› PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION ›
THE POLITICS OF UNREASON REVISITED

The central question of our times is whether we are witnessing the worldwide rejection of liberal democracy and its replacement by some sort of populist authoritarianism. Strong signs of this trend are to be found in Trump's America, Putin's Russia, Modi's India and Erdoğan's Turkey. In addition, we have numerous examples of already existing authoritarian governments (Orbán in Hungary, [Andrzej] Duda in Poland), and major aspirants to authoritarian right-wing rule in France, Austria and other European countries.

—Arjun Appadurai, "Democracy Fatigue," in *The Great Regression*

The Politics of "Blood and Belonging"

Today, we are witnessing the ascendancy of a "politics of unreason" on a planetary scale.

One of the main symptoms thereof has been the replacement of "civic" or "rights-oriented" approaches to democracy with exclusionary, "ethnic" models of democracy. This trend has been felicitously described as a *new tribalism*: a regressive approach to collective belonging meant to offset the manifestations of acute social disequilibrium—economic, political, and cultural—that, in the wake of neoliberalism's triumph, have become endemic to modern nation-states.

With the collapse of communism in 1989, expectations arose that "the world was moving irrevocably beyond nationalism, beyond tribalism, beyond the provincial confines of the identities inscribed in our passports" toward new models of political equality.[1] Today, these hopes lie in ruins. What has taken place, instead, is a classic example of the "return of the repressed": the upsurge of political movements that favor a return to the antidemocratic paradigm of "integral nationalism."

Historically, proponents of integral nationalism, such as Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras, held the egalitarian ideals of French Republicanism in pronounced contempt. In their stead, they affirmed the values of an *ethnically homogeneous, national community*: in other words, a version of "national socialism" *à la française*. In *Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme* (1902), Barrès proclaimed, "I enter into revolt against laws that are not the laws of my race." Anticipating the French National Front's chauvinistic embrace of "la priorité nationale," Barrès declared that "nationalism means resolving all questions on the basis of French interests."[2]

Guided by a visceral contempt for "universalism," these die-hard anti-Dreyfusards excoriated the Rights of Man, seeking to replace them with a series of *differential, national truths*. The "Critique of Reason"—*Vernunftkritik*—was the epistemological cornerstone of their political program.[3] Both then and now, defenders of integral nationalism reject the tenets of "political reason" in favor of blind allegiance to the nation as *Schicksalgemeinschaft*, a "community of fate." They consistently dismissed universal claims to justice and truth as detrimental to the goals of national self-assertion.

An "Age of Regression"

The political ascendancy of the "new tribalism" is disturbing insofar as it has underwritten and abetted a regressive approach to questions of identity-formation and national consciousness: an approach predicated on the instinctual "right of blood" (*jus sanguinis*) as opposed to the prerogatives of civic equality (*jus solis*).

Today, this momentous transformation—as worrisome as it is widespread—is reflected in the emergence of *authoritarian national populist movements* as a pseudo-solution to problems of "ungovernability" that have plagued modern democracies virtually since their inception. In recent years, given the failure of the self-correcting mechanisms of market-based capitalism to remedy escalating socioeconomic inequality, these difficulties and dilemmas have only increased in severity.[4]

Neoliberalism's hegemony has resulted in the triumph of TINA—"there is no alternative"—and *la pensée unique*. Currently, markets are no longer hemmed in by states. Instead, the state's capacities are determined and defined by markets. We are now in the throes of a Brave New World of unbridled deregulation, in which free trade agreements have opened up markets that are immune to the mollifying influences of politics, and partial commodification has yielded to total commodification. Thereby, a new age of hypertrophic neoliberalism has decimated the precarious gains of the post–World War II welfare state.[5]

For decades, neoconservatives have recited the mantra that free markets and democratization are necessary corollaries. Today, however, it has become clear that *the reverse is true*: uninhibited deregulation destroys the moral and institutional resources that are indispensable if democracy is to flourish. By elevating the egotism of *homo oeconomicus* to the status of an Absolute, neoliberalism has systematically stifled the values of solidarity and civic-mindedness. In their absence, democratic ideals have withered. A regressive longing for unassailable political authority has emerged, in the hope that it might bring to a halt the great socioeconomic unraveling.

In earlier periods, one could rely on organized labor and social democracy to utilize their political leverage in order to press for the necessary economic and social reforms. Conversely, in an era of post-Fordist, "flexible response" capitalism, the working class has become socially stratified—hence disunified—and the corporate state has effectively neutralized the last vestiges of trade union contestation.

