



The exhaustion of democratic theory

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Abstract

The belief in the transformative power of democratic politics has long been an essential element of progressive movements and intellectuals, including eco-emancipatory ones. Given the deficits of institutionalized democracy, democratic theory has always played a key role. Yet, the ongoing upswing in democratic theory-building and the abundance of theoretically devised democratic innovations conceals the poor condition democratic theory is in. Democratic theory, I argue, has become an implausible scholarly endeavor. The inflation of contributions to the genre has the effect of blinding us not only to an erosion of democracy but also to a crisis of democratic theory. In the context of a process I refer to as *obsolescence of democracy*, democratic theory loses its scholarly plausibility. This has important implications for understanding the demise of progressive politics, including the *eco-emancipatory project* and the current transformation of (Western) modernity.

Keywords

Crisis of democracy, democratic theory, post-democracy, democratic backsliding, democratic innovations, democratic recession, modernity

The exhaustion of democratic theory

This special issue reflects (and reflects on) the emerging zeitgeist that holds we are experiencing a transitional phase in which social norms and political institutions are undergoing fundamental change. This is particularly evident with regard to democracy, one of the central institutions of modern societies as well as one of the main pillars of the kind of

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eco-emancipatory thinking under consideration in this special issue. In such a context, many academic observers suggest that we are facing a problematic transformation, if not a crisis of democracy (Prezeworski, 2019). This diagnosis resonates with the proliferation of a pessimistic outlook on the political future of the West. It has become the dominant position among participants of the contemporary discourse in democratic theory. As such, it prompts many efforts to produce more democratic theory and search for democratic innovations, in particular as a means of stabilizing democratic regimes (Sørensen & Warren, 2025). The maxim in reacting to the diagnosis of a democracy crisis seems to be: let's intensify our efforts to reflect more on democracy!

In this paper, I argue that the upswing in democratic theory-building and the abundance of theory-based democratic innovations conceals the poor condition democratic theory is in. Democratic theory has been shaped to no small degree by protagonists and sympathizers of the project of an emancipatory politics, who sought to outline prospects for their progressive endeavor. Today, however, I argue, it has become an *implausible* scholarly effort. The increasing number of publications, only superficially a sign of the discipline's liveliness, conceals the fact that there is not only an erosion of real-world democracy but also a *crisis of democratic theory*, that is, of the concept of democracy as such.

In the first section of this paper, I argue that we are not dealing with a crisis but an erosion of democracy as a regime form and as an idea of political rule. In this section, I refer to empirical facts in some parts of my argument but I do not claim to provide comprehensive empirical evidence. The arguments I put forward are primarily conceptual and theoretical in nature. By introducing my approach, I explain this erosion as an evolutionary process which I refer to in this paper as *obsolescence of democracy* (see Selk, 2023).¹ This historical process erodes real-life democratic regime structures and devalues the idea of democratic rule, which begins to appear illusory and anachronistic. In the second section, I apply this perspective to the most influential approaches in democratic theory today, namely deliberative theory, agonist theory, and liberal theory. I explain why and how the process of obsolescence affects these theories and devalues democratic theory as a scholarly endeavor. In the wake of obsolescence, I argue, the recommendations of democratic theory become either anachronistic or entirely normative, because they fail to come to grips with political reality. Normative theory, of course, is not worthless, but for purposes of theory-building in the social sciences, where practical usefulness and empirically valid descriptions are key, it is deficient. Anachronistic theory, in contrast, is both: deficient and worthless. In the concluding section, I will show how my diagnosis relates to the overarching issue of this special issue by pointing out its implications for understanding the demise of progressive politics and the transformation of modernity that is currently underway.

The obsolescence of democracy

To disentangle the polyphonic debate on the crisis of democracy it is helpful to distinguish between events, actions, discourses, and institutions as the subject matters of the debate. In mass media and public discourses among the political class, the crisis of democracy is mostly a matter of dramatic events (such as the storming of the US Capitol). Whereas the discourse in social science and theory on the crisis of democracy

focuses mainly on discourses (on anti-democratic discourses and ideas), actors (anti-democratic parties or movements and their plans for overthrowing democratic regimes or anti-democratic constitution-making), and institutions (anti-democratic or illiberal institutional change). All these perspectives are valuable, but they usually neglect the societal transformations that also contribute to the erosion of democratic regimes and the democratic attitudes of their citizenries. A broader social-theory perspective is needed.²

In this section, I will present an approach for grappling with the transformations that contribute to what is usually interpreted as a crisis of democracy. What I am referring to in this paper as *obsolescence* highlights specific problems of those societal transformations for democratic regimes. This has proved useful as a heuristic for empirical research (Selk & Kemmerzell, 2021), but it is also helpful for pointing out the blind spots of contemporary democratic theory (Selk, 2023) as it denotes the socio-historical and evolutionary character of the transformation that is currently underway. Obsolescence is a counter-concept as it opposes the proliferating imaginary of a “crisis” or “tipping-point.” Also, in contrast to retrograde concepts such as “backsliding,” it highlights the fact that this transformation may be not the recurrence of something familiar but the beginning of a gradual, slow process that renders democracy anachronistic and thereby is, at the same time, the dawn of something new (see Seyd in this special issue). This perspective allows us to identify more precisely what is wrong with democratic theory today and why we should be skeptical regarding its potential to show us the way out of the current malaise.

