



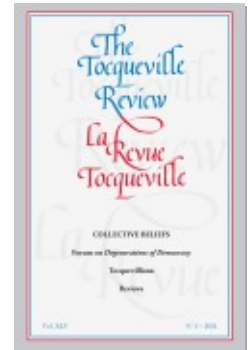
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CAN EMPOWERED CITIZENS SAVE DEMOCRACY?

Craig CALHOUN and Charles TAYLOR

To receive these stimulating reviews and a chance to respond is a privilege for which we are grateful. It makes us wish that political debates were both so civil and so intellectually serious. For the most part we feel well-understood; there are only a few places where we can't resist pushing back on specifics. More often, we want to emphasize places where the reviewers raise issues that we agree are genuinely significant. These will demand further work, but we hope this exchange can push that work forward. Alas, our colleague Dilip Gaonkar hasn't been able to draft additional text presenting his 'less republican' and to some extent less hopeful view.

First, we are well aware that there are many issues we touch on too briefly and which demand further attention. The most important of these is the international context of the mostly national cases we describe. By this we mean (a) that there could have been more and more systematically developed comparisons. Countries in continental Europe should be compared to each other, to the US, and (as Brexit and related traumas make us painfully aware) to the UK. They should also be considered in relation to the EU. We worry, for example, that Sawyer is quick to think the EU rather than any of its member states must be the relevant European comparator. As he says, the EU is not a republic, though we are not sure why that is the key issue. The EU is a structure of laws and institutions; it is much less clear it is a democracy or how much it is achieving citizen solidarity. But these are in any case questions to take up, and ideally to take up also in comparisons to the much wider range of democracies in the world – all of which, like the US, Britain, and European countries are inevitably partial and incomplete democracies.

But in calling for a more developed international analysis than we offered, we mean not just comparisons among national cases. We also mean (b) more attention to capitalism in its transnational, world-systemic character; more attention to geopolitics; more attention to migration; more to global cultural patterns; and more to transnational institutions. It is not trivial that some democracies developed in some places while they benefitted from colonial relationships to others and often blocked the development of democracy elsewhere. Nor is it trivial that solutions to many problems of actually-existing democracies—like tax-evasion—requires coordinated action among many countries and with international institutions. We agree with Culp¹ when he suggests we have only noted the issue and much more attention is needed.

Second, we placed considerable emphasis on the issue of citizen efficacy as a factor in sustaining and advancing democracy—or its lack as a cause of degeneration. Our reviewers here clearly see the centrality of the theme but also raise some significant questions.

Cozzaglio emphasizes a point on which perhaps we were not clear enough. The actuality of efficacy or inefficacy matters, but it matters largely through *perceptions* that may distort or complicate the matter. Both democracy and republican frameworks depend crucially on citizen uptake and participation. Citizens who feel a lack of efficacy will at best be inactive, more likely frustrated, and often resentful or enraged. This is a key link to populism. We took pains to emphasize that we do not regard populism as a root cause of democracy's degenerations. It can be a symptom but is also more complicated because it is so closely related to struggles over who counts as 'the people' that are inherent to democracy. Populism can be a constructive demand for effective inclusion in a polity that is unresponsive to the needs and challenges of many of its citizens. This is how we read the American movement of the 1890s—from the Farmer's Alliance to the People's Party—that produced the name 'populism' later applied to other movements. It is wrongly ignored by many later commentators who focus mainly on proto-fascism in Europe or Latin America. Even in the proto-fascist cases, there are often attempts to create reasonable vehicles for greater citizen efficacy. These are then overwhelmed by the politics of resentment, distorted scapegoating of 'people's enemies,' and movements advancing authoritarian projects. These in turn offer often insincere

promises to cater to the people's wellbeing and focus more on advancing the power of the people's nation-state and the various elites whose interests it is organized to serve. In other words, they offer illusory solutions to real problems.

These are obviously issues of contemporary as well as historical relevance. In the US—and indeed in many European countries—rural citizens currently feel sharply disempowered. They may be recipients of significant subsidies paid overwhelmingly from the taxes of urban dwellers (or consumers paying prices supported by government policies). The issue is not just that they don't see the subsidies, it is that these make them the equivalent of welfare recipients not efficacious citizens, workers earning their ways, parents supporting their children's futures. People who are right to feel they lack the efficacy to which they are entitled as citizens may have false analyses of why. And they may make electoral choices with powerful emotional appeal and dubious policy consequences—like backing Donald Trump while he cuts taxes on the rich and scuppers Obamacare partly because he talks tough on immigration and shows contempt for the normative culture of the elite.

In this connection, we stressed the 'opacity' of much contemporary politics, state administration, and large-scale social organization. Here Harsin is definitely right to stress media and technology. We acknowledged their importance in *Degenerations* but did not elaborate enough. Harsin offers several pointers in good directions for such a fuller account. We agree that many features of the contemporary media ecology contribute to the opacity of political power relations and policy-making and more generally to citizens' felt lack of efficacy. We very much endorse his call for more attention to the 'political economy of influence'. We think efforts to reduce the cost of elections could be positive. And we are dubious that advances in artificial intelligence are likely to 'bring deliberative democracy to the masses'.