As a result, today, we are witnessing a further installment of the dialectic of "barbarism and civilization": the entwinement of unprecedented technological advances—above all, in the spheres of digitalization and microcomputing—with ever-escalating levels of global social misery. The end result has been aptly denominated a new *age of regression*. As one commentator has observed:

> The symptoms of decline could be enumerated almost indefinitely: the anarchic yearning for unilateral de-globalization; the emergence of the Identitarian movement in France, Italy, and Austria; growing

> xenophobia and Islamophobia; a new wave of so-called hate crimes; and finally, the rise of authoritarian demagogues such as Rodrigo Duterte [in the Philippines], Recip Tayyip Erdoğan [in Turkey], and Narendra Modi [in India]. . . . All of this has been accompanied by an increase in hysteria and a coarsening of public discourse, together with a herd mentality on the part of the established media.[6]

The Social Psychology of "The Lonely Crowd"

Over a century ago, the sociopsychological constituents of collective regression were lucidly analyzed in pathbreaking studies by Gustave Le Bon and Sigmund Freud. Both thinkers viewed these tendencies, along with their attendant political risks, as a central feature of modern "mass society."

According to Le Bon, the defining feature of crowd psychology is the triumph of the unconscious mind over conscious thought. Hence, upon joining the crowd, the individual "yields to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce, have kept under restraint. . . . The sentiment of responsibility which always controls individuals *disappears entirely*."[7] In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1923), Freud reformulated Le Bon's conclusions as follows:

> In a group the individual is brought under conditions that will allow him to throw off the repression of his unconscious instinctual impulses. The apparently new characteristics which he then displays are in fact the manifestations of this unconscious, *in which all that is evil in the human mind is contained as a predisposition*.[8]

In contrast, leading proponents of democratic theory, such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, have stressed the importance of "public reason" as a sine qua non of liberal democratic politics. According to Rawls, public reason requires that we articulate political arguments in a *civic idiom* consistent with our most cherished "constitutional essentials." In this respect, public reason encourages a discourse of fairness—in keeping with Rawls's notion of "Justice as Fairness"—in order to ensure that, in matters of legislation, political

deliberation transcends citizens' private convictions and soteriological views.[9] It was in a similar spirit that, in "What Is Enlightenment?" Immanuel Kant contrasted the virtues of public reason with absolute monarchy's inclination to treat matters concerning the "public weal" as a private possession—a practice that was especially true of diplomacy, where "publicness" was suppressed on the grounds of *arcana imperii* or "secrets of state."

Today, a new cohort of antidemocratic elites has forsaken public reason in favor of a rhetorical strategy that consciously exploits the psychological vulnerabilities of the downtrodden masses. These twenty-first-century "prophets of deceit" thrive by making emotional appeals that are designed to incite fear and belligerence, the better to manipulate and confuse the public and, thereby, to ensure its obedience.[10]

Having been politically disenfranchised, vast strata of the lower middle classes have increasingly cast their lot with a new breed of political charlatan: demagogues who have disingenuously—as Donald Trump proclaimed at the 2016 Republican National Convention—"promised to be [their] voice." Their brand of political chicanery appeals to men and women whose weak ego ideals reflect their economic and political powerlessness. Having been denied the fruits of the acquisitive society, and with few prospects of social advancement, the downtrodden are willing and eager to sacrifice their autonomy to charismatic political leaders who specialize in making outsize promises.

Under the circumstances, an "escape from freedom" (E. Fromm) seems a worthwhile political trade-off. By virtue of these acts of self-surrender, they hope to remedy their political impotence, while simultaneously sublimating their latent masochist cravings. By becoming part of a larger political movement, they seek to offset their unbearable social isolation. They perceive a commitment to mass politics as a means of escaping the atomism of the "lonely crowd." They wager that this loss of selfhood will be adequately compensated by their incorporation into a larger whole. Thereby, they hope to circumvent the psychological self-doubt that is endemic to a bourgeois society undergoing the transition from laissez-faire to "total administration."

For the masochistic personality, the benefits of political authoritarianism are clear: he is "saved from the doubt of what the meaning of his life is or who 'he' is. These questions are answered by the relationship to the power to which he has attached himself. The meaning of his life and the identity of his self are determined by the greater whole into which the self has submerged."[11]

However, in nearly every case, the charismatic leaders and false messiahs in whom these atomized individuals place their trust have proved to be little more than twenty-first-century snake-oil salesmen: demagogues who, instead of proposing tangible solutions to pressing social problems, excel at shifting the blame toward vulnerable outgroups: immigrants and prospective asylum seekers, Muslims, ethnic minorities, and religious subgroups. In the end, scapegoating and xenophobia substitute for badly needed structural economic reforms and the alleviation of crushing material impoverishment.