My starting point is, therefore, a historicizing approach to democracy. A common fallacy in democratic theory is the implicit de-historicization of democracy. Of course, democratic theorists describe democracy as a historically developed idea and regime form, but they rarely reflect that democratic institutions are not only subject to change but may become historical themselves. One might sum up democratic theory’s de-historicization of democracy with the following quip: according to democratic theory, democracy had a history but is no longer historic.

The reason for this way of thinking is democratic theory’s anchoring in modernization theory. According to this theory, democracy is *the* genuine modern regime form and it is the best answer to modernity’s challenges. On the input side, it gives every citizen equal worth, and on the output side, it allows for intelligent problem-solving and adapting to problems of social change that arise from the differentiated structure of modern society. The implicit background premise of democratic theory, following Parsons (Parsons, 1964), holds that the process of modernization breeds democracy.

The assumption that democracy is ahistorical and everlasting has become questionable, and hardly any current text can do without a critical comment on Fukuyama’s thesis of the end of history. The modernist assumption that democracy is modernity’s appropriate regime form, however, is still prevalent. That is why the most common scheme of interpretation for the crisis of democracy is the regression scheme. It holds that societies and their democratic regimes are “regressing” towards earlier stages of history, mirroring some elements of earlier historical phases such as the crisis of the Weimar Republic, and bring back the authoritarianism of the past. It considers this process as pathological because it threatens to reverse the process of modernization. Learning from the past may help us to avoid further regression, but this way of interpreting current events excludes the possibility that it is not regression that troubles our polities

but rather progressing modernization. That is why we need to take into account and adequately conceptualize the possibility that “the crisis of democracy” is not the result of historical regress but the effect of historical progress, or at least, history progressing.

Against this backdrop, and following Greven (2020), the theory proposed here holds that democracy is not an answer to the current problems of modernity. In fact, the reverse may be the case, namely that in ongoing modernization, the course of progress will render it impossible to preserve democracy. It is a truism both of social science and everyday experience that modern society is an ongoing process of change that not only transforms practices, norms, and traditional ways of behavior but also constantly renders institutions and procedures obsolete. The theory proposed here holds that this is what is happening to democracy. The evolution of modern society leads to the slowly but steadily increasing erosion of democratic institutions and procedures. In the end, this process will transform democracy into an *anachronism* of modernity.

The obsolescence of democracy consists of four analytically distinguishable but interwoven processes that erode democratic will-formation, rule-making, and government: politicization and individualization (1), differentiation and the emergence of the negative ratchet effect (2), increasing epistemic asymmetry and the rise of the participatory aristocracy (3), and the end of democratic capitalism (4).

Politicization and individualization

Modernization not only widens the sphere of matters of political interest and public concern but also leads to the political inclusion and mobilization of broad strata of the population. Due to the expansion of areas that are relevant for state action, the growth of what is considered a public problem, and owing to the “participatory revolution” (Kaase, 1984), a thorough politicization of society takes place. As a result, nearly all societal phenomena can become an object of politics. At the same time, the resources for generating legitimacy for collectively binding decisions and policy-making become more scarce, because the “second-order emancipation” (Blühdorn, 2016) that was triggered by cultural change during the 1960s devalues duty-oriented norms and valorizes unbound individualism. This individualization is consistent with the liberal dimension of democracy, negative freedom, and the pursuit of private interests, but it is in tension if not in contradiction with the republican dimension of democracy, in particular making collectively binding decisions and prioritizing the common good over private interests. As a result, the “legitimization by procedure” (Luhmann, 1983) has become insufficient for legitimizing political rule, and democratic polities face a structural legitimation problem. This ongoing process may even morph into a “dialectic of emancipation” (Blühdorn, 2022) in the course of which democratic procedures would then be overhauled not in opposition to, but rather in the name of “emancipation” (see Blühdorn in this special issue).

Overdifferentiation and the negative ratchet effect

As Niklas Luhmann has shown, the evolutionary process of modernization inevitably leads to differentiation and the growth of complexity. At the same time, it does not produce mechanisms for stabilizing societal sub-systems (Luhmann, 1997). In political

life, this means that all of its dimensions (polity, policy, and politics) are becoming ever more differentiated, because the involved actors, organizations, institutions, levels, and networks in which political life takes place are constantly growing. At the same time, they are becoming ever more complex, because the amount of knowledge and information that is necessary to understand them is also constantly growing. As a result, political life is not only far too complex to understand for laypeople, but even experts only manage to understand their (limited) area of expertise. Politicians, on the other hand, especially when they hold highest offices, are confronted with an excess of tasks, issues, and problems that are impossible to cope with without resorting to the coping strategy of ignorance (Suri, 2017). Due to this exuberant growth of political differentiation and complexity, it has become unclear how to organize political life democratically and subject complexity to democratic will formation. In particular, the growth of complexity violates the “Sartori criterion” (Greven, 2020). This criterion states that the legitimization of democratic regimes requires that ordinary citizens can, in principle, understand the institutions, procedures, and subject matters of political life. This criterion applies to every democratic regime because in those regimes the citizens are the primary source of legitimacy (Dahl, 1992). That is why non-democratic regime forms, which derive their legitimacy from other sources, can have both: legitimacy and citizen ignorance, whereas democratic regimes cannot. Democratic regimes need enlightened citizens to generate democratic legitimacy; non-democratic regimes need ignorant citizens to generate non-democratic legitimacy.