Both practices and technology are important to contemporary media and problems they pose for democracy. We would also stress, perhaps more than Harsin does, the institutional dimensions of media—notably the power of large-scale capitalist firms (and in some settings, states). We agree there is an issue about 'attentional capitalism' but stress that surveillance capitalism is also important

(and state surveillance too). While we are sympathetic to efforts to theorize ‘deep mediatization’, we want to avoid the technological determinism suggested by some of the sources Harsin cites. Yes, specific communications technologies matter, but much depends on how they are deployed and what social-relational and institutional structures complement them. This is a matter of money, commodity circulation, and finance as well as communications media.

We stressed that decay of intermediate organizations – like trade unions - deprives citizens of support for both penetrating the opacity and undertaking effective collective action in response. We agree with Harsin that political marketing, over-reliance on opinion polls, big data analytics, and applied behavioral science has often been deployed as substitutes for citizen agency in shaping public agendas, debates and choices. Habermas’s famous critique of ‘managed’ or ‘administered’ public opinion (which built on Horkheimer and Adorno) remains relevant. But it is worth noting that Habermas’s account in 1962 of the ‘refeudalization’ of the public sphere left him poorly positioned to appreciate the power of the much more participatory (and creative and experiential) politics and public sphere of the later 1960s. Refeudalization is still an issue but so is the search for means and themes of popular mobilization to transform public culture, public debate, and public action.

In other words, social movements are crucial. We are surprised that both Cozzaglio and Sawyer seem unsure that this is our view. Sawyer comes to movements by way of Tocqueville and development of democracy not as a form of government – which raised questions about how to make popular sovereignty effective - but rather as a form of social organization with equality at its center. We aren’t sure we follow his whole argument, but three points seem important. First, in attempting to stabilize and contain democracy, republican government can be too sympathetic to aristocracy. Yes. Second, while republicanism seems to privilege the state or political ‘whole’, democracy as process can come forward at shifting scales in response to different issues and ranges of public interest. We are not sure republicanism is necessarily so rigid, but the Deweyan notion of publics formed around problems rather than durably fixed scales is a fertile one. However, it is important to our argument that effective democracy depends on institutions. Republicanism contributes not just ideals of solidarity, civic virtue and the public good but the rule

of law and creation of a range of institutions to provide for the public good. In some versions, it is self-limiting and allows for citizens to develop institutions that are not part of government but nonetheless part of achieving the democratic efficacy of citizens. Third, it can be helpful to view democracy not as a kind of government so much as processes of social organization that give efficacy to citizens. In addition to elections and representative institutions, there are assemblies, there are the organized efforts at scrutiny and accountability that John Keane analyzes as ‘monitory democracy,’ and there are movements.² Movements don’t generally *do* government, though they may take direct action; they often shape government and the agendas of those who govern.

Cozzaglio asks whether we think movements must be fragmenting. She may be responding to our critical comments on the identity politics of the last 50 years which we described as ‘ultra-liberal’ – pursuits of authenticity and recognition all-too-often divorced from actual structural transformation of social conditions and political economy. Issues of race, gender, sexuality (and indeed disability, ethnicity, and immigration status) are all important. But mere recognition is not social transformation, and in themselves they provide correctives to false universalism but not the basis for widespread solidarity. In the last chapter of *Degenerations* we argued strongly for a large-scale movement with unifying, solidarity-promoting potential. We thought that campaigns for a Green New Deal might exemplify this, through the importance of both class and the existential risk posed by climate change. We are less optimistic about this specific project now, but we still think democratic renewal will take a large-scale movement (or more than one).

Renewal of citizen efficacy must, we think, involve rebuilding of some old institutions and perhaps creation of new ones. We do not think this will come about through mitigation of opacity alone. There are deeper contradictions involved and needs for transformative social change. In the case of Brexit, for example, it is not just that a variety of Tory leaders were dishonest and Labour ineffective in explaining this. It is true that workers in the North of England were given a binary choice—in or out of the EU—without adequate explanation of seemingly opaque issues like where borders would be drawn or whether they could stay in a customs union. Much more basically, those workers (among others) were living a contradiction

between the tendencies of capitalism and the structures of social life that could not be overcome by either incremental policy changes within the pre-Brexit order or the seemingly radical choice of Brexit. Under the existing political economy, the terms of capitalist success were the terms of disintegration in their communities and livelihoods.

It is contradictions like this that make an analysis of ‘double movement’ important. As Polanyi saw, capitalism brought enormous new wealth, benefitted many, and became crucial to state power. But capital accumulation also drew the world into the confrontations of imperialism and two world wars. It deeply damaged society itself and especially the lives of many workers. A response, a counter-movement, was inevitable. It came in multiple forms from crime to fascism but also in socialism and social democracy. In the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century, and again today, movement mobilization is crucial to producing a second movement adequate to social renewal and advancing justice.