Democratic Dysfunction

Upon closer inspection, the political anomie and structural contradictions I have described seem to inhere in the very definition of democracy.

Etymologically, "democracy" means rule of the demos or people. In the case of ancient democracy, the conceptual ambiguities of democratic rule could be more or less contained, insofar as there was general agreement about the qualifications for citizenship and political inclusion. Conversely, with the advent of modern democracy, uncertainties about the criteria of civic belonging emerged with a vengeance, since it was never clear how "the people" were to be identified and defined.[12] Did women count? Religious minorities? What about artisans, shopkeepers, and those without property? In 1790, the French Constituent Assembly vigorously debated whether to grant citizenship to actors and executioners, since it was widely believed that the dubious character of their professions disqualified them as "rational political actors."[13]

As the debate advanced, the citizenship status of these "questionable" groups was defined in terms of a priceless oxymoron. They were

deemed *passive citizens*: members of the political community whose capacities were restricted to the prerogatives of "civic" belonging. Thereby, they were denied the entitlements of *active citizenship*: that is to say, the right to vote and the right to stand for and to hold office.

In sum: since its very inception, the idea of democratic citizenship was restrictive and partial, notwithstanding attendant claims to democratic inclusiveness and popular sovereignty. Historically speaking, the perquisites of active citizenship were always weighted in favor of the moneyed few. Conversely, for other groups, the benefits of democratic participation would accrue only after decades of laborious struggle.

Moreover, although advocates of modern democracy acknowledged that "We the People" should rule, the forms and mechanisms of democratic government were always highly contested. The demographics of the modern nation-state made it impossible for the collective citizenry to assemble and deliberate, as was done in Periclean Athens. The leading champion of modern democracy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, famously held representative government in low esteem, fearing that "representation" would spell the end of civic equality and rapidly devolve into new forms of political hierarchy. In retrospect, Rousseau's pessimistic prognoses were not far off the mark. In many respects, the shortcomings of modern democratic practice were inscribed in its very being.

Today, throughout the globe, authoritarian political leaders have succeeded in exploiting democracy's endemic weaknesses with a vengeance, thereby giving the lie to Francis Fukuyama's prognosis in *The End of History* that, with communism's demise, liberal democracy had permanently bested the competition. Similarly optimistic political forecasts—such as Samuel J. Huntington's conjecture that, with the coterminous unraveling of dictatorships in southern Europe (Greece, Spain, and Portugal), South Africa, Asia (South Korea and the Philippines), and Latin America (Chile and Argentina), the world was experiencing a "third wave" of democratization—also appear to have been naïve to a fault. Instead, in both the Occident and the Orient, new forms of illiberal "pseudo-democracy" have proliferated, dashing expectations concerning the advent of a liberal democratic utopia, and confirming Rousseau's

cynical observation that, given humanity's imperfections, democracy was a form of political rule better suited to *gods* than to *men*.[14]

The Rise of "Illiberal Democracy"

In discussing the rise of illiberal democracy, I will focus on two especially disturbing examples of "democratic devolution": the cases of Hungary and Poland, which, until recently, had been lauded as exemplary instances of successful "democratic transitions."

It is unsurprising that nations with long-standing traditions of autocracy, such as Russia and Turkey, would, following brief flirtations with the "open society," revert to authoritarian rule. Thus, following an ill-fated coup attempt in 2016, Turkish leader Recip Erdoğan has taken steps to ensure that he will remain "president for life," incarcerating tens of thousands of political rivals, banning opposition parties, and restaffing the judiciary with servile loyalists. Similarly, following an unexpectedly strong electoral challenge in 2012, Vladimir Putin undertook an aggressive campaign to smash the vestiges of Russian civil society and to marginalize or crush political rivals.

Previously, political analysts had adjudged Russia as a classic instance of "hybrid democracy": a designation suggesting that politics in Russia displayed a quasi-acceptable combination of democratic and authoritarian features; hence, it seemed that the final verdict on democratization in Russia was still out. On one hand, national and local elections were held regularly; and freedom of speech and rule of law were honored—albeit within government-prescribed limits. On the other hand, elections were not entirely "free," since outcomes were strongly weighted in favor of incumbents, and the right of oppositional parties to organize was seriously restricted.

More recently, however, under Putin's rule, the balance has shifted unambiguously in the direction of inflexible political autocracy. As the political scientists David Cameron and Mitchell Orenstein conclude in "Post-Soviet Authoritarianism": in the period since 1991, "Russia experienced the *largest* erosion in political rights, civil liberties, and democracy of any of the 29 post-communist countries."[15]

Since Putin began his drive toward unchallenged political hegemony, dissidents and journalists have been systematically silenced and—in the tragic case of the charismatic dissident Boris Nemtsov—brutally murdered. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea and military invasion of Ukraine, in 2014, Putin's approval rating skyrocketed to 80 percent. In terms of political longevity, he recently surpassed Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982) to become Russia's longest-serving ruler since Stalin (1924–1953). And although Putin is scheduled to complete his fifth term in office in 2024, currently, there are no constitutional guarantees or provisions in place compelling him to step down. At this point, it is difficult to foresee who or what will replace him.

