

“Cruelly Absent Grandeur”?

Democracy’s Twenty-First-Century Histories

by Adam Tooze*

Abstract: This essay approaches the idea that current conceptions of history are in fact tantamount to ideas about the historical unfolding of democracy, with history and democracy having become intellectually intertwined. This observation starts with various present-day challenges and debates, but then integrates them in broader historiographic and metahistorical interpretations. A survey of some major publications on the history of democracy in Europe and the United States from the nineteenth century to the present brings together US, British, French and German perspectives on the democratic condition of our age.

Our current crisis of democracy is a crisis of power, governance and legitimacy. It is also a crisis of elite political knowledge. Political scientists and political experts were caught unawares by Trump, Brexit and the sweeping away of the established party system across much of Europe. The voters who have flocked to the “populist parties” were, it seems, off their radar. They are commonly described as “the forgotten” or “the ignored.” Sociologists from liberal California undertake expeditions to alien places like Louisiana to find out what makes a Trump voter tick.¹ The Democratic Party elite went on “safari” to rediscover America.² In Germany the question is anxiously debated as to whether one should even talk to the AfD.³ Meanwhile, teams of forensic investigators on both sides of the Atlantic reconstruct the electronic traces of Russian meddling and beneath the cornucopia of the digital public sphere we are shocked to discover a labyrinth of profit-driven algorithms. No wonder

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1 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land. A Journey to the Heart of Our Political Divide*, New York 2016.

2 Molly Ball, *On Safari in Trump’s America*, in: *The Atlantic*, 23.10.2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/on-safari-in-trumps-america/543288/>.

3 Anne Hähning, *Soll man mit der AfD reden? Man muss*, in: *Die Zeit*, 5.3.2017, <https://www.zeit.de/2017/10/zuerich-afd-marc-jongen-auftritt-proteste>; and Annette Langer, *Debatte auf Katholikentag. “Ich rede nicht mit Rechtspopulisten, sondern mit Menschen.” Interview mit Thomas Arnold*, in: *Der Spiegel*, 9.5.2018, <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/katholikentag-mit-der-afd-reden-interview-mit-leiter-der-katholischen-akademie-a-1206575.html>.

that for many commentators this moment marks a break in the “narrative” of the West.⁴ We are at a turning-point, they claim, of historic significance.

But if that is the case, must we not turn the question back on history? If we are living through a crisis of political knowledge, is it a crisis of historical knowledge as well? How do history and historical writing relate to the current sense of democratic crisis? Can historical experience serve as an antidote to immediate panic? Or did complacent narratives help to make the democratic impasse possible? To address those questions, the following essay offers a highly selective review, which does not attempt to survey the huge field of historical writing about democracy, or democratic theory. Instead, limiting itself to Europe and the US, it sketches a series of connections between prominent works of history and social theory in which the relationship between thinking about democracy and thinking about history is particularly explicit.

I.

Academic history is a slow moving business. Scholarly essays in journals can take years to appear, books even longer. The current sense of democratic crisis is only a few years old. Historical writing will take a while to catch up. But such a simple view of timing is misleading. If one looks back over historical writing in the decades since the end of the Cold War, our sense of an immediate crisis may be relativized. But what we do find is a sense of unease that stretches back at least to the 1990s. Historians may lag somewhat in their response to our current concerns, but they have been worrying about democracy for some time.⁵

Of course, the news is not all bad. Both politics and the historical profession have been changed if not transformed by the empowerment of women, the civil rights revolution and the rollback of discrimination on grounds of sexuality. This has produced analytical histories of struggle, inspirational narratives as

4 A representative cross section of crisis diagnoses taken from the Financial Times would include Martin Wolf, *Capitalism and Democracy – the Odd Couple*, in: Financial Times, 19.9.2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/cec2664c-9a2e-11e7-b83c-9588e51488a0>; Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*, New York 2017; Gideon Rachman, *The Crisis in Anglo-American Democracy*, in: Financial Times, 22.8.2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/0c2fc5b2-6630-11e6-8310-ecf0bddad227>.

5 So too have political scientists and other social commentators. For a sampling see Robert Wuthnow, *The Left Behind. Decline and Rage in Rural America*, Princeton, NJ 2018; Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured. Opinion, Truth and the People*, Cambridge, MA 2014; Didier Erignon, *Return to Reims*, Los Angeles 2013 (French original 2009).

well as warning voices, reminding their readers that the process is still very far from complete.⁶

Histories also continue to appear that celebrate the politics of the old era – monumental histories of democratic politics and (male) politicians. But these tend to be confined to national audiences. When a historian like John Bew writes about the history and theory of *Realpolitik* he addresses himself to a transatlantic world of international relations.⁷ When he writes a biography of “Citizen Clem,” his audience is British.⁸ Robert Caro’s gigantic biography of Lyndon Johnson was an all-American historical event.⁹ It is hard to imagine a European counterpart to the American craze for all things Alexander Hamilton.¹⁰

What explains the anxious tone of much commentary on modern democracy are two factors: First, the decline of the trade unions and the socialist movement – for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the most powerful forces of democratization and the only forces to operate both inside the major states of the West and to construct a true transnational presence. Second, the West, finally, has begun to come to terms with its history of racialized violence. This poses the troubling question of whether xenophobia, racism, anti-migrant, and islamophobic motives were not fully indigenous to the Western democratic tradition. Was policing the “color line” in fact essential to the development of democracy both in Europe and its settler colonies?¹¹

Probably the most celebrated general history of the 1990s was Eric Hobsbawm’s “Age of Extremes.”¹² It was translated into dozens of languages. Retaining a Marxist perspective Hobsbawm was far from sanguine about the long-run prospects of the cohabitation between capitalism and democracy. As the antiquated phrase had it, the twentieth century was the age of the “common man.” But as that century ended Hobsbawm posed the question of how that democratic voice was to be brought to bear in era of political disengagement,

- 6 The arc runs from Carole Pateman, Three Questions about Womanhood Suffrage, in: Carole Pateman (ed.), *Suffrage and Beyond. International Feminist Perspectives*, Auckland 1994, pp. 331–348 and Paula Baker, *The Domestication of Politics. Women and American Political Society, 1780–1920*, in: *The American Historical Review* 89.1984, pp. 620–647 to Linda Hirshman, *Victory. The Triumphant Gay Revolution*, New York 2012 and Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, New York 2015.
- 7 John Bew, *Realpolitik. A History*, Oxford 2015.
- 8 Id., *Clement Attlee. The Man who Made Modern Britain*, Oxford 2017.
- 9 The final volume in the epic series was Robert A. Caro, *The Passage of Power. The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, New York 2012.
- 10 Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter, *Historians on Hamilton. How a Blockbuster Musical is Restaging America’s Past*, New-Brunswick, NJ 2018.
- 11 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line. White Men’s Countries and the Question of Racial Equality*, Melbourne 2008.
- 12 Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. A History of the World, 1914–1991*, New York 1994.

fragmentation and the decline of the nation state as an effective center of power and government.

