

FRA FORSKNINGSFRONTEN

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

POPULISM, DEMOCRACY, COMMUNISM

By Peg Birmingham

It is an honor to be interviewed by Vilde Aavitsland about my recent work on Hannah Arendt and, in addition, to be invited to write this column on future directions my work is taking. Completing a long project on the notion of superfluosity and immortality in Arendt's work, I am now turning my attention to the recent global emergence of far-right populism and the key role democracy plays in this emergence. While most analyses of populism see it as a threat to democracy, this project argues that the roots of populism are contained within it. To confront populism then is to confront its democratic roots: 1) the form of the nation-state with its claim of a national will, and 2) democracy's initial and ongoing alignment with imperialism. Given the ever-present shadow of what Nancy Fraser calls "racialized expropriation" that has accompanied the democratic nation-state from its inception, the central question of this new project is whether democracy can twist free from both democratic-imperialism and from the political form of the nation-state with its central notion of a homogeneous and unified people, of which far-right anti-immigrant populism is an extreme expression, and carry out a truly democratic revolution that aligns itself with communism and the class struggle.

It is no surprise that this project began with the election of Donald Trump, which was at least in part made possible by an emerging far-right populism in the United States. Just after Trump's election, I received an invitation to speak at a conference organized by Professor Eric Selbo-Bain at the University of Indiana at Kokomo on the topic of populism and a politics of dissensus. Preparing my lecture by working through a large body of publications on

the rise of populism not only in the US, but globally, I noticed a widely shared view among otherwise differing analyses on the root causes of populism, namely, its threat to liberal democracy. The title of William Galston's recent book, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (2018), is representative of this shared view that proclaims populism's anti-pluralist tendencies that pose a grave danger to democracy, threatening a return to fascism. Strikingly, I noticed an almost complete absence of any critique of democracy itself as having any hand in the rise of populism. Instead, I encountered the near unanimous view that democracy is in need of wholesale rescue from the populist onslaught.

Significantly, this lack of critique of democracy in the recent work on populism goes hand in hand with the largely celebratory mood of democracy among political theorists over the last thirty or forty years. Broadly speaking, the celebration of democracy is the celebration of a political space characterized by contest and struggle. Claude Lefort's theory of democracy is seminal, arguing that modern democracy is defined by an empty place of power that is subject to never-ending contest and struggle, a struggle animated by democracy's arche, namely, the principle of human rights. Totalitarianism, he claims, is the attempt to end the contest by filling in the empty space of power with a representation of the legitimate people. Jan-Werner Müller in his critique of populism explicitly cites Lefort's theory of democracy, arguing that populism's anti-democratic claim lies precisely in its claim of being the legitimate people.¹ Similarly, Jacques Rancière argues that democracy must be understood as the insurrectional

“part that has no part,” against what he names the “police,” that is, institutional orderings of varying kinds.² Chantal Mouffe goes so far as to argue that Carl Schmitt is a “closet democrat”, claiming that for him the space of collective intensities is a pluralistic democratically contested space.³

At the same time, democratic theorist Wendy Brown laments neoliberalism as converting the democratic project into an economic one and calls for a reclaiming of the demos.⁴ Even as astute a critic as Nancy Fraser describes the contemporary economic-political situation as marked by a “hollowing out of democracy” and precipitating a crisis of “de-democratization.”⁵ Most recently, Chantal Mouffe calls for a “new left populism,” which for her is another name for the “radicalization of democracy.” This new left populism, she argues, must take the form of a new sovereign collective “we” that will allow for a “return of democracy” from our present “post-political” neoliberal moment.