Equally troubling are the cases of the fledgling Central and Eastern European post-communist states, whose political incorporation into the European Union, in 2004, was intended as a prophylactic against authoritarian regression.

The prognosis for ex-communist nations of southeastern Europe—Bulgaria and Romania—had always been grim, since, in this region, democratic traditions have been endemically weak. Moreover, from the very beginning, the transition process had been riddled with corruption and adversely affected by what was in effect a power grab by former communist elites.

Conversely, in the cases of Hungary and Poland, expectations were considerably higher. Following some initial setbacks, by the early 2000s both nations were widely regarded as model instances of successful transitions to democracy. As a leading political scientist has observed: "Hungary was once the star of the post-1989 transition. It was the first in the region to rewrite its constitution to embrace democratic values. It had a steady string of free and fair elections from 1990 through 2010 with regular alternation of governments between left and right. . . . In fact, Hungary became the very model of a 'consolidated democracy,'" as defined in the standard literature on democratic "transitions."[16] A 2010 Freedom House assessment of "Political Rights and Civil Liberties" in twenty-nine post-communist states rated Hungary and Poland among the highest scorers.[17]

In retrospect, however, these upbeat appraisals proved woefully premature. With Viktor Orbán's election as prime minister in 2010,

Hungary's earlier advances with respect to rule of law and civic freedom were effaced with a rapidity and finality few observers had anticipated. With the leading opposition party sidelined owing to a corruption scandal, Orbán reconfigured the Hungarian constitution, thereby ensuring the predominance of one-party rule for the foreseeable future.

The centerpiece of Orbán's "parliamentary coup" concerned his disqualification of an independent judiciary. Backed by an impregnable parliamentary majority,[18] Orbán arbitrarily lowered the retirement age of Hungary's Supreme Court justices, a maneuver that permitted him to fill the vacancies with loyalists. Simultaneously, Orbán rammed through a constitutional amendment expanding the number of justices, thereby creating even more vacancies, which Orbán proceeded self-servingly to fill. Next, Orbán transformed Hungary's election laws in a manner that redounded to the advantage of his own Fidesz Party. Thereby, Orbán and Fidesz managed to ensure that, in the future, electoral or constitutional challenges would be impossible.

Orbán supplemented the aforementioned authoritarian measures with a despotic media law that was administered by the "National Media and Communications Authority," whose five members were handpicked by Orbán. Subsequently, journalists and news outlets were required to pay draconian fines—up to 200 million Hungarian forints or 600,000 euros—for "immoral reporting" and content deemed offensive to Hungarian national honor. In the case of Hungary's state-run television network, Orbán simply dismissed hundreds of employees he suspected of disloyalty and replaced them with progovernment hacks. When the dust had cleared, Orbán succeeded in effectively silencing the "fifth estate."

From the backbenches of the European Parliament, ex-68er Daniel Cohn-Bendit fittingly accused Orbán of seeking to transform Hungary into a "Communist surveillance dictatorship," and, more pointedly, of attempting to introduce "Putinism" into Hungary.

From the very beginning, the evisceration of Hungarian democracy has been accompanied by a weighty infusion of traditional ethnic chauvinism: a strategy that was profoundly reminiscent of Hungary's interwar, pro-fascist Horthy regime. Thus Fidesz, along

with its far-right coalition partner, Jobbik, has consistently sought to valorize ethnic Magyars—so called true Hungarians—to the detriment of detested minorities and out-groups: Jews, Roma, asylum seekers, and homosexuals, whose presence purportedly posed a threat to Hungarian national integrity.

These actions have resulted in a rash degradation of Hungarian civic discourse. Among contemporary right-wing politicians and opinion leaders, it has become common practice to disparage individuals and groups who are critical of the new Hungary's national chauvinism as "objectively Jewish" or as "symbolic Jews." Even prior to Orbán's implementation of anticonstitutional measures and decrees, antidemocratic elements frequently denigrated the Hungarian parliament building as the "synagogue on Kossuth Square." They excoriated the European Union as a "Zionist Front Organization" and condemned liberal and social democratic political opponents as beholden to a nefarious "Tel Aviv–New York–Brussels" axis.[19]

Little wonder that, in recent years, Budapest has turned into a safe haven and clearinghouse for neofascists, Aryan supremacists, and the international alt-right.[20] Moreover, since the relationship between Budapest and Brussels has soured, Orbán has openly turned to fellow autocrat Vladimir Putin for political support.