The same question was posed in the 1990s by the second coming of another mid-century classic, Karl Polanyi's "Great Transformation."¹³ Neo-Polanyians saw the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as precursors to the globalized present, in which aspirations to democratic national self-determination rubbed up against the demands of globalized capitalism, as articulated and reinforced by dogmatic ideologies of the free market. That tension was not a discovery of 2008 or the Eurozone crisis of 2010. Dani Rodrik's much discussed globalization trilemma, which many today see as the key to understanding the crisis of "populism," was prefigured already in the 1990s by economic historians such as Barry Eichengreen and Harold James.¹⁴ Populism's first great moment came a century ago with William Jennings Bryan's campaign against the gold standard and his spectacular capture of the Democratic Party at the Chicago convention of 1896.¹⁵ Even if the threat or promise of socialism was receding behind the historical horizon, at the end of the twentieth century the historical lesson was clear. There were many circumstances under which capitalism and democracy did not make easy bedfellows.

Nor were these the gloomiest predictions. Political histories that drew not on political economy but on theories of imperialism and logics of racial violence were even grimmer. Mark Mazower pitched his "Dark Continent" against the backdrop of the genocidal violence of Yugoslavia's 1990s civil wars.¹⁶ It was a minatory account of the shallow roots of democracy in Europe. Michael Mann's study of settler colonialism and mass participation in genocide – "Dark Side of Democracy" – wound the pitch of despair to an even higher level.¹⁷ The new wave of Holocaust research taught that under the wrong circumstances the "common man," the supposed hero of the democratic drama was to be feared.¹⁸ For historians like Christopher Browning the Holocaust raised questions not just about Germany, but about modern society generally. The parallel he invoked was Vietnam. Whether in My Lai in 1968 or

13 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation. Economic and Political Origins of Our Time*, New York 1944.

14 Compare Barry J. Eichengreen, *Globalizing Capital. A History of the International Monetary System*, Princeton, NJ 1998 and Harold James, *The End of Globalization. Lessons from the Great Depression*, Cambridge, MA 2001 with Dani Rodrik, *The Inescapable Trilemma of the World Economy*, in: Dani Rodriks Weblog, 27.6.2007, http://rodrik.typepad.com/dani_rodriks_weblog/2007/06/the-inescapable.html.

15 Richard F. Bense, *Passion and Preferences. William Jennings Bryan and the 1896 Democratic Convention*, Cambridge 2008.

16 Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*, London 1998.

17 Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy. Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*, Cambridge 2005.

18 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, New York 1993.

the General Government in 1942, citizens, SPD-voting denizens of Hamburg no less, could morph into mass murderers.

If race and democracy had a twisted history, so too did the politics of gender. One of the powerful attractions of fascism for interwar men was that it delivered a backlash against an age of liberalization and transformation in gender relations. At the same time, as Claudia Koonz's "Mothers in the Fatherland" showed, women too flocked to the NSDAP and helped to sustain both the anti-democratic politics and violence of Hitler's regime. Ironically, young women became Nazis in part through their search for self-realization and the promise of emancipation from familial patriarchal authority offered by organizations such as the Bund Deutscher Mädel. And Dagmar Herzog would continue this theme by arguing that National Socialism in fact derived a large part of its energy from its embrace of a racialized form of sexuality.¹⁹ Fascism promised pleasure – the ultimate payoff from emancipation and self-realization – more convincingly than did stuffy conventional politics with its nineteenth-century cultural baggage. Questions of identity and subjectivity were thus entwined in an ambiguous dynamic of emancipation and violence.

Against this dark backdrop, Geoff Eley's "Forging Democracy" stood out for its forceful restatement of the classic progressive narrative. If one wanted to explain the undeniable advance of democracy there was only one plausible answer, he insisted. It was the left that was the creative and dynamic impulse making and remaking democracy.²⁰ Again and again the labour and women's movements along with other reforming currents, combined to force progressive democratic change. Rather than lacking roots, as Mazower and others suggested, the problem of democracy in Europe was that it faced dangerous enemies.

Eley's narrative offered a welcome antidote to structural pessimism, but it was bitterly ironic in that it was delivered at a moment when the European left was utterly exhausted. Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder dominated the transatlantic political scene and adopted policies that disempowered organized labour. Meanwhile, political scientist Peter Mair spoke of "Ruling the Void" and Colin Crouch announced a new age of "Post-Democracy."²¹

Well before the current moment of anxiety, there were thus a variety of more or less alarming historical narratives of democracy and democratization to choose from. Furthermore, whatever story they tell, all of these texts can be thought of as political interventions not in the sense of unambiguous party

19 Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism. Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Princeton, NJ 2007.

20 Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy. The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*, Oxford 2002.

21 Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void. The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, in: *New Left Review* 42, 2006, pp. 25–51 and Colin Crouch, *Coping with Post-Democracy*, London 2000 and id., *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge 2004.

political alignment, but as critical engagements in the public sphere. They were contributions to the arguments over the politics of modernity and inputs to policy-making and education. As such they performed a crucial civic function. In the widest sense they contributed to the critical scrutiny of power that John Keane has dubbed “monitory democracy.”²²

II.

The Vietnam War was one of the moments that gave birth to monitory democracy – the awareness of the need by civil society in all its forms to exercise continuous and intensified scrutiny of democratically legitimated executive power. And the twenty-first century began with a series of shocks that reinforced that lesson. In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, the Bush administration launched the invasion first of Afghanistan and then of Iraq. It did so not only to bring those responsible to justice, but in the name of regime change and democratization. Indeed, as of 2002 democratization was officially espoused as a strategic objective of US security policy.²³ The fact that the disastrous Iraq War was justified in public with deliberately misleading intelligence had the boomerang effect of putting American and British democracy in the dock.²⁴

In the US the misguided War on Terror waged in the name of democracy, prompted scholars to launch a searching examination of the history of military-political relations. In “Decline and Fall of the American Republic” Bruce Ackerman whose recent work had revolved around an elaborate historical reconstruction of America’s constitutional development, turned his attention to the power grab by the executive branch and its increasing militarization.²⁵ For Ackerman it was the late stage of the Cold War that saw the fatal undermining of American democracy by its imperial overreach and militarism. Andrew Bacevich warned of a new American militarism in which the priorities of democratic politics and the military were inverted. “The question that generals wanted to hear from their civilian masters after Desert Storm was not ‘What are you doing for us?’ but ‘What can we do for you and the troops?’”²⁶

But the demoralizing experience in Afghanistan and Iraq also called profoundly into question the entire neoconservative vision of democracy

22 John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, New York 2009.

23 The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, 17. 9. 2002, <http://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2002/>.

24 Anthony Barnett, *The Lure of Greatness. England’s Brexit and America’s Trump*, London 2017.

25 Bruce Ackerman, *The Decline and Fall of the American Republic*, Cambridge, MA 2010.

26 Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism. How Americans Are Seduced by War*, Oxford 2013, p. 51.

promotion. Their adoption of simplistic, universalized notions of democracy and its history were at the heart of the disaster. It was one thing to picture the history of global democratization as a series of waves, as Samuel P. Huntington had done in 1991.²⁷ It was quite another to actually implement democratization in the Middle East. Of course, the historical examples of the Marshall Plan and the successful “democratization” of post-war Europe were easily too hand. But it was from European recipients of that aid – France and Germany – that the loudest opposition to the Iraq War came. Indeed, Joschka Fischer, as Germany’s Foreign Minister, would hurl his country’s democratization in the face of Donald Rumsfeld, breaking into English to demand that America live up to its own professed standards and provide convincing evidence for its claims about weapons of mass destruction.²⁸

Others despaired that the gap could any longer be bridged. In the wake of the gigantic anti-war demonstrations of February 2003, Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida published their manifesto – “February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe.” Rather than restating the case against war, Habermas treated the occasion as the founding moment of a new political unit, gathered around the core of the old European Community, the Europe of the Six. In his view it marked nothing less than a new bifurcation of “the West.”²⁹

Speaking for much of the US foreign policy community, Robert Kagan agreed. The Europeans were living in a “Venusian” world, a world without agonistic conflict, a world regulated by law alone.³⁰ To the American wielders of power it seemed that Western Europe with its perfected democratic systems and comfortable welfare states had forgotten what politics was ultimately about: the question of war and peace. Furthermore, Europe’s liberal intellectuals had also conveniently forgotten the frame of hard power on which their continent’s peaceful, prosperous and democratic development had rested since 1945, a frame supplied by America as the “arsenal of democracy.”