Empirically, the level of knowledge regarding political life is stagnantly low among citizens. It is important to notice that increasing formal education does *not* raise this level. Willeck and Mendelberg sum up the state of research regarding this issue by stating: “Universal high school education and exponential increases in college degrees leave shockingly low levels of political knowledge and engagement intact” (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022, p. 90; Converse, 2000). Therefore, the violation of the Sartori criterion seems to be unavoidable, because differentiation and complexity have acquired such a high level, a *negative ratchet effect* occurs, i.e., it has become impossible to simplify or reduce the differentiated governance structure to a level that is compatible with democratic will formation. This process renders retrogradist slogans to “take back control” illusory. Rather, it is likely that alternative modes of legitimization that do not rely on high levels of average citizen competence and information will become more important in the future.

Epistemic asymmetry and the participatory aristocracy of the super-democrats

Of course, some citizens display a high level of competence and knowledge. That is why, on the side of the citizenry, the growing complexity of political life does not affect everyone equally. Rather, an asymmetry among the citizenry emerges. In the context of the evolving structures of ever-more differentiated governance arrangements, a dichotomy arises, namely the dichotomy between insiders and outsiders (of policy networks, diverse publics, etc.). As a result, the distribution of knowledge regarding the policy fields at hand is increasingly asymmetric. This dichotomy also plays out on a more general level. Speaking in terms of ideal types, the citizenry splits into two groups. On

the one side, a small knowledgeable group exists that is well versed in various forms of informal and formal civic participation and channels of political influence. It knows how to bring its viewpoints and interests into the political process. On the other side, a larger, only seldomly participating group exists that lacks deeper involvement in politics and knowledge of the political process.

This split of the citizenry has two consequences. First, we can witness the rise of *uncommon sense* that renders illusory the assumption of a common ground on which citizens may deliberate over matters of common concern. Second, increasing unequal direct citizen participation may lead to the emergence of a *participatory aristocracy*. This is a paradoxical effect of the increase in participation during the “participatory revolution” (Kaase, 1984), in the course of which more citizens became active participants of political life, without, however, contributing to an equalization of political influence by citizens. Whereas the “fundamental democratization” during the 18th and 19th century, described by Mannheim as a process in which “the masses” entered political life due to universal conscription, was finally contained by elite strategy of bureaucratic and military centralization (Mannheim, 1940, pp. 44–49), the “participatory revolution” of the 1960s was the result of rising living standards and the expansion of higher education and leisure time. It opened up bureaucratic structures for participation but was at the same time contained both by strategies of coopting the upper strata of the citizenry as well as implementing authoritarian countermeasures against any radicalism regarding the redistribution of power and wealth (Chamayou, 2021). As Charles Maier puts it: “The developments of the 1960s and 1970s can be depicted as an ‘opening’ and then partial reclosing of participation in political decision making and of policies contesting the global distribution of wealth.” (Maier, 2023, p. 204).

As a result, the increase in civic activity went hand in hand with a severe “participation gap” (Dalton, 2017). Because this gap has not only political but also structural causes—mostly socio-economic and credential inequality—that are currently not on the political agenda, this gap will prove to be permanent. A long-term effect of this gap may be that due to the socialization effect of this unequal participation, a culture of involvement emerges in which participating, well-off, and academically trained citizens develop a sense of political superiority, i.e., a de-facto *aristocratic* self-image as being *super-democrats*.

Since Robert Michels (1925) and the sociology of elites, we know that even in a democratic context elites emerge that act relatively detached from their social and organizational base. This insight also applies to an area that is usually regarded in normative theory as the stronghold of the forces of the good: civil society (see Sevelsted & Johansson, 2024). The concept of super-democrats, however, adds a new dimension to this critical perspective. It does not refer to elites in the strict sociological sense of the word, i.e., to those who sit in the top echelons of organizations. Instead, it refers to civic groups that do not belong to the elite but do exercise a relatively high degree of influence due to their familiarity with participation processes within organizations, institutions, and governance networks. As some readers of this paper may know from personal experience, participatory politics may not lead to the highest levels of fame and fortune, but it does provide skills, social capital, and knowledge that pay off. The dichotomy between elite and mass, therefore, needs to be complemented: after the participatory

revolution, a tripartite structure has emerged that consists of elite, mass, and civic aristocracy.

The end of democratic capitalism

Wolfgang Streeck (2018) uses the concept of “democratic capitalism” to describe the political constellation during the *Trente Glorieuses*, that is, the phase after the Second World War until the mid-1970s. It had institutionalized a pacifying compromise between democratic will formation on the one hand and economic cooperation between labor and capital on the other. As Martin Conway (2020) has shown, this institutional arrangement was not only a quite stable political and economic regime, but it also consisted of a psychologically effective and motivating promise of collective welfare and social cooperation in the future due to a compromise between two elite-driven processes: social inclusion and capitalist profit-seeking.

One important effect of the steady erosion of this compromise and its final dissolution during the neoliberal era is that neoliberalism has not been able to become an equally compelling and integrating vision of an inclusive and hopeful future. The slogan that “a rising tide lifts all boats” appears increasingly as an empty promise. As a result, the motivating and integrating social glue and the positive expectations towards mutually beneficial cooperation in the future decompose. Contemporary capitalism increases “private” political power, fosters oligarchic and plutocratic tendencies (Kotkin, 2020), and deprives ordinary citizens of “social hope” (Rorty, 1999). The more this social glue dissolves, the more citizens view the polity as being a game of losers vs. winners (Jackson & Grusky, 2018) instead of being a mutually beneficial arrangement that serves all affected parties.

