◀ EDITORIAL ➡

Resist and Revivify
Democratic Theory in a Time of Defiance

Jean-Paul Gagnon and Emily Beausoleil

The Economist Intelligence Unit (2017) proclaimed 2016 among the worst of years for democracy in the world. For the first time since The Economist Intelligence Unit began reporting its measures of democracy in 2006, the United States has been downgraded to a "flawed democracy." Scholars researching contemporary populism have also recently reported that disaffection with the democratic status quo in countries, including the United States (Foa and Mounk 2017) and the United Kingdom (Webb 2013), has been growing in volume and shifting in tenor (see, especially, Moffitt 2016; Rooduijn 2013; Torre 2015).

We see two main reasons for this disaffection. The first comes down to the "usual gripes" – lack of trust in politicians (Amnå and Ekman 2014) and a difficulty in relating to dominant political parties (Gauja 2016: 89) leading to low voter turnout, especially in subnational elections (Green and Gerber 2015: 174–177),[1] as well as a sense that certain political practices are behind the times (Innerarity 2010: 52). In the United States and the United Kingdom this disaffection has been amplified by citizens' responses to the global economic crisis (GEC), which began in 2007 and whose effects are still being felt.[2]

The second reason is because there is a fragmented, difficult to represent subset of citizenry in both the United States and the United Kingdom. These citizens have, to varying extents, been feeling left behind as, over the last 30 to 40 years, the focus of representative politics moved from tackling class-based material concerns to ones framed around recognition and identity (Devine and Sensier 2017; Fraser 1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003). People from these subsets, be they "white working class" (Ford and Goodwin 2017), the self-professed "silent majority" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 11, 84), "angry men" (Kimmel 2013), or "red menace"

millennials (Langman and Lundskow 2016: 234), felt unrepresented by dominant political parties in the GEC's aftermath. In part humiliated by lack of work, anxious about their ability – or inability – to pay for housing and food, and increasingly resentful of a widening inequality gap, many voters in the United States and the United Kingdom resonated powerfully with antiestablishment and material-focused movements such as the Brexit referendum and both the Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders presidential campaigns. Job creation, job security (i.e., *Louth Leader* 2016, for Brexit, and C-SPAN 2016, for Trump), wealth redistribution (i.e., Warren 2016, for Sanders), and getting big money out of representative politics were all talking points for proponents of these campaigns.

It is too early for half of the supporters of these populist movements on either side of the political spectrum in the United States and the United Kingdom to be labeled "deplorable."[3] These phenomena are too complex and will require much unpacking by scholars in the years to come. Nevertheless, we can confidently make three observations.

The first is that these surges of populist politics from the Left and Right, and the disaffection that propels them, are rooted in citizens' sense of political powerlessness (Stoker and Evans 2014). Whether declining local industry, employment, and autonomy due to the opaque forces of a complex global economy (Cowie 2010) or the weakening link between the challenges of citizens and those in place to represent them (Hay and Stoker 2009), it is not hard to see why this sense of diminished agency is currently widespread. Indeed, even those that turn to "deplorable" responses of scapegoating, aggressive fundamentalisms, and racial and sexual violence seem to share something of the experience of scarcity, anxiety, and vulnerability with a far wider public who feel left behind by both the economy and politics.

This does not excuse these reprehensible, unethical, and antidemocratic responses. They *are* deplorable, and those who enact them should be held to account by their fellow citizens – or, in more extreme cases, by the rule of law. But it highlights a risk and an opportunity for democratic politics within such populist movements across the political spectrum.

The second observation is that these anxieties and frustrations are easily manipulated and harnessed by patently *undemocratic* leaders. Donald Trump, along with other right-wing populists such as Rodrigo Duterte (Curato 2016) and Benjamin Netanyahu, has styled himself, through his own actions, as one of "the deplorables" (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2017: 1). He has been masterful at addressing, redirecting, and momentarily satisfying intense feelings of frustration, resentment, and shame into deplorable policies that still fail to address (that even, at times, exacerbate) the underlying causes of such sentiments (Watkins 2016). Trump's

first weeks in office have, for example, seen him sign a flurry of executive orders and post numerous tweets that have alienated women, Muslims, environmental activists and researchers, indigenous people, protestors, and immigrants. His actions have provoked widespread condemnation from politicians in other countries, the leaders of major corporations, celebrities, and advocates of prodemocracy movements.