In the argument over Iraq, two different histories of post-war democracy were at stake and the further implications of that point were brought home by critical reactions to the Habermas-Derrida vision from Eastern Europe.³¹ The

27 Samuel P. Huntington, *Democracy’s Third Wave*, in: *Journal of Democracy* 2. 1991, no. 2, pp. 12 – 34.

28 Severin Weiland, “Ich bin nicht überzeugt,” in: *Der Spiegel*, 8.2.2003, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/sicherheitskonferenz-ich-bin-nicht-ueberzeugt-a-234367.html>.

29 Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, *February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together. A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe*, in: *Constellations* 10. 2003, no. 3, pp. 291 – 297.

30 Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power. America and Europe in the New World Order*, New York 2004.

31 Stefan Auer, *Whose Europe is it Anyway? Habermas’s New Europe and its Critics*, in: *Telos* 152. 2010, pp. 181 – 191.

Franco-German vision of a unified core Europe touted by Habermas, Derrida and German Foreign Minister Fischer seemed to be shaped as much by mistrust towards Eastern Europe as it was distance from America. Donald Rumsfeld's motives in playing up the gap between "old" and "new Europe" were no doubt cynical. But the differences were real. In Eastern Europe where democracy had arrived only with the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, there was, indeed, greater enthusiasm for the historic mission of NATO and a greater willingness to go along with American projects of democratization backed where necessary with military force. As seen from Sofia, Budapest or Warsaw, Habermas and Derrida's vision revealed a dramatic failure of historical imagination. The Iron Curtain may have been come down but the *maître à penser* in Paris and Frankfurt still clung to old East-West distinctions. As Norman Davies and Tony Judt argued in massive new histories, it was high time for Europe to re-envision both its present and its past beyond the territorial demarcations of the Cold War.³²

But, perhaps the most far-reaching intellectual reply to Habermas came from Pierre Rosanvallon, first in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France and then a few years later in a powerful essay of 2008.³³ Rosanvallon agreed that historically there were different European and American conceptions of democracy. But he then went on to insist that both the American and the Franco-European model had frozen into theologically-infused, "closed universals." Indeed, what was often presented as "the revival of the political," the transatlantic project of normative political philosophy proffered by Habermas and John Rawls, was itself a third, more benign, version of the same problem. What each of these closed universal conceptions of democracy obscured were the social tensions, intellectual puzzles and political fissures that haunted the democratic project not accidentally but constitutively. They obscured what was, according to Rosanvallon's mentor Claude Lefort, the defining feature of modern politics, that at its heart was not a stable, firmly rooted natural order, or a solid sociopolitical constitution, but an "empty space" of power.³⁴ Rosanvallon's intervention moved the discussion to a new level because what he was calling for were not more critical histories of American militarism (à la

32 Norman Davies, *A History of Europe*, London 1996 and Tony Judt, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*, New York 2006.

33 As befits an academic occasion Rosanvallon's inaugural address focused on distinguishing his project of the "history of the political" from other scholarly approaches. The 2008 essay turns the same arguments against the politics of "regime change," transitology etc. See id. and Samuel Moyn, *Democracy. Past and Future*, New York 2006 and id., *Democratic Universalism as a Historical Problem*, in: *Constellations* 16. 2009, pp. 539 – 549.

34 For a conversation between the two, shortly before Lefort's death, see Pierre Rosanvallon, *Trial by Politics. A Conversation Between Pierre Rosanvallon and Claude Lefort*, in: *Books and Ideas*, 16.10.2013, <http://www.booksandideas.net/Trial-by-Politics.html>.

Ackerman), or a separate history of the European West (à la Habermas), but a recognition of radical historical instability as fundamental to our understanding of democracy.

Only an historical approach can fully grasp politics [...] can take full measure of politics [...] only if one brings out the full depth and density of the contradictions and ambiguities that underpin it. One must thus seek to think democracy by tracing the course of its history. Yet it is clearly not enough merely to say that democracy *has* a history. Rather, one must take the more radical step of recognizing that democracy *is* a history. It cannot be separated from the task of self-exploration and experimentation, nor from an effort to understand and to build upon its own essence. [...] History must thus be the *active laboratory* of our present, and not simply its back-lighting.³⁵

Sounding like E. P. Thompson, Rosanvallon announced:

In order to adequately think democracy, one must thus abandon the idea of a model in favor of that of experience. The conditions of common life and of self-government cannot be defined *a priori*, fixed by tradition, or imposed by an authority. On the contrary, the democratic project establishes politics as a field that constitutively resists closure by virtue of the tensions and uncertainties that underpin it. [...] Only such a history can bring to light the relationship between our experience and those of the men and women who preceded us in all corners of the earth. There is [...] no model of democracy with which some have been endowed so that they might institute it throughout the world. There are only experiences and the results of trial and error, which must be meticulously and lucidly assessed and grasped by all.³⁶

History thus moved from being a watchdog to being a systemic antidote to the hardening of modernity's intellectual-political arteries. The tendency to resort to models rather than history was an expression of the failure to grasp the openness and indeterminacy injected into human affairs by the age of democratic revolutions.

The initial impetus for Rosanvallon's approach to democracy as history was critical and curative. But that stance of historical self-reflection applied not just to democratic idolatry, but to democratic disillusionment and disappointment as well. In his 2003 inaugural, Rosanvallon pointed to the deep discontent evident in Europe in the early 2000s: "A whole series of contemporary debates coalesce, in fact, around the diagnosis of a transition felt to be dangerous: the decline of the will, the unraveling of sovereignty, the disaggregations of forms of collectivity, and so forth."³⁷ But, as Rosanvallon insisted, such sentiments were "by no means unprecedented." They were in fact structurally conditioned by the distinction between "the political" – the

35 Rosanvallon, *Democratic Universalism as a Historical Problem*, in: *Books and Ideas*, 8. 4. 2008, <http://www.booksandideas.net/Democratic-Universalism-as-a.html> (emphasis by the author).

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Id.*, *Democracy*, p. 54.

dramatic but fleeting moment of constituting the collective – and the day to day business of real existing “politics.” As Rosanvallon remarked,

it is never simple to separate the noble from the vulgar, the great ambitions from the petty egoistical calculations, the trenchant language of truth from the sophistry of manipulation and seduction, the necessary attention to the long term from submission to the urgencies of the moment. [...] There grows up around the political, as a result, a longing that in a certain sense is impossible to fulfill. It is often as if there were at the same time too much and too little of politics, a fact which combines an expectation and a rejection. The desire for politics flows from the aspiration for the collectivity to be its own master, and the hope of seeing a community take form in which a place is made for each person. At the same time, there is a rejection of sterile conflicts and the search for a simply private happiness. It is easy to feel at once what feels like an exasperation before an excess and a nostalgia before what feels like a decline. Politics often seems simultaneously like an irritating residue, to be eliminated if possible, and like a tragically lacking dimension of life, a cruelly absent grandeur.³⁸

In the early twenty-first century, neoliberalism and its politics of depoliticization no doubt exacerbated this sense of lack. But the problem of post-democracy was not new. It was a specter that haunted the very structure of modern politics itself. At least as far back as the early 1800s one could trace contradictory responses. On the one hand there was social science and its promise to give a happy ending to politics, by way of the technocratic application of reason. On the other there was the violent exaltation of resurgent political will. Twentieth-century communism drew much of its strength from the fact that it satisfied both impulses, but it was only one strand in the weave of modern political ideology. According to Rosanvallon there was an entire “negative history of democracy” to uncover, a history of disappointment and contempt.