Before I conclude this section by showing the consequences of this process of obsolescence of democracy, the following table sums up the main results (Table 1).

The democratic creed becomes implausible

Obsolescence renders the promise of democracy anachronistic. This does not mean that citizens no longer support democratic values and ideas, but that the gap between everyday

Table 1. Dimensions of obsolescence.

Processes & drivers	Effects	Will render democracy...
Politicization & individualization	Contestation and shortage of legitimacy	Illegitimate
Overdifferentiation and the negative ratchet-effect	Complexity	Out of (popular) control
Epistemic asymmetry and rise of super-democrats	Epistemic inequality	Unequal and incomprehensible
End of democratic capitalism	Material inequality	Unjust battle between winners and loser

experience in democratic regimes on the one hand and the self-image of these regimes on the other is widening. Consequently, democratic regimes appear as institutional hypocrites. The opaqueness of political life, the ineffectiveness of democratic will formation, the loss of social hope, and the impression that democratic regimes are institutional hypocrites undermine the democratic creed.³

One consequence of this is that the “folk theory” (Achen & Bartels, 2017) of democracy is becoming implausible. This non-scientific popular theory, according to which democracy equals good governance plus popular sovereignty or, normatively less demanding, elite control, has lost empirical reference. Achen and Bartels show this in their book *Democracy for Realists*, but they are mainly focused on falsifying scientific theories of democracy, and therefore tend to overlook one important political implication of their finding, namely that the falsification of the folk theory means that the main legitimizing ideology of democracy is not plausible anymore.

Another consequence is that the weakening of democratic regimes and their ideological underpinnings in the wake of obsolescence opens up possibilities for anti-democratic action. Among them the proliferation of antidemocratic *agitprop* and “new despotisms” (Keane, 2020), the evolutionary emergence of undemocratic alternatives to democratic government such as (Trumpian) right-wing pseudo-populism (Frank, 2020), expertocratic modes of government (Caramani, 2017), and post-democratic forms of group identity politics and aggressive hyper-moralism (Liu, 2021). These are well-established topics in social science, and in particular in the wake of the second Trump presidency there is considerable agreement that pseudo-populism/authoritarianism and other forms of “democratically camouflaged” antidemocratic politics threaten democratic regimes and should be of utmost scholarly interest. In the following section, however, I will focus on an overlooked phenomenon, namely the effects of obsolescence on democratic theory as a scholarly endeavor.

Democratic theory is not dead yet, but it smells funny

It is important to note that the scholarly form of democratic theory I refer to in this section combines normative and empirical elements. Democratic theory not only consists of normative statements but also needs to reflect the real world of politics. This is not to say that democratic theory, following a naïve understanding of *Widerspiegelung* or a brute conception of positivism, has to mirror empirical political life. Instead, it means that democratic theory, to be not only a normative construct, needs anchoring in real-life politics, i.e., it must refer to existing constitutions, political actors, institutions, public discourses, procedures, trends, developments, etc. More precisely, democratic theory has to be able to describe existing political regimes as embodiments, approximations, or at least as bridges to the form of democracy the theory normatively argues for or prescribes.⁴ I refer to this link between normative argument and empirical description of real-life politics as democratic theory’s *plausibility link*. Obsolescence cuts through this linkage between theory and real-life regimes. The existing regimes lose their appearance as bridges, approximations, or embodiments of democracy and thereby render democratic theory implausible. I will illustrate this by showing the consequences of obsolescence for the three most important approaches in democratic theory today, namely deliberative theory, agonist theory, and liberal theory.

Deliberative theory. The deliberative theory of democracy highlights the deliberative aspects of political regimes. Its model of democracy gives both formal and informal procedures of deliberation priority over other dimensions of democratic legitimization and decision-making. Currently, there are multiple versions of deliberation theory, but for this paper, it is sufficient to refer to Jürgen Habermas (1996), who has developed the most sophisticated version. His work is still highly influential, at least as a background theory for most contemporary contributions to deliberative democratic theory and empirical studies of deliberation. Its core idea is to describe democratic regimes with a two-tier scheme according to which the political process flows between informal areas (social movements and the public sphere) and formal areas in which collectively binding decisions are being taken (parliaments and governmental bodies). The function of the political system as a whole is to rationally solve problems that arise out of other societal systems and their colonization of the lifeworld. According to Habermas, deliberation is essential because it is the means to identify those problems and rationalize political rule.

Habermas and his disciples make it clear that the deliberative theory of democracy must not be confused with a positivistic theory whose empiricism fallaciously conflates what exists with what has validity. In contrast, deliberative theory is a reconstructive theory that rationally reconstructs the normative meaning of existing institutions of democratic regimes (and as such is *not* a pure or ideal normative theory; in this regard, Habermas' theory is following the Hegelian, not the Kantian path). Hence, even though the theory still seeks to keep a critical distance from existing regime structures, its understanding of empirical democratic regimes is one in which these regimes at least approximate the deliberative model, hence bringing forth reasonable political decisions, and may be further improved and thereby transformed into more deliberative regimes. Understanding the theory as purely normative therefore misses its epistemological and methodological status.