The one possible stopgap or counterforce to Orbán's and Fidesz's evisceration of Hungarian democracy was the European Union. However, the EU's weak self-understanding as, in the first instance, an economic entity, as opposed to a cohesive political unit, ultimately proved its undoing.

According to Article 7 of the EU Constitution, nations that violate EU norms with respect to rule of law or human rights are subject to censure. However, the implementation of this rule risks provoking a strong political backlash among the inhabitants of the offending nation. Hence the unintended consequence of such actions may be to reinforce the political isolation and insularity of the target nation. Moreover, it is well known that demagogues such as Viktor Orbán and Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński are particularly adept at stoking the fires of populist ressentiment.

Throughout the region, like-minded authoritarian national populists have lauded Orbán's brand of illiberal democracy, exalting the

"Hungarian model" as a praiseworthy alternative to constitutionalism and rule of law. For example, in neighboring Poland, Law and Justice Party (PiS) leaders have brazenly emulated the antidemocratic measures and tactics that Orbán utilized to decimate the fabric of Hungarian democracy.

In 2017, in developments that were widely publicized, Poland's right-wing parliament passed legislation lowering the retirement age of the nation's high court justices, permitting Kaczyński and his lieutenants to replace them with jurists who had pledged in advance to support the Law and Justice Party's ethnopopulist agenda. One of the main goals of these complex machinations was to redefine Polish identity according to ethnic and religious as opposed to civic criteria. Thereby, dissenters and critics would be deprived of any constitutional or legal standing. Hence, going forward, those who disagree with majoritarian policies should be condemned for their disloyalty and branded as "traitors."

It was at this point that, alarmed by Poland's breach with rule of law, for the first time in its history, the European Commission undertook steps to censure a member state, a procedure that mandates a three-month review before further action can be taken. However, since, in order to be enacted, such measures require unanimous support on the part of EU members, there is virtually no likelihood they will come to pass, since, as expected, Hungary has already declared its refusal to go along in the event of a vote.

Law and Justice Party leaders meretriciously alleged that the EU's disapprobation reflected a conspiracy to force Warsaw to accept vast numbers of undesirable Middle Eastern refugees against its will. Invoking the fiction of a communist threat as a pretext, the government proceeded to vastly expand the state security apparatus—the same organ that so many Poles had grown to loathe under communist rule.

Kaczyński, for his part, has had choice words for naysayers and dissidents who disapprove of Law and Justice policies, excoriating them as *"Poles of the worst sort"*: betrayers of the Polish nation, who should be treated accordingly. In the words of one well-informed observer:

> Kaczyński's signature achievement is a brand of populist politics predicated on the notion that the Polish Third Republic, inaugurated with the collapse of the Communist regime, has been a mafia-like cabal. He rose to power . . . promising to create a "Fourth Republic," to elevate the Catholic Church's position in public life, to reinstitute Communist-era welfare guarantees, and . . . to expose the alleged skeletons in the closets of the Third Republic's political and business elites. [21]

Illiberal Democracy and Its Doubles

How should one characterize political regimes such as those in Hungary and Poland that have relied on authoritarian populist methods to systematically undermine the precepts of rule of law, electoral fairness, and constitutionalism? To describe them simply as "authoritarian" seems inadequate: uninformative and nondescript, insofar as a glorification of political authority is a feature they share with a wide variety of kindred regimes. Thus, taken by itself, it fails to account for their political specificity.

As various critics have pointed out, the epithet "illiberal democracy" also seems amorphous and misleading, since, in truth, these polities have ceased to be democracies in any meaningful sense of the word. Recently, Fareed Zakaria, who first popularized the term, has acknowledged the descriptive limitations of the "illiberal democracy" paradigm. In its stead, he has simply proposed "Putinism," which he defines as an ungainly combination of nationalism, religion, state capitalism, and a politically bridled media.[22]

Other commentators have argued for the descriptive and analytical cogency of "neofascism." But these attempts also lack empirical precision. Historically speaking, one of the distinguishing features of fascism was the premium it placed on "total mobilization": a key technique that fascist leaders employed in order to ensure that popular enthusiasm remained keen. It was also a mechanism that highlighted fascism's "energetic" approach to politics, in contrast with the lethargy of bourgeois "parliamentarism." It is not hard to see

that, owing to their fundamental conservatism, the authoritarian states I have been describing do not qualify as "fascist" or "neofascist." As with the integral nationalist regimes of the 1930s, today's neoauthoritarian states fear mobilizations from below that they cannot control.