III.

But, if history was the antidote to both democratic and anti-democratic fetishism, that begged the question: what type of history? “My conception of history,” Rosanvallon replies,

is neither antiquarian nor presentist. I haven't attempted to find the origins of our problems in history. I didn't try to write a genealogy of the present. I don't think that the present is solely the outcome of an evolution whose secret mechanism could be discovered by the historian in considering the past as the matrix of development. [...] What interests me is restoring to the past the presentist character it had in its time. What interests me is understanding the political experience of the past all over again, making it come alive once more [...] the point is to re-invest the past with its dimension of indeterminacy. Whereas a genealogical history has an opposing role: it always follows the thread of some necessity [...]. I want to restore to the past its one-time present. To me, the historian's role consists in giving

38 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

the past back its present, so that this present of the past helps us to consider our own present more effectively, instead of merely expounding what might be the necessity of this present.³⁹

What Rosanvallon does not say is how he came by this vision of non-genealogical, non-presentist history. In fact, his trajectory is the product of a very particular historical and political struggle within the French left. To cut a long story very short, Rosanvallon's particular vision of the historical study of the political is an answer both to exalted Republican histories of the French revolution and to the social historical evacuation of the political practiced for many decades by the *Annales* school. Rosanvallon's vision of a historically infused approach to democracy has its own history.⁴⁰ His appointment to the Collège de France was the culmination of the long march through the institutions by the heirs of Lefort and François Furet.

The crucial point is that in France since the 1970s the rethinking of history and democratic politics had gone hand in hand.⁴¹ The significance of that dual development is highlighted if we compare Rosanvallon's hopeful invocation of history (his kind of history) as the answer to the problem of rethinking democracy, to the near contemporary "Politics out of History" by the Californian critical theorist Wendy Brown.⁴² For Brown, history is not the answer to an impasse in political theory. The collapse of taken for granted historicity is the problem. "[W]hile many have lost confidence in a historiography bound to a notion of progress or to any other purpose," Brown remarks, "we have coined no political substitute for progressive understandings of where we have come from and where we are going [...]"⁴³

What is (nineteenth-century) liberal justice without a narrative of progress that situates it between an inegalitarian and unemancipated ancient regime and the fulfilled promise of universal personhood and rights-based freedom and equality? What is (twentieth-century) liberal democracy without communism as its dark opposite? What is liberalism out of these histories, indeed out of history as we have known it, which is to say, out of a history marked by the periodicity of this particular past-present-future and by the temporality of progressivism?⁴⁴

39 Javier Fernández Sebastián and Pierre Rosanvallon, *Intellectual History and Democracy. An Interview with Pierre Rosanvallon*, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68. 2007, pp. 703–715, here p. 710.

40 Andrew Jainchill and Samuel Moyn, *French Democracy between Totalitarianism and Solidarity. Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 76. 2004, pp. 107–154.

41 For recent accounts of this double development see Emile Chabal, *A Divided Republic. Nation, State and Citizenship in Contemporary France*, Cambridge 2015 and Stephen Sawyer, *Neoliberalism and the Crisis of Democratic Theory*, in: Stephen Sawyer and Iain Stewart (eds.), *In Search of the Liberal Moment. Democracy, Anti-Totalitarianism and Intellectual Politics since the 1950s*, New York 2016, pp. 192–213.

42 Wendy Brown, *Politics out of History*, Princeton, NJ 2001.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

44 *Ibid.*, pp 13 f.

Little wonder, Brown remarks that “there is [...] a wash of insecurity, anxiety, and hopelessness across a political landscape formerly kept dry by the floodgates of foundationalism and metaphysics.”⁴⁵ Not that she is hopeless. Like Rosanvallon Brown recognizes that there is much work to be done:

[O]ut of the breakup of this seamless historiography and ground of settled principles, new political and epistemological possibilities emerge. As the past becomes less easily reduced to a single set of meanings and effects, as the present is forced to orient itself amid so much history and so many histories, history itself emerges as both weightier and less deterministic than ever before.⁴⁶

“Neither purely despairing nor purely hopeful,” Brown insists, we must bear the “mixture of heaviness and hope carried in a history that, in the wake of metaphysics and metanarratives, may finally become our own.”⁴⁷ It is hardly by coincidence that the final chapters of Brown’s investigation into the problem of historicity and political theory were devoted to Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin.

We all have our particular histories with democracy. It is in the nature of the beast. And if this is true for France and America, it is true for Germany too. In Germany, the lineage of emphatically “democratic” historiography was more fragmentary than in France or America. The current line begins in earnest really only in the 1960s. But by the twenty-first century that tradition too was ripe for historical excavation. Paul Nolte’s weighty but elegant history of democracy, “Was ist Demokratie?” is the most advanced effort to do this.⁴⁸ Just as for Rosanvallon, Nolte’s starting point is to insist that democracy is not a static timeless structure but a dynamically evolving historical process capable of generating genuine novelty. Against the backdrop of the assumptions of Nolte’s teachers in the Bielefeld school, the significance of this argumentative move should not be underestimated.⁴⁹ They were enormously invested in the project of mapping Germany’s history against a standard of “the West” which was not itself in question. As Nolte insists, our challenge today, and it is a particular challenge for inheritors of the mantle of the democratic history of the Federal Republic, is to come to terms with the fact that we live in democracy’s post-classical era.

Democracy, Nolte insists, has not one but three histories with three different leitmotifs – fulfillment, search and crisis (*Erfüllung, Suche, Krise*). At first sight this seems like a rather schematic formalism and Nolte offers no more than a perfunctory explanation for his proposition. The real significance of Nolte’s triad becomes clear when we realize that his three “histories of democracy” are not just modes of writing history, they are modes of historicity, modes in

45 Ibid., p. 5.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., p. 17.

48 Paul Nolte, *Was ist Demokratie? Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Munich 2012.

49 Id., Hans-Ulrich Wehler. *Historiker und Zeitgenosse*, Munich 2015.

which democracy is experienced and enacted. They are in fact the three modes mapped by theorists such as Rosanvallon and Brown – the abandoned narrative of fulfillment, the crisis that comes in its wake and the recommitment to a new search – cast by Nolte as a political *Bildungsroman* without definitive conclusion. As modes of political historicity these three narratives shape the development of democracy itself.