Like the early nineteenth century English workers Polanyi considered, those in most of the UK today need not just clarity but material change. Clarity could help them produce the change they need, but only if coupled with large-scale, institutionally structured solidarity. There is no guarantee of success. In *Degenerations*, Gaonkar argues not just that failure may be more common but that it may be impossible to build a movement that speaks effectively to the diversity of oppressions and frustrations and builds solidarity across the identities they shape. We all agree that Humpty Dumpty cannot be put back together again; it is necessary to build anew not just recover. But perhaps the ambition of a unified polity combined with an egalitarian society is beyond our grasp.

This raises two questions to which we do not have clear answers. Sawyer poses the first by asking whether new movements today are changing the very meaning of democracy in fundamental ways? Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century movements put democracy as egalitarian social organization at the center of an era. Is that era over? We think not. Egalitarian social organization still matters. Sawyer is asking whether new movements focused on race, gender, and sexuality make the old pursuit of democracy obsolete. We don’t think so. Majoritarianism may be a problematic approach. But equality is still basic—together with liberty and solidarity. It is still our challenge,

as both the republican tradition and the actual pursuit of democracy have taught, to balance popular equality and demands for immediate efficacy with mutual commitments, embrace of diversity, and pursuit of the public good.

So, the nature of new social movements does not in itself render the continued pursuit of constitutional democracy and egalitarian social organization obsolete. Despite its internal degenerations, democracy can be renewed. But there is a second question. Each of our interlocutors implicitly asked it when they noted the importance of capitalism. Will external conditions give democracy a chance?

Capitalism, we noted, gives democracy the challenge of an internally contradictory path of development. New wealth (and technological capacity) is accompanied by disorganization of previous society. This can be extreme and rapid or moderate and mitigated. But democracy has to meet challenges that are at once recurrent and always presented in new forms. Capitalism is itself under pressure and changing. This has happened before, but how deep will the changes be? Capitalism could of course end, possibly in a happy way, more likely in chaos and conflict.

But it is not just capitalism that threatens the conditions for continued democracy. So does climate change. We noted this in *Degenerations*, though we had no especially creative insight into how humanity—or democracies—can meet the challenge. Entwined with both capitalism and climate change there are also geopolitical threats to the future of democracy. We do not mean simply that authoritarianism is on the rise. We mean that international structures that have sustained peace are giving way to war. This too has happened before. One question is how effective democracies will be in their international affairs. Have degenerations of democracy weakened the West in ways Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping seem to think? How much? Will Donald Trump or Viktor Orbán or the laziness and self-interest of liberal elites make this worse? Will Israeli invasion of Gaza in the wake of Hamas' October 7 attacks on Israel spread into wider war? Has it already damaged Israeli democracy fatally, coming alongside the settler movement and Benjamin Netanyahu's challenges to the constitution? Will Western democracies confront their own complicity or simply repress the voice of student and other protestors? Even if democracy is resilient, the fault lines of

geopolitics suggest ways conflict could become global. The power of new weapons combines with the vulnerabilities of global technological systems to make survival a real question—for the countries in which we have built partial democracy and hope for more and indeed for humanity.

Cozzaglio asks how hopeful we are. We are committed to hope, though we have to work at it. This does not mean we are uncritically optimistic. We are very worried.

NOTES

- [1] Julian Culp presented his comments at our online forum held at the Center for Media, Communication, and Global Change and the Center for Critical Democracy Studies at the American University of Paris in January 2023 (<https://www.aup.edu/news-events/news/2023-01-31/degenerations-democracy-aup%E2%80%99s-newest-research-center-hosts-leading>). He has published his review separately in *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical and Democratic Theory*, vol. 31/1 (March 2024).
- [2] Keane, *The Life and Times of Democracy*, NY: Norton, 2009. The idea of monitory democracy comes originally from Michael Schudson; see *The Good Citizen*, NY: Free Press, 1998.

ABSTRACT

This forum offers critical perspectives on Craig Calhoun, Dilip Gaonkar and Charles Taylor's *Degenerations of Democracy*. In her contribution, Ilaria Cozzaglio, raises questions on the standpoint from which a critical perspective on our current democratic crisis is most effectively formulated. Taking an internalist perspective from the citizens' perspectives on democracy's contemporary crisis, as the book does, is essential for understanding our current condition, but it also raises new questions on how best to challenge the status quo while respecting citizens' demands. Jayson Harsin explores what happens when we place some of the most recent media and communications technologies and practices at the center of our analysis. He asks how an examination of the fundamentally asymmetrical resources at the disposal of governments and particularly private media operations may be shaping democracy's degeneration more than the book suggests. Stephen W. Sawyer builds on the book's historical dimensions to question the emancipatory possibilities of a renewed republicanism, as opposed to reinforcing democracy as a mode of social organization and a multi-scalar approach to solving public problems, referencing the EU as an example. Craig Calhoun and Charles Taylor respond by clarifying their position and suggesting ways that their analyses may be extended to both respond to and build on these comments. They conclude with a cautious and critical optimism, rooted in a hard-fought commitment to hope.