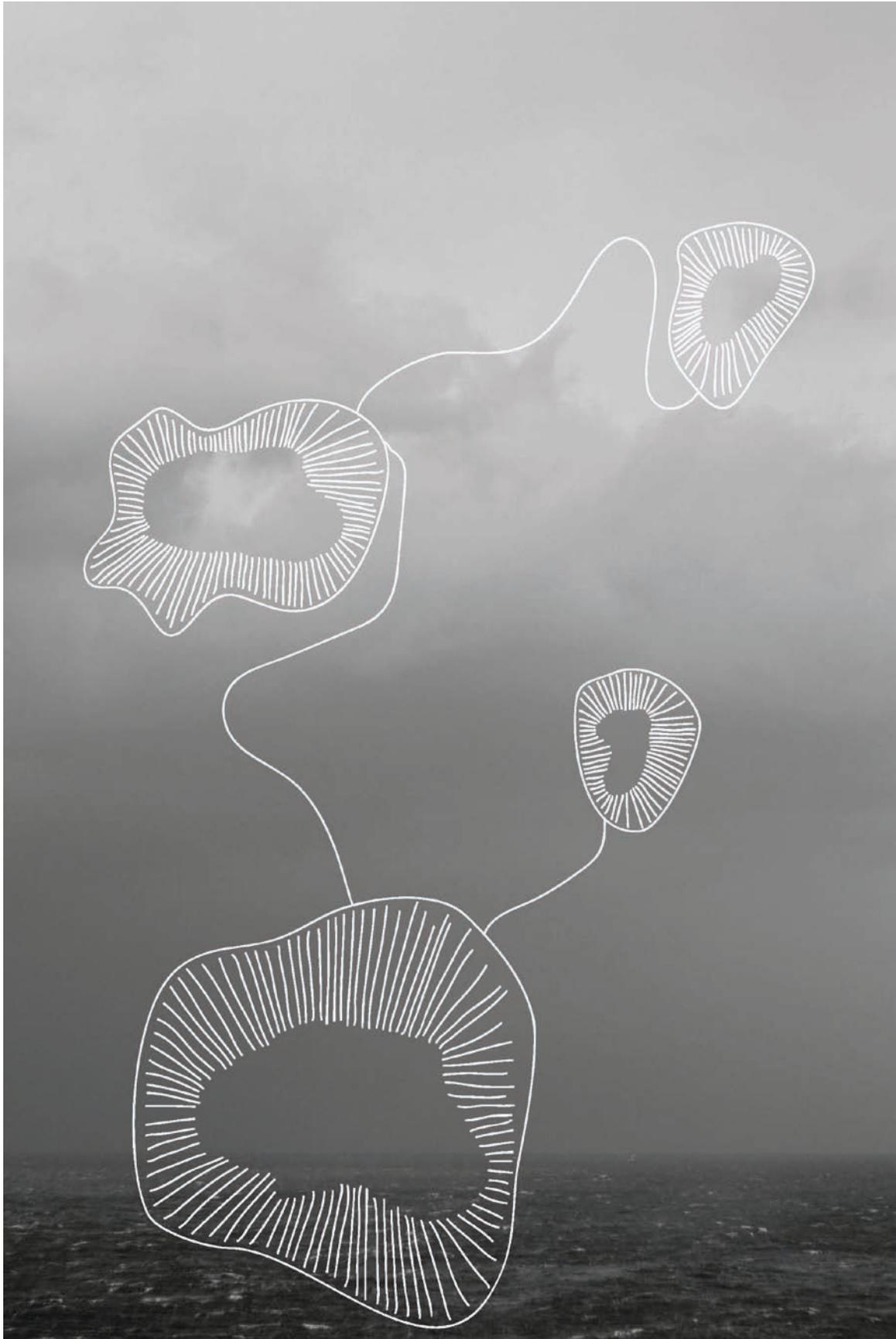
Problematic to these democratic rescue missions from both populism and the neoliberal order, is the lack of analysis of the ways in which modern democracy from its inception has been rooted in a certain conception of a legitimate people whether that be the 1776 declaration of independence in the name of the “good people of the 13 colonies” or the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which is explicitly declared in the name of the people of the French Assembly. Contrary to Lefort’s claim of democracy as characterized by an empty space of power in which the “we” of the people is a contested notion, both revolutionary declarations – 1776 and 1789 – are made in the explicit name of a legitimate people. In other words, the democratic space of the people and its power has never been empty, but from its inception tied to a homogeneous, unified national will of a people clearly defined. Moreover, it is unclear to me that the 1789 Declaration opens a contested space of right that takes place in the gap between the universal “man” and the particular citizen as Ranciere claims, or whether instead Arendt is more sober-minded in arguing that from their inception universal human rights have been tied to a strictly defined notion of the citizen as a national, that is, as a member of the nation-state.

This last point raises another question that I want to explore in this new project, namely, the relation between modern democracy and the form of the nation-state. If the birth of modern democracy and the birth of the nation-state are twin births, and I think they are, then the question is whether democracy can free itself from a notion of a people and a national will that is strictly enclosed within

closed territorial borders. Of course, the borders themselves are not established democratically. Thus, the space of democracy is a space defined by increasingly militarized and nondemocratic boundaries that separate democratic citizens from those who utterly deprived of democratic status. The inhumane and anti-democratic situation at the US southern border has brought this vividly into view. Again, the so-called empty and contested space of the people is a very limited and self-enclosed. The anti-democratic borders reveal the crisis of democracy today of which an anti-immigrant far-right populism is only a symptom. With 65.5 million forcibly displaced refugees and stateless globally, and with another 150 million “climate refugees” predicated by 2050, can the nation-state continue to be the political form of democracy as it has been since Westphalian?