One is tempted to say that the quest for the realization of democracy, “the search,” is, in fact, Nolte’s start and end point. His very last sentence invokes John Dewey. With his insistence that we must abandon familiar preconceptions about democracy and accept our post-classical situation, Nolte sets out to convince us that innovation and novelty are the one continuity in democracy’s history. He can barely suppress his ironic tone when dealing with America’s ahistorical classicism, in which the present is connected seamlessly with the moment of the founding. The open-ended search for democratic self-realization is not without its dangers. The quest can go wrong, as in the case of Leninism. But, it is significant that Nolte includes the failed Soviet experiment – alongside Carl Schmitt’s early writings – as part of the story of democracy’s quest. A genuine experimentalism must be open-minded. It must be willing to take risks. But even when disasters are avoided, the effort demanded by the search begs the question of an end point. This gives rise to narratives of democracy as fulfillment. These reflect the fundamental alignment between democracy and the desire both for individual autonomy and unforced cooperation. But such narratives are dangerous not only because they promise premature closure: Rosanvallon’s “closed universals.” They are dangerous also, because narratives of fulfillment lead to their own kind of historical exhaustion: Brown’s “end of history” moment. At that point they risk tipping over into the third mode of narrating democracy: crisis.

This dynamic oscillation between historical modes is not just a formal possibility of Nolte’s schema. It is central to his interpretation of the crises of democracy in the early twentieth century. Nineteenth-century “Whig” progressivism was exhausted by World War I. In the war’s aftermath this set the scene for the problems of contemporary democratic politics to be interpreted as terminal crises that heralded the final exhaustion of democracy’s historical development. It was the collapse of an overconfident developmentalism, combined with a resentful backlash against the real effects of social and political transformation that prepared the way for the leap into the dictatorial dark.

If Nolte coolly lays out the open-ended historical logic of democracy, in John Keane it finds a far more exultant advocate. His “Life and Death of Democracy” offers a rollicking narrative of democracy’s history back to the ancients.⁵⁰ Keane offers not only a dramatic and sweeping reconstruction of democracy as

50 Keane, *Life and Death*.

a global phenomenon. He takes the imbrication of democracy and history to its logical end point. His is not only a historical manifesto for democracy, offered from *de haut en bas*. "Life and Death of Democracy" is a call for the democratization of the history of democracy. It is not simply, as Rosanvallon puts it, that democracy is a history. The interdependence goes both ways. For Keane it is out of democracy, understood as the struggle to realize autonomous self-government, that modern historicity emerges. "[R]ight from the beginning, democracy in action stirred up people's sense of the historical contingency of power relations."⁵¹ Democracy, Keane remarks is "double-jointed." It is both conditioned by history and "a great driver of people's sense of their own historicity."⁵² Invoking his teachers, the odd couple of C.B. Macpherson and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Keane calls for a "dialogue with the dead" to reanimate and re-enfranchise democracy's own past. The parallels to Rosanvallon's appeal to make the past come alive, though unacknowledged, are striking.

Whereas Keane's project of democratizing the history of democracy revels in the unexpected and the surprising, forcing open our Eurocentric horizons with examples drawn from early Mesopotamia to modern "emerging markets," what preoccupies Nolte is the problem of how to form a "balanced judgement" (*ausgewogenes Urteil*).⁵³ His triadic reconstruction of the histories of democracy, positions him to the side of all three. But this, of course, is its own program. Nolte's "balanced" history is, in fact, a vision of something like an ideal mixed constitution of historicity, complete with "checks and balances." On its own, any one of the three modes of democratic historicity harbors dangers. It is when we balance the satisfaction of fulfillment and the restless energy of the democratic search with the heightened awareness of crisis, that we make history safe for democracy.

For Nolte, balance has normative content. Balance is a norm that is threatened from two sides: enthusiasm and despair. Nolte is less worried about democratic triumphalism. After the end of history and Iraq, there is little to fear from that direction. As Brown describes it so eloquently, we live amongst the ruins of liberal hubris and complacency. And that is even truer now in 2018 than when she wrote. Nor does Nolte object to experiments. Concluding his book in October 2011 he welcomed Occupy and Germany's Stuttgart 21 protest movement as typical expressions of post-classical democracy. What really worried Nolte back then was exaggerated and unselfconscious democratic crisis talk. Colin Crouch's notion of post-democracy is his bugbear. The crisis mode of narration, unchecked by the other two – by the recognition of our investment in democracy's promise of fulfillment and the restless open-ended

51 *Ibid.*, p. 875. As Keane puts it at another point, "(democracy) made history possible," p. xi.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 876.

53 Nolte, *Was ist Demokratie*, p. 16.

nature of democratic innovation – is a mode of historicity that Nolte sees both as a harbinger of crisis and as one of its motors. “One should not underestimate the power of discourse and the undertow of speech that destroys democracy.”⁵⁴ Anyone engaging in easy talk of “democratic crisis” *after* Carl Schmitt, Nolte sternly declared in 2011, must hold themselves accountable.

IV.

Nolte’s point about democratic alarmism is well taken. The “dark side of democracy”-literature that emerged from the grim intellectual conjuncture of the early 2000s was profoundly lopsided and its politics were indeed opaque. But if there are risks involved in raising the alarm about false crises, surely there are some crises that *are* real. How do we make the historical judgement? When is the right moment to ring the tocsin? And, in particular, what are we to make of the current crisis? Here, a comparison between Nolte and another historically minded commentator is instructive.

David Runciman begins his latest discussion of democracy and its discontents, “How Democracy Ends,” with a description of a meeting at Cambridge University in January 2017 dedicated to a collective viewing of Donald Trump’s presidential inauguration.⁵⁵ What gives Runciman pause are the mixed emotions that Trump’s bizarre performance evoked. On first viewing Runciman and his colleagues were horrified. As scripted by Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, Trump seemed to pose a clear and present danger to representative democracy. But on second viewing that reaction was displaced by a strange sense of calm and familiarity. Trump banged his drum, but, surely, neither he nor the rest of the populist pack pose any real threat. They express their raging discontent, but within a frame that is itself robust.

So, Runciman, on reflection, strikes a pose of equipoise, checking his first panicked reaction with historical reflection. Strikingly, Nolte’s response to the current crisis has been rather less sanguine. For all his unease with talk of democratic crises and post-democracy, for all his stress on “balance,” when it comes to “populism” Nolte is not one to hold back. The remarkable surge of the AfD in Eastern Germany strikes him as alarmingly reminiscent of the 1920s. “The breakthrough of the rightwing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), which jumped from zero to 15 percent or more just since last summer, took place, comparatively, like a coup,” he remarked to one journalist.

Are there parallels in German history? As far as the drama of the process is concerned, one has to look back much further into the past than the 1980s, i. e., to the Weimar Republic of the 1920s and early 1930s. Regardless of the content of a party’s program, a historian must find it

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 263 f. and pp. 468 – 471.

⁵⁵ David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends*, New York 2018.

worrisome, if a new party formation jumps immediately to 24 %, as the AfD did in Sachsen-Anhalt in March. That indicates a quasi revolutionary unrest.⁵⁶

For Nolte what explains this disastrous shift in public opinion is a historical dysphoria not unlike that which he diagnosed in the early twentieth century. At its heart the democratic discontent both then and now is driven by a “crisis of world view” (*Krise des Weltverständnisses*) that manifested itself in conspiracy theories and anti-establishment thinking.⁵⁷ Driven by their self-confident vision of progress, the elites had left the wider population behind. The result was to unleash “catastrophe fantasies.” If only the voters in Saxony could be brought to understand that “[t]he world is much more stable” than they believed. “The tenacity” of what they clung to, is “in any case structurally much stronger than whatever comes from the outside. And if traditions are threatened, for example the Christian West, then the threat really comes from inside, because the tradition is no longer experienced as vital [...]”⁵⁸ What worried Nolte was the difficulty of reaching voters locked in a solipsistic loop of online media and conspiracy theory.