One of the main analytical and definitional challenges of the cases I have been discussing derives from the fact that political leaders have continuously paid lip service to the formal requirements of democratic rule, while simultaneously doing their utmost to strip democracy of all substantive value and meaning. Thus neither in Hungary nor in Poland have oppositional political parties been banned outright. Instead, in both cases, the politics of authoritarian consolidation or "state capture" has ensured that, in the future, it will be virtually impossible for these parties to attain power via normal electoral means. In order to justify their authority, both Orbán and Kaczynski have been particularly adept at tapping into long-standing traditions of national chauvinism. Both men have skillfully played the card of national identity politics—the idea of the nation as a "community of fate"—instrumentalizing fears that to accept Western liberalism can result only in the wholesale forfeiture of national consciousness.

A good illustration of this dilemma was Kaczynski's response to EU allegations that the Law and Justice Party's partisan realignment of Poland's Constitutional Court represented a blatant violation of the "separation of powers" and, hence, was manifestly undemocratic. Kaczyński proposed that, in making these criticisms, EU officials had stood the facts on their head. It was the high court in its earlier incarnation, Kaczyński alleged, that had been "undemocratic." He cited a number of the Constitutional Court's early, anti–Law and Justice rulings in support of his claims. Conversely, Kaczynski maintained that the court was *eminently democratic* in its new incarnation, since it faithfully reflected the "will of the Polish people," who had provided Law and Justice with a political mandate.

Kaczynski's reasoning represents a classic instance of the authoritarian populist *mentalité*: especially, the contention that the institutional safeguards of political liberalism represent *hindrances* or

impediments to democratic rule. Populists (and here Donald Trump's presidency is as good an example as any) consistently maintain that these "safeguards" are *obstacles* that prevent an unmediated and direct "communion" between the "will of the people" and the charismatic leader who claims to represent them. However, on closer inspection, these neopopulist leaders manifestly hold the citizens who support them in low esteem, since their goal is to instrumentalize the people's will for the ends of political self-aggrandizement.

Viewed historically, authoritarian national populists have excelled at exploiting the definitional ambiguities of "popular sovereignty." They denounce the "separation of powers," "rule of law," and "parliamentarism" as little more than roadblocks to realizing *genuine democracy*, which Carl Schmitt, in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, described as the "homology between rulers and ruled, leaders and led."[23] However, to redefine democracy along these lines is, in effect, a recipe for capitulation, insofar as it sacrifices the prerogatives of democratic self-determination to the Orwellian constituents of the "Total State."

As historian Mark Mazower has pointed out in a recent article, the key to understanding authoritarian populism's contemporary vogue has less to do with *fascism* than it does with a loss of confidence in "the checks and balances and basic freedoms [characteristic of] parliamentary government." As Mazower explains, during the 1920s and 1930s, throughout Europe,

> many blamed the power of the legislature for society's woes and wanted to see more power in the hands of a single leader. Parliaments were written off as façades that rubber-stamped what unaccountable lobbies and elites demanded. . . . Political parties moved to the extremes and spoke about one another as if they were fundamentally illegitimate. The judiciary and the police became politicized. It is this *crisis of institutions* that provides the most striking parallel between Weimar and the US today.[24]

Mazower's observations help to explain the widespread, deeply ingrained cynicism concerning liberal democracy's political viability. The commonplace assaults on rule of law and "parliamentarism"

portend the end of democracy as we have come to know and cherish it. By the same token, there can be little doubt that parliamentary democracy has become *dysfunctional*, having degenerated into a mechanism whereby financial and corporate elites perpetuate and expand their socioeconomic privileges. These developments have rendered democracy's original utopian-egalitarian promise virtually meaningless. In its contemporary incarnation, democracy, by systematically stifling pluralism and by denying the demos a meaningful say in public affairs, has, to all intents and purposes, ceased to be "liberal." Wherever one turns, entrenched plutocracies have usurped the prospects of participatory citizenship that originally provided democracy with its raison d'être and global appeal.[25]

The Return of the Repressed

Mazower's proposal merits further scrutiny: in order to comprehend the demons of contemporary politics, we should pay attention to democracy's precipitous devolution during the interwar years as a meaningful precedent. After all, the authoritarian regimes that flourished during this period gained acceptance as mechanisms of coping with social and economic disturbances that are quite similar to the ones confronting the West today.

President Woodrow Wilson's optimistic prognosis that World War I would make the world "safe for democracy" was rudely reversed shortly after it was proclaimed. Before long, war-induced economic hardship and acute civil unrest—aggravated by the "specter of Bolshevism"—lent credibility to "dictatorship" as an ironfisted method of maintaining political unity. In the aftermath of serial dynastic collapse—Habsburgs, Hohenzollerns, Romanovs, and Ottomans—and as social disequilibrium escalated to new heights, throughout Europe civilian populations opted for "order" rather than "freedom." In retrospect, it would prove a fateful choice.