For deliberative theorists, the main indicator for a democratic regime is the process of real-life deliberation that justifies the belief that political decisions are democratic and reasonable. Against this background, the core problem that the process of obsolescence poses for deliberation theory is what I have referred to as the rise of uncommon sense, the end of democratic capitalism, and the emergence of a participation aristocracy due to which real-life deliberation increasingly appears as being polarized, exclusive, and elitist. As a result, obsolescence dissolves deliberation theory's plausibility link. Political life in regimes transformed by obsolescence ceases to approximate a deliberative regime and the theory appears as implausible.

The reactions from the deliberative camp in democratic theory to this process are twofold. First, Habermas himself recently approved of the diagnosis that democratic regimes have transformed into post-democracies (Habermas, 2018). As this is problematic for his reconstructive approach to theory, however, his own and more recent contributions to democratic theory bring deliberative theory more into the realm of pure normative theory. For instance, his proposals on how to democratize the European Union, notwithstanding its critique of real-world neoliberalism, rest on thought experiments and normative reasoning (Habermas, 2014; Queiroz, 2021).

Second, among other deliberative theorists and researchers that adhere to the deliberative approach, there has been a move towards normative deflation. As a result, the notion of deliberation according to which political debate should be open, inclusive, and free from

strategic uses of power, has been fundamentally transformed. For instance, Bächtiger et al. (2018, p. 2) define the term deliberation in the following way: “we define deliberation itself minimally to mean mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern.” According to this definition, nearly all kinds of political communication count as deliberative. This updated definition of deliberation hence falls into the trap of empiricism, conflating existence with validity. That is why Goodin has aptly criticized this normative deflation of deliberative theory with the following quip: “If deliberation is everything, maybe it’s nothing” (Goodin, 2018). In fact, the normative deflation of deliberation does not rescue or justify the idea of a deliberative democracy, but rather abandons it.

Another variant of normative deflation of democratic deliberation is the idea of a “deliberative system” (Mansbridge et al., 2012). According to theorists of deliberative systems, processes of deliberation in existing regimes may violate the criteria of proper deliberation (as being open, inclusive, and free of domination) but it is sufficient if the regime as a whole combines processes of deliberation systematically. Taken in isolation they appear as normatively deficient, but seen from the perspective of the theory of deliberative systems they complement each other. This defense of deliberation theory also departs from the original program of deliberation theory and one may question whether it is a democratic theory after all, because, as Habermas himself has argued, for generating legitimacy democratic regimes need to be justified not only from the perspective of theory (observer’s perspective) but also from the perspective of citizens (participants’ perspective).

Agonist theory. While deliberation theory focuses on rationalizing political decisions by inclusive, open, and domination-free discourse, the centerpiece of agonist theory is the confrontational dimension of political life in democratic regimes. There are diverse variants of this theory but for this paper, it is sufficient to focus on Chantal Mouffe (2013), its most important theorist. The core idea of her theory of agonist democracy is that in democratic regimes, politics is a struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic articulations of democratic values, namely liberty and equality. Right-wing articulations of democratic values focus on liberty. They articulate it in terms of unequal economic freedom and propose conservative or classic liberal models of social order; left-wing articulations of these values focus on equality and interpret those in terms of socialist models of society.

Mouffe stresses the importance of the existence of both articulations because they are the source of legitimacy for democratic regimes. According to Mouffe, democratic legitimacy emerges from the pluralistic articulation of a shared space of democratic values. This space, however, cannot be made operational consensually. Rather, the constitutive openness of interpretation of values in a democratic context requires that a plurality of models of society, which stem from a specific interpretation of democratic values, is present in the political debate. In short, democracy needs a conservative-liberal and a socialist articulation of its values. Relative stability emerges from the inclusion of these models into political life in democratic regimes because only by allowing for agonistic opposition between contrasting models of order does the emergence of enmity cease

to be a problem. Political pluralism pacifies democracies, whereas political monism triggers anti-democratic enmity.

Mouffe's theory of democracy is a political project that emerged from specific political transformations that took place during the 1980s and 1990s. More specifically, her agonist theory was invented to justify socialism as a democratic project after the fall of the Eastern bloc and the ensuing delegitimization of state socialism. Moreover, due to the emergence of new social movements and novel political agendas among the left, a reorientation of leftist politics towards democracy seemed urgent (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Agonist theory responded to this challenge by arguing that democratic regimes need the socialist political project (as a counterpart to the conservative-liberal project) to gain stability and legitimacy. Moreover, it assigned to the left the task of democratizing socialism and combining the divergent issues of the new social movements with the idea of socialism by bringing all the issues into one "chain of equivalence," that is, framing them as being part of an overarching left project. According to Mouffe and her co-author Laclau, the most useful form for this is populism, hence their preference for left-populism. Against this backdrop, agonist theory considers existing democratic regimes as bridges to democratic socialism.

Agonist theory's indicator for the existence of a democratic regime is that even though (neo-) liberalism gained hegemony after the fall of the Eastern bloc, there still is room for democratic debate on alternative models for organizing society. Agonist theory presupposes the possibility of a left counter-hegemony, i.e., that democratic values can be articulated not only in the TINA-register of (neo-)liberalism but also in the socialist-egalitarian register. However, due to the process of depoliticization during the 1990s and 2000s that prompted the rise of "post-politics" (Mouffe, 2005), counter-hegemonic articulations of democratic values had been weakened. Liberal globalization pushed counter-hegemonic models of political order to the margins of political life and reference to them was mostly limited to protest movements, fringe parties, and old-fashioned radical intellectuals.