But if talk of post-democracy in the early 2000s was exaggerated, is there not something overblown about such evocations of the interwar period? In invoking “revolutions,” “coups” and the “1930s,” who is it who is indulging in “catastrophe fantasies”? If one follows Nolte’s argument that democratic crisis talk in the mode of post-democracy can provide raw material for populist anti-systemic politics, what, one must surely ask, is the effect of centrist alarmism that labels the emergence of a dynamic new popular party as a “coup” or a “revolution” and associates it with the most disastrous period in modern German history?

After the first moment of shock at Trump’s inaugural had worn off, Runciman was no longer convinced by the interwar analogy. Certainly, in 2018 he is in no mood to deny the seriousness of our situation and he is convinced of the need to draw on history to understand it. The question for Runciman is which bit of the past to relate to: “In arguing that we ought to get away from our current fixation with the 1930s, I am not suggesting that history is unimportant,” Runciman insists. “Quite the opposite: our obsession with a few traumatic moments in our past can blind us to the many lessons to be drawn from other points in time. [...] We need history to help us break free from our unhealthy

56 Dominique Eigenmann, A Crisis Reminiscent of the 1930s. Germany Facing the New Populism. An Interview with Paul Nolte, in: *Telos*, 30.6.2016, <http://www.telospress.com/a-crisis-reminiscent-of-the-1930s-germany-facing-the-new-populism-an-interview-with-paul-nolte/>.

57 Paul Nolte, “Ähnlichkeiten zu den 20er Jahren werden zunehmend unheimlich,” in: *Deutschlandfunk*, 7.5.2016, https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/populismus-in-deutschland-aehnlichkeiten-zu-den-20er-jahren.691.de.html?dram:article_id=353537.

58 Eigenmann, Crisis.

fixations with our own immediate back story. It is therapy for the middle-aged.”⁵⁹

History for Runciman is less a binding continuity, which is presumably what forces German commentators to turn back to the interwar period, nor is it the protean, self-reflexive entanglement that preoccupies Rosanvallon, Brown and Keane, it is more akin to a wardrobe, or a “suite” of analogic possibilities. If Trump’s populism is the issue, then Runciman looks not to the 1920s, but to the 1890s for insights. If our inability to face the possibility of existential technological or environmental risk is the issue, then the early 1960s, the moment of the Cuban missile crisis, Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring” and Hannah Arendt’s “Banality of Evil” may have more to teach us. If what we are facing are the political ripple effects of a technological revolution, then perhaps we need to go back to 1651 and Hobbes’s conceptualization of the state as automaton in the age of the print revolution. None of these historical vignettes make Runciman confident about the future. But they suggest a different range of problems with democracy than the leap back to the interwar period.

One way to explain the difference between Runciman and Nolte’s use of the past would be to say that Nolte starts with the phenomenon of the upsurge of the AfD and looks for its historical analogues. Runciman by contrast, starts not with the political manifestations – sudden eruption of a popular right-wing movement in Eastern Germany – but with what he takes to be the systemic challenges of the present – for instance, gilded age inequality and existential environmental and technological risk – and looks to see what can be learned from the past about how polities cope with those types of threats. The result is illuminating. It does indeed distance us from a morbid obsession with the interwar period. But it also results in a fractured and episodic treatment. Historical cameos illuminate the present; they do not systematically explain how we got here.

V.

That evasion is not by accident. If one takes democracy in a capacious way, as the topic surely demands, then asking the question of how we got here is tantamount to asking for a comprehensive theoretical history of modernity. Much of what is said about democracy and its historicity – that it *is* a history, that it is constitutive of history – could after all be said about other key terms of modern history, notably capitalism and the state. To offer such a comprehensive account is a daunting task and, in an age suspicious of grand historical theorizing, it is also an unfashionable one. The author to have made the attempt most recently and with most direct application to the question of

⁵⁹ Runciman, *How Democracy Ends*, p. 9.

democracy is Marcel Gauchet.⁶⁰ A long-time fellow traveller of Rosanvallon in the collective of French post-Marxists, the two were estranged in the early 2000s.⁶¹ But their thought continues to exhibit interesting parallels. Like Rosanvallon, Marcel Gauchet is a theorist as much of the political as of politics. In 2007 Gauchet delivered the first of four volumes of the “L’avènement de la démocratie” series. 2017 saw the completion of the project. In it, Gauchet develops a sweeping account of West European modernity from the late middle ages down to the present. Its key terms are autonomy, democracy and above all secularization.⁶²

For Gauchet the “materialization of autonomy concomitant with the leaving of religion was realised in three stages and it was carried out successively by three different drivers: the political, the law and history.”⁶³ The state provided an earthly anchoring of political power. Law provided a structured medium for human-fashioned relationships. Finally,

the process that saw humanity leave religion was characterized by the reversal of the time orientation that had hitherto defined collective action. Running counter to the unconditional obedience owed to a foundational past and to the dependency on tradition, modern historicity projects humanity into the invention of the future.⁶⁴

So Gauchet agrees with Rosanvallon, Brown, Keane and Nolte on the centrality of the connection between historicity and democracy, but insists that its origin lies essentially in the emancipation from a frame of temporal consciousness shaped by religion.

The triad of the state, the law and history structures Gauchet’s history of modernity.

[T]he problems that characterise the democracy of the moderns essentially boil down to a matter of adjusting, of articulating, of combining these three dynamics of autonomy, political, juridical and historical. [...] It is arduous indeed to keep together the requirements

60 On Gauchet’s dogged commitment to grand narrative see Michael C. Behrent, *Age of Emancipation*, in: *Dissent*, winter 2018, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/age-of-emancipation-marcel-gauchet-democracy-review>.

61 Jacob Collins, *A Metaphysics of Democracy*, in: *New Left Review* 74. 2012, pp. 145 – 154.

62 On the secularization theme see Knox Peden, *The Politics of Disenchantment. Marcel Gauchet and the French Struggle with Secularization*, in: *Intellectual History Review* 27. 2017, pp. 135 – 150. On the question of autonomy see Michael C. Behrent, *Thoughts on Gauchet’s L’Avènement de la démocratie*, in: *Tocqueville* 21, 1. 2. 2018, <https://tocqueville21.com/books/thoughts-gauchets-lavenement-de-la-democratie/>.

63 Marcel Gauchet and Natalie J. Doyle, *Democracy. From One Crisis to Another*, in: *Social Imaginaries* 1. 2015, pp. 163 – 187, here p. 167. Gauchet set out his theorization of secularization in *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, Princeton, NJ 1999. For a French reading of the German-inspired debate about secularization see Jean-Claude Monod, *La querelle de la sécularisation. De Hegel à Blumenberg*, Paris 2002.

64 Gauchet, *Democracy*, pp. 167 f.

of the political form, the demands of the individual endowed with rights and the needs of future-oriented self-creation, to make them work in unison.⁶⁵

But the challenge itself is inescapable. For Gauchet, our current moment of crisis can only be a “growth crisis.” It is the fifth in a series of stages in the development of modern democracy:

1. The nineteenth-century liberal regime
2. The early twentieth-century crisis
3. Totalitarianism
4. Post-war mixed regime
5. Neoliberalism.