By 1920, the twenty-five-year Horthy regency had established itself in Hungary. Two years later, Mussolini undertook his successful March on Rome—a *coup de main* that presaged twenty years of

fascist oppression. In Spain, Primo di Rivera overthrew a legitimate government and established the bases of dictatorial rule. And in 1926, the fledgling Second Polish Republic succumbed to a coup initiated by Marshall Józef Piłsudski, who would remain Poland's de facto political leader for the ensuing ten years.

In an article titled "European Dictatorships" that was written during the late 1920s, the political scientist Henry Spencer reflected on liberal democracy's stunning reversal of fortune:

> The American viewing present-day European governments is more than ordinarily perplexed. He knew that states, great and small, had adopted nineteenth-century constitutions in conscious imitation of free British parliamentary self-government. . . . He had thought of the Great War as democracy's righteous, forceful defense of itself against the aggression of imperialism. He had seen . . . high hopes of a reconstruction, wherein free states should co-operate in a league of peace . . . perfecting democratic constitutions and the mechanisms of individual liberty.
>
> A few short years afterwards his ears ring with the newspaper din of portentous names like Mussolini, Primo de Rivera, Pilsudski, and Stalin. He feels an atmosphere of skepticism or denial that envelops the wan figure and (in Mussolini's startling phrase) more or less "decomposed corpse" of political liberty. He faces an apparent reversal of the supposed universal progress toward democracy that he had been taking for granted. He wonders whether his law of gravitation is undergoing a critique of relativity.[26]

At the time, Carl Schmitt, a bitter foe of political liberalism and an astute observer of contemporary political trends, denigrated "parliamentary democracy"—which the Western powers had vaunted as the logical successor to autocracy—as an inadequate basis for the maintenance of state sovereignty. In Schmitt's view, following monarchy's demise, the way forward lay not with a crisis-ridden political liberalism, but instead with *dictatorship* as a form of secularized Absolutism.

To bolster this claim, Schmitt relied on the doctrines of Europe's leading apostles of counterrevolution: Joseph de Maistre, Louis de

Bonald, and Juan Donoso Cortés. According to Schmitt, the ultimate significance of these counterrevolutionary thinkers lies

> in the consistency with which they *decide*. They heightened the moment of decision [*Entscheidung*] until their starting point, *legitimacy*, had been entirely *dissolved*. As soon as Donoso Cortés realized that the period of absolute monarchy had come to an end because there were no more kings . . . he brought his decisionism to its logical conclusion: *he demanded a political dictatorship*, . . . a pure decision, not based on reason and discussion . . . an Absolute decision created out of nothingness.[27]

Today, it seems that we have returned full circle. In Europe and elsewhere, the catalysts of social instability that first appeared during the interwar period—economic volatility, combined with a growing hostility toward "parliamentarism"—have reemerged to challenge the foundations of the liberal democratic project.

One prominent and worrisome illustration of this tendency has been the meteoric rise of far-right political parties. Once confined to the political margins, these parties have succeeded in shifting the boundaries of European politics in an authoritarian direction, making what once seemed unthinkable an ongoing and threatening reality. Moreover, as the West's democratic convictions decline, it has increasingly forfeited the moral high ground it formerly claimed in its dealings with nations in other geographical regions—Russia, the Middle East, South America, and Asia—where democratic traditions have been historically weak.

In Austria, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which was founded by neo-Nazis during the 1950s, has exploited a rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment to become part of a governing coalition with the center-right Austrian People's Party. As a deterrent to immigration, the new government has embraced legislation that aims to humiliate prospective migrants in order to discourage them from choosing Austria as their final destination. Henceforth, asylum seekers' cellphones will be impounded upon their arrival, and whatever cash is in their possession will be entirely confiscated.

In Germany, until recently, the presence of the National Socialist past seemed to immunize the political system against right-wing extremism. However, since 2013, the mainstream political parties have been forced to contend with a significant threat from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). In four years' time, the virulently xenophobic AfD entrenched itself as Germany's third-largest party and, potentially, a future political kingmaker. The perception of a significant rightward shift in German political culture has been abetted by the rise of the Islamophobic PEGIDA movement, whose initials stand for Patriotische Europäer Gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicization of the West). Although PEGIDA originated in the eastern province of Saxony—the German state with the lowest immigration levels—recently it has established bridgeheads across the continent. Hence, it has become a bona fide, pan-European force.