The core problem for agonist theory, therefore, was to substantiate the claim that existing regimes are democratic in the sense that they make room or allow for building a left counter-hegemonic chain of equivalence. This increasingly appeared implausible. As a result, Mouffe's writings became gloomy and less optimistic concerning the democratic impact of the new social movements, and she adopted the term "post-democracy." In more recent times and with a view to the crisis of the liberal order, Mouffe argues more strongly for left-populism to combat anti-democratic authoritarian and right-wing populist political projects (Mouffe, 2018). As the failures of various left populist projects in Western political contexts demonstrate, this plea for leftist populist projects is mainly normative. These political regimes cease to be bridges to democratic socialism. As Orban's regime of "leader democracy" and Trump's Bonapartism indicate, the counter-hegemonic project against liberalism is not left-populism, but a post-democratic version of right-wing populism.

Due to these developments, agonist theory has become unrealistic and its plausibility link has been dissolved. The major factor here is what I have referred to as increasing differentiation and complexity. Even though the liberal order is in dissolution and the ideological hegemony of liberalism falters, it is unclear how all problems and grievances

this process brings forth in all areas, levels, and networks of political life can be connected in a chain of equivalence that promotes democratic socialism (or a similar left-populist project). More specifically, agonist theory's underlying model of politics according to which a binary confrontation between a right-wing political project and a left-wing political project is essential for democratic politics appears anachronistic. In contrast, we can witness a severe fragmentation and diversification of political life that agonist theory's simplified model of democratic politics cannot capture. Similarly, Mouffe's prediction that the political future of democratic regimes will consist of a confrontation between left-wing populism on the one side and right-wing populism on the other appears as flawed, although there are some countries, such as Brazil, where this constellation seems to be emerging. However, these are the exception to the rule. In Western countries, France alone is currently showing tendencies that point in this direction.

Liberal theory. The last approach to democratic theory I will discuss in this section is liberal theory. In liberal democratic theory, there is no central author or representative figure. For this reason, I will engage with an ideal-typical model of liberal theory that seeks only to highlight those features that distinguish the liberal approach from the other approaches.

According to this model of liberal democratic theory, existing regimes embody the idea of democracy. This may allow for more demanding interpretations of the democratic values and norms than only the liberal interpretation, but according to liberal theory, in real political life democracy equals what we already have and what is usually considered the minimal model of liberal democracy. Its core elements are: the rule of law, checks and balances, basic rights and freedoms, open party competition, and above all elite control based on the principle of political equality and institutionalized through public opinion and electoral competition. There is always room for improvement, but seen from this perspective, on a general level, democratic regimes do not need fundamental reform. According to liberal democratic theorists, the institutional structure of liberal democracy, if it functions properly, generates processes of political learning and fosters gradual improvements. That is why liberal democratic theory describes existing democratic regimes, even though they consider them not as being perfect, as embodiments of democracy. Liberal theory's main indicator that we live in democratic regimes is the existence of basic rights, the rule of law, and the institutionalization of elite control through public opinion and voting, and therefore political learning.

For liberal democratic theory, obsolescence poses two problems. First, it generates a widening gap between democratic norms and real political life that renders these norms illusory or simulative. In regimes transformed by the obsolescence of democracy, the norms of liberal representative democracy still exist, but they are detached from political life due to the opaque complexity of political life and the impossibility of organizing the differentiated governance structure of political life democratically. Second, another problem for liberal democratic theory is that obsolescence has aristocratic implications since it gives the upper strata of the citizenry and elite more political power. As disillusioned liberals concede, we do not have elite control based on political equality but rather an oligarchy and a plutocratic control of the agenda (Dahrendorf, 2000). This malfunction of elite control leads to elitist segregation ("secession of the rich," Urbinati &

Zampaglione, 2016) and freezes the process of political learning, because without proper control of elite power and political competition for power, there is no political learning. As Karl Deutsch put it: “power is the ability to afford not to learn” (Deutsch, 1963, p. 111). To the extent that the elites can secure power, they are able to afford not to learn.⁵

Obsolescence, therefore, renders liberal democratic theory implausible and dissolves its plausibility link. The most stunning and troubling consequence of this process is that even the minimal model of liberal democracy that Schumpeter, following Weber, has developed does not describe the political reality of our transformed regimes. According to Schumpeter and old-school liberals such as Walter Lippmann (1927), democracy institutionalizes competition between elites, which allows the citizenry to reject or confirm ruling elites, after a period of governing, through the voting mechanism.

It has recently been argued that this mechanism is still intact as the number of electoral changes has not decreased and the empirical evidence for the argument that former consolidated democracies are “backsliding” towards autocracy is therefore missing (Little & Meng, 2024). Notwithstanding this important observation, in times of differentiated networks of governance and political complexity, the simplistic principal-agent model of an electoral democracy that Schumpeter used in his seminal text to describe the political process is anachronistic too. Political life in regimes transformed by the obsolescence of democracy looks so different from this model that its underlying liberal democratic theory is outdated.