This periodization is anything but new. But what is interesting about Gauchet’s model is how systematically he places historicity at the heart of this discussion. In every constellation the relationship between all three modes of realizing autonomy is in play – the state, the law and historicity. But it is the third term, the self-conscious, dynamic, historical self-production of society that is the prime mover. What emerged from the *Sattelzeit* between 1750 and 1850 under the sign of liberal modernity was the primacy of civil society and its dynamic self-reproduction, a “new type of society” in Gauchet’s words, “history-based society” (“*la société de l’histoire*”). It is hard here not to hear echoes of Hegel, or Dilthey’s “objective spirit,” or on the other hand Arendt’s critique of the modern condition and the coupling together of the historical and the social.⁶⁶

Against this backdrop the first fundamental crisis of the modern democratic constitution that culminated in the disasters of the interwar period, is defined as the point at which

on the one hand democratic legitimacy won, came into effect and imposed the rule of the masses whilst on the other hand, this theoretical advance of autonomy [...] far from leading to actual self-government led in reality to a loss of collective mastery. The parliamentary system revealed itself to be both deceptive and impotent; society stressed by the division of labour and the antagonism between the classes, gave the impression of coming apart; historical change, as it became widespread, accelerated, intensified and escaped all control. Thus, humans, at the very moment they could no longer ignore the fact that they were the ones that made history, found themselves forced to admit to themselves that they did not comprehend the very history they were making. [...] A suspicion crept in, the suspicion that the move away from religion had perhaps given birth to an unruly society. The two great phenomena of the 20th century – the eruption of totalitarianisms and the formation of liberal democracies – must be understood as two responses to this immeasurable crisis.⁶⁷

65 Ibid., p. 169.

66 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, New York 1968.

67 Gauchet, *Democracy*, p. 171.

So, like Nolte, Gauchet diagnoses an imbalance in the force field of historicity as one of the principal drivers of the early twentieth-century crisis.⁶⁸ But crucially, for Gauchet the crisis of unsettlement in the early twentieth century was still shaped by the shock of the first wave of secularization. That was the model of certainty against which the new experience of uncertainty was measured and for which totalitarian models of social and political organization offered a violent fix.

This is what for Gauchet sets the early twenty-first century crisis of democracy apart from that a hundred years earlier and makes analogies to the 1920s so misleading. What separates the two moments is not just the intervening regime of the “Trente Glorieuse” in which the power of the state, law, and the historical self-production of society were happily recombined. The crucial historical development is a second and terminal wave of secularization that swept across Western Europe from the 1960s, or, as Gauchet calls it, the “re-launch of the process of disengagement from religion.” What has been commonly characterized as the age of neoliberalism has this comprehensive process of secularization at its core. It was a second great “theologico-political” upheaval. Autonomy triumphs. The last traces of heteronomy are erased. “Only the perspective of the latter makes it possible to recognise the mutation’s manifold dimensions.”⁶⁹ What we are living through is a new and deeper form of unsettlement. Furthermore, our reaction to it is framed by the kaleidoscopic, shifting geometry of relations between the state, the law and historicity. Whereas in the early twentieth century the answer to the challenge of the open future was the state and politics, in our current moment, under the sign of neoliberalism, it is law that is the key.

The regime of rights – both property and human rights,

is the master authority of today’s social configuration. It confers its political tone upon the liberal offensive, by laying almost as much emphasis on the exercise of individual rights as on civil society’s capacity for initiative. One can debate for a long time which of the two, in the end, exercises more influence among the forces which shape our world: economic freedoms or the politics of human rights. For our purpose, suffice it to note their interdependency.⁷⁰

But despite the hegemony of a liberal rights regime, the other two elements of Gauchet’s triad cannot be suppressed. They are definitional of modernity. The collective capacities of the state remain a functional necessity and the roaring

68 For related formulations one might look to Henry Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890–1930*, New York 1977, Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement*, London 1992 and Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire. Has History Come to an End?*, London 1994.

69 Jacob Hamburger and Marcel Gauchet, *There has been an Absolute Victory of the Democratic Principle*, in: *Toqueville* 21, 29.1.2018, <https://toqueville21.com/interviews/marcel-gauchet-absolute-victory-of-the-democratic-principle/>.

70 Gauchet, *Democracy*, p. 176.

pace of economic and social change in the early twenty-first century is more intense than ever. We live thus in a world governed by an “optical illusion.” Notionally, the legal rights regime is all, but

[t]he Nation State has remained as structurally important as ever but in a purely infrastructural mode and in the context of the disappearance of the imperative transcendental authority conferred upon it by religious structural underpinnings. [...] Likewise, never has the perception that history is accelerating been so widespread, and justifiably so, no matter how inadequate the words used to convey it. The amplification of historical action is indeed conspicuous. Except that this deepening of the productive orientation towards the future has the consequence of making this future impossible to grasp at the same time as it obscures the past. As this deepening severs the ties that unified time it imprisons us in a perpetual present. At the very moment when the historical orientation rules to a degree as yet unequalled, all happens as if history has ceased to exist. In the collective environment only the juridical dimension remains visible.⁷¹

Gauchet’s macrohistorical vision thus provides the underpinning of Samuel Moyn’s well-known critique of the politics of human rights and their historiography.⁷² For Moyn, the era of human rights as claims against the nation state commences in the 1970s, with the exhaustion of the postcolonial state project and the advent of market liberalism.⁷³ Like Rosanvallon, Gauchet places himself at a distance to the late turn by Habermas and the Habermasians to law and normativity. Gauchet does not deny the significance of individualized rights as a historic achievement, but he turns our attention to the “generalised feeling of being dispossessed that haunts life in a rights based democracy.”⁷⁴ Ultimately a rights-based, legally fixated “minimal democracy” is for Gauchet profoundly unsatisfactory and unstable because it cannot recognize either the public power necessary to govern or the reality of the socio-economic processes with which it interacts.

In concrete terms what this means is that the economy, under the banner of rights, imposes its rules and, in the process, changes to a very large extent the powers and freedoms of the individual. This constant dissonance consolidates the feeling that society is destined to be oblivious to itself, that the collective cannot be seized and, in the last instance, that democracy is impossible in the fullest sense of that word. How could this political community, supposing it even still exists, and which cannot be controlled because it is being pulled by incompatible demands, be capable of making choices that affect the whole?⁷⁵

71 *Ibid.*, pp. 175 f.

72 Samuel Moyn, *The Politics of Individual Rights*. Marcel Gauchet and Claude Lefort, in: Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt (eds.), *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 291 – 310.

73 Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia*. *Human Rights in History*, Cambridge, MA 2010.

