeed the experience of participation, and consequently the plural "rediscovery" of the political, rather than the movement of struggle and rebellion. (36)

Arendt kept her focus on the conditions in which positive liberty can emerge, in her sense of the freedom that a shared public space occasions in which the mutual presence of a *plurality* of individuals allows each to speak and act on their own, in their own name, in their uniqueness. For her, the plurality afforded by such a space was the opposite of a unified multitude or mass. In *On Revolution*, her elevation of the American over the French Revolution to exemplify this understanding of freedom, publicness, plurality, and uniqueness did not enamor her to the 1960s New Left.

To reset the stakes in the present, consider French bread riots as understood by Arendt and Indian onion riots as understood by Gaonkar. The uprising of the poor in the French Revolution exemplified a multitude or mass as opposed to a plurality since, Arendt writes in *On Revolution*, "what urged them on was the quest for bread and the cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice. In so far as we all need bread, we are indeed all the same and may as well unite into one body." She links this to

> the French concept of *le peuple* [which] has carried, from its beginning, the connotation of a multiheaded monster, a mass that moves as one body and acts as though possessed by one will; and if this notion has spread to the four corners of the earth, it is because of its obvious plausibility under conditions of abject poverty. (94)

Gaonkar turns the table on this formulation. Today's India is a vibrant democracy quite unlike ancien régime France, yet abject poverty exists on a massive scale. How then to understand such direct actions as squatters' protests over housing evictions or riots over the price of onions? These acts arise from the *demos* and occur not in the *square* but in the *street*, that is,

> the most common and proximate "public space" where the people—especially the nonelites—live and work. . . . [These protests] erupt and disrupt unexpectedly, but often. They make no normative claims to incarnate the people as a whole. Instead, they actively pressure the government to remedy a variety of intolerable conditions. (205)

Gaonkar calls for a more expansive and nuanced understanding of direct action's varied "temporalities and tactics" (201). Action like the onion riot "tends to pursue immediate relief ahead of enduring solutions" and so "does not always align with electoral politics, legislative priorities, and judicial proceedings," in comparison to "the elongated duration of slum-dwellers" (201), whose resistance to evictions often eventuates in "creating local associations and movements and soliciting support from NGOs, political parties, and sympathetic civil servants" (202).

By contrast, movements and protests that occur in the *square* are often "national in focus and orientation," and Gaonkar gives a long list from the 1963 March on Washington to Tiananmen Square in 1989 to Tahir Square and Zuccotti Park in 2011 to Kyiv's Maidan in 2013, to which could be added the BLM and Sardines protests Cavarero foregrounds. In these the diversity of the participants "enacts a commonly held citizenship. . . . By bridging differences, however temporarily, the enactment incarnates *the people*, a feat that established authorities are unable to accomplish." It is a *performance* of "the sovereign unity of the people" (204). In the onion riot, extrapolating from Gaonkar, the people act but do not enact a symbolization of *the people*. They do, though, trouble that symbolization. Their very participation in the public space of the street manifests their exclusion from the public square and, so, from the sovereign unity of the people; that is, they manifest in their very presence and existence the gaping hole in that unity.

The import of this differentiated account of the forms of public protest lies in rethinking and reimagining the civic-democratic dimension of politics. The civic-democratic concerns participation, and the instances that Cavarero and Gaonkar discuss expand the understanding of what counts as democratic participation, whether affirming the Arendtian view or somewhat exceeding it. I have a

possible quarrel, however. Gaonkar establishes his analysis on the premise that "the proponents of liberal-deliberative democracy remain deeply fearful of crowds and mass gatherings" (200). This may be true at a very general level, but by the same token the 1963 March on Washington and indeed the 1965 Selma to Montgomery marches in the wake of Bloody Sunday are revered historical watersheds in the US "liberal and deliberative democratic imaginary" (196). Their nonviolent character is obviously a part of that reverence, but by the same token the disciplined, confrontational nature of the nonviolence proved to be the most effective strategy of the civil rights era. It altered legislation, judicial proceedings, and electoral politics. Indeed, isn't the issue across the spectrum of constituent moments, protests, and direct actions, insofar as their aim is not the seizure of state power, how to bring grievances and demands into the space of liberal-deliberative governance? It's definitely not a question of awaiting or yearning for participatory democracy, real democracy, true democracy, the democracy-to-come. It's a question of expanding and intensifying democratic participation in its capacity to pressure representative democracy, including the terms of representation themselves.