And yet these populist energies, while susceptible, do not inevitably lend themselves to demagoguery and the othering, scapegoating, and violence that we have seen thus far in Trump's campaign rhetoric and government orders to date.

Our third observation here is that in such a climate, democratic innovations — reforms that support democracy, in other words — have never been more crucial. First, they can help to better represent those subsets of people who are feeling unrepresented. As Hannah Arendt famously observed regarding the rise of totalitarianism (1968), the unorganized and unrepresented masses do not matter to politics until, suddenly, they do — and more committed, more creative, and more responsive democratic institutions and mechanisms are precisely what is required to address the energies and needs that might, in the absence of a voice, seek more deplorable means elsewhere. Second, democratic processes are uniquely poised to mediate and negotiate between highly diverse and contentious positions — at once a constructive platform for controversial claims as well as a means of publicly challenging and potentially transforming even the most deplorable views. There is perhaps nothing like the alchemy of meaningful exchange between the plurality that is "the people." Democratic processes, institutions, and sensibilities have never been more necessary, but also in need of significant critique and creativity.

These three observations help us make sense of what a number of democratic theorists, democracy practitioners, and engaged citizens are doing today. They are applying staunch, evidence-based contrarianism to resist deplorable people and policies. And they are providing critically informed hope to the prospect of revivifying democratic institutions — such as political representation — where they have suffered setbacks.

We have seen this mixture before.

In 1939 John Dewey, for instance, wrote his essay "Creative Democracy: The Task before Us" in a time when brutal violence was overtaking parts of Europe and East Asia. The essay was Dewey's response to the populists of his time — Franco, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, men who criticized elites and emphasized the centrality of the people, yet framed "the people" in homogenous terms. They also convinced their followers that they were in the midst of a disastrous crisis that only "the leader" could solve (Rooduijn 2013). Dewey called for the resistance of "intolerance, abuse,

calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as because of differences of race, color, wealth or degree of culture," as these actions betrayed "the democratic way of life" ([1939] 1998: 342) as Dewey understood it. But what he found even more dangerous than open, state-sanctioned coercion against specific groups of people was the creation of a society in which "common" individuals do not live a life that actively cultivates civil liberty. This life, as we understand it, is one that tries to lessen the fear and hatred that sometimes germinates among, and between, people feeling the pinch. It is a life that uses interpersonal creativity to help others meet their needs and desires.

Put together, Dewey's resistance against types of violence that are harmful to democracy and his call to revivify the democratic way of life defied much of the political reality of his times. His position is defiant because it cuts both ways: first against what must be resisted—real, existing threats to democracy—and then against problematic political institutions (ideally the ones that gave oxygen to populist movements in the first place) by advocating for their reform. This defiance advances certain ideals such as nonviolence, lifelong education, civil liberty, material equality, precaution, kindness, interpersonal creativity, and the promotion of societies that are premised on people who help other people meet their needs and desires without prejudice.

Now, in the shadow of the mainly "alt-right" populist events that have rocked democracies and democrats across the last 18 months (i.e., Duterte, Brexit, Trump, Le Pen), it seems to us that democratic theory has become acutely defiant once more. As evidenced by this issue, and the recent literature on populism that we have read, democratic theorists are actively resisting real threats to democracy *and* proposing how to resolve the problems that populists preyed upon to get themselves, and their movements, across the line.

In this issue, Samuel Salzborn argues that political parties need to take into account the impermanence of democratic governments and the understanding that their policy outcomes will likely be revised, replaced, or repealed in future. This is because a democratic government can only ever work with the inconsistent, ever-shifting preferences of the always-diverse citizens it is representing. It is farcical, therefore, for people to put their faith in strong leaders who claim that they, and only they, can make life better for them. As William Caspary (this issue) reminds us, democracy must be about social and communicative action oriented toward broad consensus formation and *re*-formation. Democracy, in this sense, is reminiscent of tidal action—waves of needs and desires from different aggregations of affected and interested citizens crash upon parliaments, other state institutions, and the media. These waves ultimately wash into

contact with other citizens, the waters delighting some and terrifying others; they may even at times erode the foundations upon which certain cultural institutions rest. This process of a multimodal, multivocal, and multipolar pursuit of consensus on a problem-by-problem basis does not — and cannot — end. If it did it would negate those very conditions that are vital to the experience of living in a democracy. The lesson from Salzborn is that populists cannot capture the will of the people, because it is ephemeral and only ever expressed in part — it is always incomplete. The waves we see do not define the ocean — a lesson lost on the populist.