In France, the party system that, for nearly five decades, had been the mainstay of French politics has succumbed to a profound crisis from which it may never recover. Thus in the 2017 presidential elections, neither the center-left Socialists nor the center-right Republicans succeeded in making it into the second round. Instead, as in 2002, the electorate opted for the far-right National Front and, ultimately—in keeping with a tradition that dates back to Robespierre, the two Napoleons, and Charles de Gaulle—a "political savior," in the guise of Emmanuel Macron and his neophyte République en Marche party.

Even in instances where Europe's far-right parties have fallen short of governing, they have been extremely successful in reframing the parameters of political debate in a manner that favors their ethnopopulist agenda. For their part, the mainstream center-right and center-left parties end up participating, shamelessly, in a "race to the bottom," as they seek to outdo their far-right rivals in fear-mongering and persecutory zeal for purposes of electoral gain. In this way, across Europe, far-right political actors have managed to attain a level of cultural and political influence vastly disproportionate to their electoral standing.

These developments help to account for the tentacular, worldwide spread of a new "politics of unreason": the proliferation of political ideologies that exalt the values of myth, ethnic homogeneity, and hatred of the Other. They promote a new "political tribalism": a mentality that offers misleading and xenophobic pseudo-solutions to very real contemporary problems: rapidly escalating social inequality, the cultural fragmentation of traditional lifeworlds, and the loss of identity that is coincident with the rise of globalization and the demise of the nation state.

The remedy for these omnipresent signs of authoritarian political regression is a reaffirmation of the values of "active citizenship": a return to the precepts of participatory democracy at the local, regional, and national levels. This means simultaneously cultivating the values of *enlightened citizenship*: nurturing a network of horizontally linked, informed political actors who are capable of counteracting, at every turn, the blandishments and chicanery of today's "prophets of deceit."

Notes

1. For an early account of this development, see Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys in the New Nationalism* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 5.

2. Barrès, *Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme* (Paris: Félix Jouven, 1902), 33.

3. See Axel Honneth, "An Aversion Against the Universal," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2(3) (1985).

4. Thomas Edsall, "Why Is It So Hard for Democracy to Deal with Inequality?" *New York Times*, February 15, 2018.

5. Wolfgang Streeck, "The Return of the Repressed and the End of Neoliberalism," in *The Great Regression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 2017), 158.

6. *L'Age de la Régression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger (Paris: Premier Parallèle, 2016), 9.

7. Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, trans. Jhon Duran (New York: Penguin, 1977), 34.

8. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. J. Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959), 6.

9. See John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason," in *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 212–254

10. See Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit* (New York: Harper Row, 1949).

11. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt, 1965), 154.

12. See Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

13. See Lynn Hunt, *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 86–88.

14. See Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1991). Samuel J. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993). For Rousseau's remarks, see *The Social Contract* (New York: Penguin, 1962), 114: "If there were a nation of *Gods*, it would govern itself democratically. A government so perfect is not *suited* to *men*."

15. See David Cameron and Mitchell Orenstein, "Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its 'Near Abroad,'" *Post-Soviet Studies* 28(1) (2012), 1–44.

16. Kim Lane Scheppele, foreword to Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016), xv.

17. See Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2011: The Authoritarian Challenge to Democracy* (New York: Freedom House, 2011).

18. See Gyorgy Csepeli, "The Ideological Patchwork of the Mafia State," in *Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State*, ed. Bálint Magyar and Júlia Vásárhelyi (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), 28: "The core concept of the electoral system overhaul posited that once a political machine was created in the legislature, all hurdles for the party operating it would be removed, giving it free reign. . . . As this political machine operated in parliament, everything passing through it would be legitimate and lawful."

19. See Andreas Koob et al., *Mit Pfeil, Kreuz, und Krone: Nationalismus und autoritäre Krisenbewältigung in Ungarn* (Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2013).

20. See Carol Schaeffer, "How Hungary Became a Haven for the Alt-Right," *Atlantic*, May 27, 2017.

21. See Piotr H. Kosicki, "Poland Turns Right: A New Government, an Old Nativism," *Commonweal*, June 21, 2016.

22. Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Putinism," *Washington Post*, July 31, 2014.

23. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 26: "All democratic arguments rest logically on a

series of identities. In this series belong the identity of governed and governing, sovereign and subject, the identity of the subject and object of state authority, the identity of the people with their representatives in parliament, [and] the identity of the state and the current voting population."

24. Mazower, "Ideas That Fed the Beast of Fascism Flourish Today," *Financial Times*, November 7, 2016.

25. See R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

26. Henry Spencer, "European Dictatorships," *American Political Science Review* 21(3) (1927), 537.

27. Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on Political Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 66.