Liberal theorists react to this in two ways. The first reaction is the most prominent. It mirrors the strategy of the political elite. It consists simply of an affirmation of the ideal of liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 2022). The second reaction is rare but could become more widely spread in the future: defeatism. Liberal theorists who react in this way have given up the idea of liberal democracy and they begin to concede that their concept of democracy has fallen out of time (Urbinati, 2019).

In sum, all three approaches to democratic theory I have discussed are implausible because they cannot establish a plausibility link between their theoretical model and real political life. As a result, their models of democracy fail to describe existing regimes as democratic and their models of democracy do not capture the nature of regimes transformed by obsolescence. The following table sums up these observations (Table 2).

This confronts these approaches with two options: either being anachronistic, i.e., ignoring the transformation by counterfactually assuming that democracy still is more or less properly functioning, or by fleeing towards pure normative theory, while conceding or ignoring that democracy in real-life politics is withering away.

Of course, this conclusion can be called into question. One possible counterargument could be that my Eurocentric point of view is biased. It does not acknowledge the emergence of creative new concepts and theories that are emerging from postcolonial discourse and postcolonial scholarship (Scholte, 2020). This is to a certain extent true. However, insofar as these concepts move away from Western notions of democracy, they rather prove my point that our cherished notions of democracy are in fact exhausted.

Another counterargument may be that there are several propositions from all camps of democratic theory that seek to spell out “innovative” reform options for revitalizing democracy, such as incorporating mini-publics (Sørensen & Warren, 2025) or lot-based

Table 2. Approaches in democratic theory.

Theoretical approach	Existing regimes as	Indicator	Core problem
Deliberation	Approximation	Real-life deliberation	Uncommon sense Aristocratic deliberation
Agonism	Bridge	Left counter-hegemony	Failure of left counter-hegemony
Liberalism	Embodiment	Elite control Constitutional norms	Oligarchy & opaque politics

second chambers into our polities. As many of these proposals implicitly or explicitly refer to pre-modern institutions (McCormick, 2006) it may be asked how innovative they actually are. Moreover, they usually address very specific institutional aspects and it is reasonable to assume that they may not address the overarching macro transformation that obsolescence brings forth. The empirical experience with these “innovations” is that they do not lead to structural reform but that they are rather add-ons that leave the fundamental structures of power and inequality intact. The widely cited case of the successful Irish Citizens’ Assembly on the issue of abortion should not obscure the fact that in most cases, mini-publics and other forms of participatory governance are instances of participatory window dressing (see Pateman, 2012).

Could a revitalization of democracy perhaps be initiated by strengthening the majoritarian elements of democracy instead? There is a rich body of majoritarian theory of democracy (see, for example, Kelsen, 1920), and recently Richard Tuck has put forward a powerful majoritarian defense of democracy (Tuck, 2024). However, when it comes to the existence of the preconditions for this form of democracy, such as organizational bases of mass politics, group coherence, and social homogeneity, skepticism seems warranted. In a recent lecture, Tuck himself states: “The central problem of Western societies now [...] and the septicemia which has invaded the organs of democracy, is that the concrete benefits which mass action used to deliver are no longer necessary.” (Tuck, 2019, p. 3–4). Why would we, then, have reasons to expect a comeback of majoritarianism?

My discussion of the main approaches to democratic theory, therefore, arrives at the observation that paradigmatic assumptions of democratic theory may be fallacious. The first assumption is that political regimes can meet the Sartori criterion. Yet, obsolescence indicates that political life has become so differentiated and complex that it is at least unclear how it could be organized and legitimized along the lines of democratic will-formation. The second questionable assumption is that existing “democratic” regimes institutionalize political learning, political equality, the rationalization of political decisions, or, viewed from a left-leaning theoretical perspective, the possibility of socialist counter-hegemonic projects. But due to the obsolescence of democracy, political life becomes more irrational, illegitimate, unequal, and chaotic without producing normatively attractive and practically feasible alternatives to democracy. The third assumption is that “democracy” as it is currently institutionalized and practiced is the solution to

contemporary problems. If this assumption is not shared, normative theorizing still makes sense. However, democratic theory is not a purely normative discipline. As it is a part of the social sciences, it must examine its object also empirically. As such, it not only fails to describe existing regimes as democratic but also cannot plausibly state why we have reason to believe that they are the answer to contemporary problems.

Conclusion

The positive reference to democracy and the belief in the transformative power of democratic politics was an essential element of progressive movements and intellectuals, and they considered democratic procedures as means for their emancipatory ends and progressive aspirations. A firm belief in democracy and progressive politics were correlated. Against this backdrop, what are the implications of both obsolescence of democracy and the conceptual exhaustion of democratic theory for the future of eco-progressive politics and the prospects of emancipatory ambitions in theory-building? In conclusion, I want to highlight two of them.

First, today's proponents of progressive politics still cultivate democratic rhetoric and cannot but praise democracy on a superficial level. However, many progressives and in particular the ecologically-oriented faction of today's progressives seem to be skeptical of democracy (see Arias-Maldonado in this special issue). An example for this is *Demokratie im Feuer*, a non-fiction book that is somewhat 'theoretical' and sold quite well on the German book market (Schaible, 2023). On a rhetorical level, it is brimming with praise for democracy. In terms of content, however, the author is well aware that democratic procedures will not produce outcomes that are inclusive and ecologically sound at the same time because democracy is essentially relativistic and it is therefore unclear which outcomes it will bring about. He therefore proposes an institutional restructuring, along the lines of an 'independent' ecological central bank, which would then de-democratize climate policy. This, it seems, is not an isolated case as political ideas that operate on undemocratic terrain are gaining ground among these circles and beyond, whether these are expertocratic (Zulianello & Ceccobelli, 2020; see Sorg & Staab, Zierott et al. in this special issue) or, at the fringes, Leninist (Heron & Dean, 2022) in character. This change in discourse suggests that the firm belief in the co-evolution and elective affinity of democracy and progressive politics may now be undergoing a process of dissolution.