Alexandros Kioupkiolis advances an understanding of "common democracy," which sees political governance as an affair that must be equally accessible to all members of a demos. He comes to argue that innovations such as "wiki-democracy" (Sirianni 2009: 52; see also Noveck 2015) should be explored, because open-access, collaborative, peer-to-peer governance holds the potential to overcome the myopias found in contemporary political representation. For Kioupkiolis, the wiki approach is a practical way of ensuring that more people can meaningfully represent their concerns by means of an internet-facilitated, autopoetic democracy. The advantage of Kioupkiolis's suggestion, for us today, is that it could reduce the sense of alienation from politics, and inexperience with politics, that comes from being poorly represented or unrepresented. As Teun Pauwels (2014: 2) and Daniele Albertazzi and Sean Mueller (2017: chap. 27) remind us: populists thrive on dissatisfaction with the political status quo and divisions between the "haves and have-nots." Any measure that resists the divisions that political representation creates in a political community is, therefore, a means to resist the populists that would seek to use such divisions to their advantage.

Alice el-Wakil comes to the rescue of popular referendums that have been panned for their unrepresentative and undemocratic procedures and divisive outcomes (e.g., Parkinson 2001). Brexit, for example, is now among the most derided of referendums in recent history on account of its error-prone representation of complex political issues and its rush to take ill-informed voters to the polls. El-Wakil walks us through Joshua Cohen's work to show how a facultative referendum can anticipate these problems if the referendum's designers make its procedures more deliberative. Designing referenda with the deliberative ideal in mind can help voters and their representatives reach consensus. This in turn means that the referendum will be more likely to produce an outcome that is more representative of those people affected by, and interested in, the issue at hand. Given that populist leaders often thrive off divisions in a political community, it is sensible practice to try to lessen those instances where divisions are manufactured through procedure.

Each of these articles proposes various reforms to core democratic mechanisms (parties, online democracy, referendums). Romand Coles's recent book *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times* (Duke University Press, 2016) takes this impulse to move beyond critique to creative design of democratic practices even further, developing a highly novel account of and set of concrete strategies for a radical democratic politics. This project is timely not only for its answer to the call for committed, creative democratic innovations, but also because it is focused on enlarging and strengthening democratic life in the neoliberal context that is greatly responsible for the hollowing-out of the welfare state, deregulation of the economy, and weakening of representative politics' responsiveness to everyday citizens—in a phrase, the underlying forces driving populist movements and potentially harnessed by dangerous demagogues. In trickster fashion, Coles identifies four aspects of this neoliberal context that obstruct and yet might be co-opted for democratic purposes: the resonance of *receptive generosity* to counter the capitalist-evangelical resonance machine; the cultivation of *alternative flows* to counter megacirculation; the co-optation of neoliberal dynamics of *co-optation*; and the mutually reinforcing *oscillation between shocks of exceptional performative eruptions and quotidian organizing and action* to counter the dynamics of neoliberalism's "shock doctrine." In this, he develops a language and set of specific strategies that work to cultivate and sustain a democratic politics from the cellular to the institutional level, in the most hostile of contexts, against the most ostensibly monolithic and impervious of rivals.

This issue's book symposium on *Visionary Pragmatism* brings together a diverse group of scholars to discuss the claims and implications of this work for political theory and practice. The symposium opens with Paul Apostolidis, who affirms Coles's claim that intercorporeal resonance is central to fostering a sense of agency, creativity, and connection in diverse polities, but seeks to nuance this with attention to the (class, race, and imperial) histories and unevenly distributed precarities of laboring bodies. William Connolly notes that the inability among most academics to date to make connections across political, physical, aesthetic, and environmental terrains—what Coles achieves uniquely in this book—is partly to blame for their failure to predict the rise of the "alt-right" and Trump. He cautions, however, that complexity theory—translated by Coles into democratic resource—lends itself to the neoliberalism Coles seeks to challenge, given its ethos of flexibility, self-organization, and creativity. He invites Coles to interrogate whether this link is inevitable, and how democrats might draw inspiration and resource from complexity theory to address the multiple sites and potential coalitions of late capitalism, and the democratic and ecological crisis of Trump's election in particular.