Crossing the threshold from protest to meaningful change is rife with uncertainty. The George Floyd's murder galvanized Black Lives Matter's massive mobilization and produced a universal cry, *This is unjust*. When the slogan *Defund the police* took hold, and as acts of violence occurred on the fringes of the marches and rallies, the movement's purchase on public opinion and governmental action began to slip. And it must be noted that by the fall of 2022, just three years after the Sardines movement mobilized so effectively against right-wing xenophobia and racism and gave the image and experience of a vital inclusive polity, Salvini was back in office as a vice-prime minister in the far-right government of Giorgia Meloni, whose Brothers of Italy party, with its fascist roots, was heading a coalition held together by Silvio Berlusconi. Through Rancière's lens, such setbacks presumably simply mark the oligarchical power of representative democracy to forestall genuine democracy. There is no genuine democracy, just as there is no telic democracy. Democracy is the site of ungrounded mobilization and persuasion.

5

Returning, by way of conclusion, to Arendt's hard distinction between the political and the social in relation to social democracy as analyzed and advocated by the authors of *Degenerations of*

Democracy, her passionate commitment to civic-democratic values is a call for political participation not for participatory democracy. There is no return to the Athenian polis. Modern society and mass democracy require representative democracy, layers of expertise in government and civil society, and effective administrative structures, that is, bureaucracies, in the public and private sectors. Calhoun and Taylor themselves downplay the inherent necessity of bureaucracy and expertise to create and sustain a thriving social democracy. Populist rhetoric, thanks to the success of right-wing populism and the left's envy of it, has seeped into theoretical discourse, as though the polarity of elites and nonelites has overriding explanatory power to analyze the social field and political conflicts. There are certainly relevant tendencies, like the disparities in voting based on education. But just as politics does not align on a mobilization of the 99% against the 1%, so-called elites are not unified in beliefs, interests, and affiliations nor are so-called nonelites. I quite share in Calhoun and Taylor's advocacy on behalf of social democracy but have contested their idea that it is the in-built *telos* of democracy. The active strife among social-democratic, civic-democratic, and liberal-democratic values and visions in not only ineluctable but is key to democracy's vibrancy. To equate the social-democratic with democracy warps the interpretation of political participation and of liberal rights and freedom. There is a value in Arendt's thought that goes beyond the major concepts. It's the mode of thought itself, which gleans and refines ideals and norms from the Western tradition of political thought and uses them to analyze and often criticize contemporary events without, however, deriving prescriptions for future action. There is certainly no *telos* in her thinking. She values beginnings and the innovations they can bring.

The strife among the liberal-, civic-, and social-democratic dimensions of modern democracy can be destructive or creative. Creative strife can innovate new rights, extend liberties, and pluralize the pursuit of happiness through society as a whole. At the moment, none of this is going so well.

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Notes

1. See my *The Cultural Contradictions of Democracy: Political Thought Since September 11* (2007), pp. 183–8.

2. See, for example, the 1952 BBC lectures now collected in Isaiah Berlin, *Freedom and Its Betrayal: Six Enemies of Human Liberty* (2014).

3. Such a prefiguration recalls Ernst Bloch's idea of concrete utopia to designate those fragmentary experiences and actualities of everyday life, collaboration in community or workplace, political activity, myths, and art which prefigure, concretely, possible social transformations. See Ernst Bloch, "Karl Marx and Humanity: The Material of Hope" and "Upright Carriage, Concrete Utopia," *On Karl Marx* (1971), pp. 16–45 and pp. 159–79.

4. See Jason Frank, *Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America* (2010) and *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (2021).

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