At the same time, modern democracy’s twin birth with the nation-state points to the shadow of racism that has accompanied this birth and gives caution to democracy’s unconditional celebration. Etienne Balibar remarks on this coincidence of democratic declarations of independence with expropriation and racism: “[I]t cannot be by chance that the genocide of the Indians became systematic immediately after the United States – the first of the new nations in Lipset’s famous expression – achieved independence.”⁶ He points out that this same coincidence between democratic independence and expropriation driven by racism can be found in subsequent democratic declarations such as independent Algeria insisting that the “Berbers” become “Arab,” and Israel’s “powerful racism against the eastern Jews (called Blacks) and the Palestinians, who were driven out of their lands and colonized.”⁷ And yet, Balibar will not admit to a *necessary* identification of nationalism with racism, arguing that nationalism offers a unifying and unavoidable supplement to the nation-state and its universal principle of equaliberty, while racism is a supplement to this supplement, emerging as it does from the aristocratic insistence on being of a higher race. I am not so sure that such a strict distinction can be made, especially given Balibar’s own claim that all democratic declarations of newly formed nation states involve a racially driven expropriation and exploitation of minority groups. It would seem instead that nationalism is always already a racism, both supplements as it were needed not only to provide unity to the nation-state which at its heart is divided by the class struggle, but at the same time, to drive the imperialist project which, as Arendt points out, needs the engine of racism.

This last point raises the question of modern



democracy's complicity with capitalist-imperialism. This question continues reflections that I began in my work on Arendt's account of immortality and superfluousness. Here I can only be brief, noting that while it may be tempting to cordon off modern democracy from imperial capitalism, Arendt's account of imperialism in *Origins of Totalitarianism* will not allow it. Without racism, she argues – correctly, in my view – imperial capitalism could not have succeeded in its global aims and without modern democracy's strict notion of the people understood in terms of a homogeneous general will, racism could not have been so easily imperialism's driving engine. In her analysis, Arendt is well aware of the inner contradiction between democratic governing principles of equality and the consent of the governed on the one hand and imperialism which recognizes neither consent nor equality, and yet does not flinch from noting this “willing alliance” between democracy and colonial imperialism, which she argues had been prepared for by the birth of the democratic nation-state and the national question in which race-thinking was already present with the new body politic of the nation-state.

As I noted at the outset, given the ever-present shadow of what Nancy Fraser calls “racialized expropriation” that accompanies the democratic nation-state, the question is whether democracy can emancipate itself not only from the political form of the nation-state, but also whether it can free itself from democratic-imperialism. That is, the willing alliance between democracy within the national borders and capitalist imperial expropriation abroad. Of course, this alliance is the basis of Marx's critique of modern democracy. This leads to the third thread of this project, namely, thinking about the possibility of a “democratic communism.” In my view, this requires going beyond simply calling for a renewal of democratic socialism, which we know has been able to live alongside of and actually be sustained by an integrated global capitalism.

Here the question is whether it is possible for democracy to embrace the central political concept of communism, that is, the class struggle. Strikingly, while the democratic theorists mentioned at the beginning of these remarks stress the need for an agonistic space of democratic struggle, none align this struggle with class. To embrace the class struggle means that democracy must free itself from a notion of a unified people, embracing instead a notion of division at the very heart of an *international* politics. As Jodi Dean puts it,⁸ one must take a stand in this fundamental division that marks the class struggle. Here another question emerges, namely, the status of the “de-

mos.” Must a democratic communism abandon the notion of a demos, tied as it has been to a unified people, inseparable from the supplements of nationalism and racism that masks the class struggle, or is it possible to posit a notion of the *demos*, now understood in terms of division and class struggle?

Finally, what is the status of the political subject of an international democratic communism? As Balibar points out, politics cannot avoid a theory of the subject; history is without a subject, but not politics. Two questions then emerge: can there be an international subject of politics and how do we think this subject in terms of the class struggle? Returning momentarily to where this project began, it seems to me that Ernesto Laclau's work on populism, rooted as it is in Marx and the class struggle, is of help in thinking through this new political subject of a democratic communism.⁹ Certainly, a distinction must be made between the subject-position of populists in former colonized countries and the subject-position of populists within the colonial imperial nations.

To summarize the direction of this new project. I will conclude by pointing out that our present moment is dominated by an internationally integrated capital that is not only a political actor, but an actor at the global level. To counter this requires that democracy, if it can provide any resources for our present conjunction, must become international. Communism has always been rooted in a notion of the international class struggle. The question is whether democracy can be as well.

NOTES

¹ See Müller, J.-W. 2016, *What is Populism?*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

² See Rancière, J. 2010, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Corcoran, S. (trans.), University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

³ See Mouffe, C. 1997, “Carl Schmitt and the Paradox of Liberal Democracy” in *The Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*, 10:1, 21-33.

⁴ See Brown, W. 2015, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books, New York.

⁵ See Mouffe, C. 2018, *For a Left Populism*, Verso, London.

⁶ See Dean, J. 2019, “Communicative Capitalism and Revolutionary Form” in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 1-15.

⁷ See Laclau, E. 2005, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, New York.

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