Jodi Dean reflects on the receptivity and resonance harnessed for *antidemocratic* ends in Trump's election: attunement to populist feelings and transmission of a sense of transformative possibility, embodied incitations and affective intensities at rallies and on social media. She observes no conceptual tools in Coles's account to distinguish Trump's strategies from those of radical democracy, and warns that an absence of antagonism — a clear sense of what one is fighting against — and an overly capacious theory encourage an ineffective "postpolitics." Indeed, she argues for a Communist approach as necessary and sufficient to achieve the transformation and climate action Coles seeks. Like Connolly and Dean, Jade Schiff highlights parallels in Coles's model with the neoliberal "resonance machine" and the risks therein. She asks how we might reduce these ever-present risks and work to sustain the highly demanding radical politics Coles proposes through greater attention to self-care (what she calls "autoresonance") in the face of neoliberalism's depredations.

The book's publication lies on one side of the 2016 US election results. These reflections, and Romand Coles's own response, stand on the other. The "shock" effect (to use Coles's own term) of Trump's election shapes the questions, concerns, and urgencies of at least three of these authors' commentaries, and as well as addressing the rich and provocative questions they offer, Coles uses the opportunity to respond to them in this symposium as a site to apply the book's innovative approach to democratic politics to the particular challenges posed by Trump's administration — what Coles calls (this issue) "the antithesis of an ethos of receptivity called toward complex commonwealth and reciprocal flourishing among highly diverse beings." In short, his response here — like the book itself — seeks to address the all-too-pressing and perplexing question for democratic politics in neoliberal times: "What, then, must we do?"

This issue is rounded out by *Democratic Theory*'s first "practitioner's note." SeeClickFix is a democratic enterprise coming out of New Haven, Connecticut. It helps connect local governments and the citizens they are trying to service. SeeClickFix founder and current CEO Ben Berkowitz offers a set of optimistic notes from the field. With more than a million users reporting issues to hundreds of local governments and public and private organizations (the company recently reported that there were nearly 100,000 user reports in 2016 alone — most dealing with graffiti concerns), SeeClickFix seems to be fulfilling a number of the premonitions that have come out of the democracy 2.0 literature (e.g., McNutt 2014; Stamati et al. 2015). The "democratic innovations economy" is certainly a space for scholars to watch, and we hope to be bringing more notes of this kind to you in future issues.

The field of democratic theory is blossoming with strategies to resist violence against democracy and to revivify those democratic institutions that would benefit from conceptual and/or practical reform. We find ourselves not in a period of democratic despondency and political disarray, as less circumspect cynics would have it, but rather in a vitalizing time of *defiance.* There is power in this. To defy in the name of democracy is to oppose "truthiness," confront arbitrary decision making, disobey illogic, and dissent from any policy that will, to use Dewey's phraseology, constitute treason to our democratic ways of life. A time of defiance invites us all to be daring in our compassion for each other, bold in how we explore and care for the many — and diverse — meanings of democracy,[4] audacious in our gentleness toward the earth, and courageous in our advocacy for that paradoxical but poignant practice of democratizing democracy wheresoever and whensoever this need should arise.

➡ NOTES

1. The lack of attention given to subnational, particularly local, elections in democracies such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States is, on the one hand, understandable, as these elections receive far less fanfare in the media, but on the other, this phenomenon is perplexing because it is typically our local politicians who affect our daily lives the most. For more, see Chou (2016).
2. Cheng Enfu and Xie Chang'an (2016) and Hinkson (2016) mention that the GEC is still affecting Western capitalist democracies. See, comparatively, for Australia, Borowski (2013) and Carvalho (2015: 37).
3. McCann (2016: 46) reports how Hillary Clinton, "at a September LGBT fundraiser in Manhattan," said "half of Trump's supporters" belong in a "basket of deplorables." While *some* of Trump's supporters are likely to have behaved in deplorable ways, there is insufficient data to claim that half of those who ended up voting for him are deplorable.
4. Gagnon (2016) has identified more than 1,216 real, existing descriptors of democracy. This list of adjectives sustains the understanding that democracy has hundreds, if not thousands, of different definitions, meanings, theories, conceptions, models, practices, iterations, and so forth, which come to us from different times and spaces.

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