74 Gauchet, *Democracy*, p. 180.

75 Gauchet, *Democracy*, p. 182. It will be interesting to see whether Jacob Collins upholds his critique of Gauchet’s work as “idealist” in light of this analysis of the “rule” of the economy, see Jacob Collins, *An Anthropological Turn? The Unseen Paradigm in Modern French Thought*, in: *New Left Review* 78. 2012, pp. 31 – 60. At the very least we will need

And the circle becomes vicious when the sense of living in an environment which escapes our control means that “the concept of democracy can only retain one plausible meaning, the protection of the freedoms of the private individual,” which reinforces the “unconditional legitimacy of personal prerogatives,” further amplifying “skepticism towards collective power.” The result is to continuously exacerbate

the divide between the elites and the people; inexorably it erodes the trust of people in the very oligarchies it pushes them to rely upon. The populist reactions such logic provokes ends up reinforcing the situation they denounce. Minimal democracy is a form of democracy that is all the more insecure and unhappy with itself for being trapped in a circle that deprives it of the means to self-correct.⁷⁶

Not only does Gauchet allow us to differentiate systematically between epochs of crisis. He also allows us to situate the mode of historicity that is so characteristic of our moment. The sense of loss of the grand narrative from which Brown takes her starting point and the modest, cut-down, plural version of history that Rosanvallon, Nolte and Runciman in their various ways advocate are symptomatic. As Gauchet puts it, in a world in which the political-theological disarmament has been taken to a new level, in a world of minimal democracy, history itself has been desacralized. We are beyond the end of the end of history.⁷⁷

The sweep of Gauchet's vision is impressive. But the obvious question is how it stands in relation to its own diagnosis. Can a vision capable of proclaiming that we are “beyond the end of the end of history” really claim even to have reached the end of history? Either Gauchet's account of the present is incomplete, or he cannot account for the conditions of his own possibility. Uncharitably, one might see it as a sign of Gauchet's belatedness. His sprawling narrative is a souped-up version of 1970s anti-totalitarianism beached in a world that, as he himself admits, is well beyond post-totalitarian excitement.⁷⁸ Even the tearing down of monuments to dictators has become a hackneyed routine.⁷⁹

But for Gauchet himself, such dismissive responses simply fail to register his critical intent. Unfashionable though it may be, what his supervening philosophical history allows him to do is diagnose the current moment of historical fragmentation as itself an effect of the “minimal democracy” that we inhabit. Rather than accepting an endless and ever-expanding search à la Keane, or “balance” à la Nolte as adequate, Gauchet continues to orientate

to reckon with the “thickness” of Gauchet's vision of the historical self-production of society.

76 Gauchet, *Democracy*, p. 180.

77 Marcel Gauchet, *Le nouveau monde. Avènement de la démocratie*, vol. IV, Paris 2017, p. 380.

78 The line forcefully developed by Collins, *Metaphysics of Democracy*.

79 The current crop of “anti-totalitarian” attacks on Trump only serve to reinforce the point, see for instance Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny. Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, New York 2017.

himself towards a totality of historical interpretation. And it is from that vantage point that he formulates his positive project. What he aims for is a “recomposition” of the political. This will entail not a rejection of the “human rights moment” and its attenuated historicity, but its reflexive subsumption and rearticulation with a revived capacity for collective political action and a reenergized conception of collective historical self-production. Beyond the end of secularization, at least as far as Europe is concerned, there is no alternative to the basic triadic structure of state, law and history. The only question is how they will be combined and recombined.

VI.

What our survey suggests is that over the decades since the Cold War there have been, at least, three ways of thinking the connection of democracy and history.

The most active and widely practiced mode is a kind of hit and run pluralism that poses the question of democracy and history again and again in a variety of ways. For this monitory history of democracy, Keane provides a jubilant manifesto. Brown’s embrace of Nietzsche and Foucault perhaps points in a similar direction. Runciman’s pick-and-mix approach has a similar pragmatic feel.

Then there are a series of efforts to ground or to give structure to this relationship. In Keane’s reflections on the essential entanglement of democracy and historicity we see one variant of this move. Rosanvallon’s ontologically founded historicism – “democracy is a history” – offers another. Nolte recasts this in formal terms by way of his three ideal types of democratic histories, organized around fulfilment, search and crisis. Nolte also converges with Rosanvallon in suggesting that a history of democracy must include both a “negative history” of the critics and enemies that democracy raises against itself, and a history of democracy’s priests, its theologians, the formalizers and architects of the “closed universals” that a truly historical approach to the subject cannot abide.

At a higher level of abstraction still, we have to reckon with Gauchet’s frankly macrohistorical birds-eye view that insists that we must explain how the current configuration of historicity and political organization came to be. This situates democracy and its discontents within the entire process of modern historicity unleashed by the rupturing of the Christian worldview in the early modern period.

The next question to ask is what is the relation between these three metahistorical positions. Should one adopt a pragmatic stance? Is it an ascending chain, as one might imagine Gauchet asserting? Or does the logic of a balanced constitution, which Nolte invokes to found his triad of histories of democracy, operate in relation to these three metahistorical modes as well? Do

the three modes complement each other – the energized and engaged polemic addressed to an immediate problem, the cool recognition of historiographic plurality offset by the continued quest for totalizing explanation? Or do they in fact exclude one another?

Certainly, their historical diagnoses of the problems of the present diverge. Whilst Paul Nolte refers us back to the familiar crises of the twentieth century and Marcel Gauchet waits for the latest wave of secularization to work itself out, John Keane, in one of his dizzying inversions asks: “What Americans can learn from China about democracy?”⁸⁰ Meanwhile, David Runciman draws on Cold War history to assess our likely chance of controlling artificial intelligence and the coming swarms of nanorobots. Are they the electromechanical embodiment of the banality of evil?⁸¹

Of course, the responses of intellectuals to an immediate crisis are not predetermined by the intellectual framework they have previously elaborated. There is scope for innovation, slippage and self-contradiction. But excavating the underlying assumptions about the relationship between history and democracy certainly throws light on the choices made by our protagonists in relation to the current crisis. The most neuralgic issue, distinguishing particularly cleanly between Nolte, Runciman, Gauchet and Keane, is the significance they attach to the interwar analogy. For Nolte it remains a touchstone. For Gauchet it was the expression of an earlier growth crisis. Runciman regards it as a middle-aged tick in need of therapeutic treatment and Keane urges us to move beyond Eurocentric preoccupations.

One of the most glaring differences between the present and the interwar period is that the early twentieth century was a period of spectacular politicization. That hardly describes our current moment of disenchantment and tumbling electoral participation. Not for nothing Runciman invokes as an alternative historical reference Chris Clark's bestselling account of the July crisis of 1914. Are we, Runciman asks, “sleepwalking” towards the end of democracy?⁸² As Müller and Richter note in their introduction to this issue, Francis Fukuyama identified amnesia as one of the threats to democracy beyond the end of history.⁸³

If the literature discussed here has one thing in common, it is the urge to overcome this absence of mind. What it calls for is general awakening to historical consciousness about democracy and the experimental possibilities

80 John Keane, *What Can Americans Learn from China about Democracy?*, in: John Keane Blog, 26. 5. 2017, <http://www.johnkeane.net/interview-with-ideapod-democracy-in-china/>.

81 Runciman, *How Democracy Ends*, p. 111.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 115 citing Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London 2012. Runciman goes on to juxtapose democratic sleepwalking with democratic tightrope walking.

83 See Tim B. Müller and Hedwig Richter, *Einführung. Demokratiegeschichten. Deutschland (1800 – 1933) in transnationalen Perspektive*, in: GG 44. 2018, S. 325 – 335.

that its histories suggest. But the question remains to be answered: What history do we wake into? Whose history is it? And perhaps even more basic is the essential political question of who it is that we imagine awakening. To whom is our message in fact addressed? And how will they react to the ringing of our historical alarm clocks? Might they not simply prefer to hit the snooze button? What will it take to rouse “us” from sleep? In the final analysis, some will doubt that consciousness is really at the root of the problem at all. By focusing on “the political” and discussing the history of modern democracy as such, are we really just trying to find ways of not centering our thought and action on the critique of the political economy of capitalism? What might be the price, both intellectual and political, we pay for that choice?⁸⁴

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84 In Gauchet’s case the intention to displace Marx is manifest, see Peden, *Politics of Disenchantment*; more generally Collins, *Anthropological Turn* and Collins, *Metaphysics of Democracy*.