Seen through the lens of my diagnosis, this is not just a shift of preference that could be easily criticized and remedied with better arguments. Rather, it is a reaction to the conceptual exhaustion of democracy and democratic theory, which seem to offer fewer points of reference for progressive politics. Recent political events, such as the re-election of Donald Trump, are contributing to the fact that democracy and democratic procedures now appear dysfunctional and corrupt on a fundamental level, in particular in the eyes of progressive observers. Until now, the view that democracies are systemically corrupt has been a hallmark only of right-wing populist parties, politicians, and intellectuals. However, this view might now increasingly spread to other political camps and would then also be reflected in progressive theory-building and political thought.

In this context, it is significant that one of today's most eminent political theorists, John P. McCormick, has already made such a theoretical argument. He suggests that the structural problems of the emergence of an oligarchic power structure have reached such an extent that only a radical institutional reform that departs from the principle of political equality and abolishes the norm of bodily integrity could provide a remedy. To this end, he not only continues to propose the introduction of plebeian institutions but also argues for the introduction of majority-led trials for indicting corrupt behavior on the part of officials, which should be punished by public execution (McCormick, 2011, p. 180ff.; McCormick, 2019). The fact that such proposals are put forward in the theoretical debate must be interpreted in the light of the structural transformations of democracy and the resulting exhaustion of democratic theory.

Second, the obsolescence of democracy and the conceptual exhaustion of democratic theory call into question the link between the process of modernization and democratization that has been established by typical modernist social theory (Parsons, 1964) and which is, up to this day, an essential background assumption of most contemporary political and social science. For instance, it has just recently been brought forward as an explanation for the "resilience" of those democratic regimes that are embedded in a modern society and thereby resist the process of backsliding to authoritarianism and autocracy (Levitsky & Way, 2024). In fact, it is unlikely that older forms of authoritarian politics are about to reemerge because the social conditions for authoritarian politics have changed and authoritarianism would have to adapt and re-invent itself. However, there is also reason to believe that the exhaustion of progressive politics, the demise of the eco-emancipatory project and the dissipation of its democratic spirit take place in the context of the emergence of a new phase in the historical process of modernization. What it will look like, we do not know, but it may dissolve the affiliation between democracy and modernity, which in turn would severely affect the eco-emancipatory project. It was guided by the assumption that ecology, emancipation, and democracy would not only mutually support and complement each other but would also be supplemented and reinforced by the process of modernization. If this basic assumption is no longer tenable, then it follows that progressive politics must also reinvent itself. So the good news is that old-style authoritarian politics is simply no longer fit for purpose as a result of obsolescence. The bad news is that this also applies to progressive politics.

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Notes

1. This article draws on my recent book and presents its main argument, but also elaborates further on it by introducing the concept of the *plausibility link*. I would like to thank all organizers and participants of the numerous conferences, workshops, and talks where I had the opportunity to present my work. I am very grateful for the thoughtful comments and helpful criticism by the two reviewers and both editors of this special issue.
2. Of course, a macro-perspective is often taken into account in contributions from political theory. But this is either done without an overarching theoretical scheme of interpretation (Runciman, 2019) or in form of a macro-level explanation that builds upon a small set of variables (Przeworski, 2019). In contrast, I am aiming at combining political theory with a social theory perspective on the crisis of democracy, following paragons such as Blühdorn (2013), Greven (2020), and Zolo (2008). In his more recent publications, Blühdorn (2020) has concentrated more on uncovering an inner dialectic of democracy that lies at the root of the current malaise.
3. That is not to say that during the last decades no political achievements and improvements to political life in democratic regimes were made. These include, inter alia, an increase in civic participation, increasing recognition of difference, reduction of sexist and racist discrimination, and a decline in institutionalized sadism towards minorities. With a view to their effects on democracy, however, even these very laudable achievements had their downsides. The increase in participation was socially selective and led to the emergence of the aforementioned participatory aristocracy. The increase in recognition of difference went hand in hand with the erosion of the idea of inclusive citizenship and triggered tribalistic tendencies among citizens (Michaels, 2007). Finally, the reduction of socially accepted sadism is counteracted by the moralization of the public sphere and new forms of political bullying (Fourest, 2020).
4. One may think of Dahl's seminal *Democracy and Its Critics* (Dahl, 1989) as a classic example of democratic theory in the sense I refer to the term here. Dahl's democratic theory, however, is *not* paradigmatic for academic democratic theory, because Dahl refers to existing regimes as "polyarchies." For him, "democracy" is a form of political rule that has not yet been realized in modern times.
5. One can ask whether it is a general characteristic of political systems to become encrusted after a while, to neglect political learning, and to block internal reform. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who reminded me that this was a central issue of ancient republican political theory. For modern liberal political thought, from Mill to Dewey to Rorty, it was nevertheless clear that modern liberal democracies are characterized by their inherent capacity for self-improvement and fundamental reform.

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