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It is a truth universally acknowledged but rarely enunciated that academia will always be beholden to popular trends. In the aftermath of the 2016 Trump election and the Brexit-vote, for instance, an avalanche of books and op-eds on ‘post-truth,’ ‘populism,’ and ‘fake news’ has swamped local bookstores and opinion pages. The phenomenon has led Jan-Werner Müller to coin the term “democracy-defense industry”¹—an academic apparatus in which “apocalyptic talk of authoritarianism” allows academics and thought-leaders to pitch new books to citizens worried about today’s democracies. “Save democracy,” so runs its slogan, “by buying my book.”²

Like most frenzies, the populism gold rush has not been a pretty sight. As argued by philosopher Brian Leiter, since academics “feel the freedom to take off some of their armour” and “move from specialist areas...,” an “unwillingness to be slowed down in the quest for ‘relevance’” keeps an entire generation “from complex texts.”³ Like fast politics, fast scholarship tends to be bad scholarship.

Sophia Rosenfeld’s *Democracy and Truth* is a rare exception to Leiter’s rule. Rosenfeld is the author of a previous monograph *Common Sense*—a riveting history of a concept that was once key to the republican

¹ Jan-Werner Müller, “Democracy’s Midlife Crisis,” *The Nation*, 22 April 2019, <https://www.thenation.com/article/how-democracies-dies-how-democracy-ends-book-review/>.

² Müller.

³ Brian Leiter, “The Quest for “Relevance” by some Analytic Philosophers, and Their Ignorance of the Post-Kantian Traditions in European Philosophy,” in *Leiter Reports*, 28 May 2019, available at <https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2019/05/the-quest-for-relevance-by-some-analytic-philosophers-and-their-ignorance-of-the-post-kantian-tra.html>.

tradition.⁴ As with this previous, much longer book, *Democracy and Truth* brings a beautiful mix of history, political philosophy and cultural chronicle to bear on the contemporary crisis of facticity.

The case seems pressing enough. “In Trumpland,” Rosenfeld notes, “truth becomes falsehood,” “falsehood masquerades as truth,” and the “very idea of verified knowledge itself... is thrown into question” (7). But why should politicians and citizens care about ‘truth’ in the first place? And what ‘kind’ of truths are we talking about here? This historical question, of how ‘truth’ became a value central to democratic republics, lies at the heart of Rosenfeld’s book. What animates her investigation is the awareness that we are living through “a particular historical crisis in the relationship between democracy and truth.” This crisis, she claims, “threatens to erode the forms of intellectual trust and cooperation that are required for democratic life,” and turns the acquisition and control of truth into nothing more than “consequence of brute power alone” (41).

So how did we get here? To answer this question, *Democracy and Truth* scavenges five centuries of political history. Four chapters—“The Problem of Democratic Truth,” “Experts at the Helm,” “The Populist Reaction” and “Democracy in an Age of Lies”—chronicle the birth and history of the modern notion of democratic truth in the age of revolutions. This new notion had three new characteristics: it was public, deliberative, and, most importantly, social. In contrast to the secretive control over knowledge in absolutist regimes, radical republicans such as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin hoped for a properly public contest over knowledge. As Franklin noted in the 1720s, without “freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom, and no such thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech” (33). Taking the petty craftsman and amateur scientist as their model, these republican writers hoped that decision-making could be wrested from a narrow clique of courtiers. Geared to new institutions of mass education, this transfer would lead to a polity where, according to James Madison, “light (would) prevail over darkness” and “truth over error” (34). The new notion of ‘social’ truth analyzed by Rosenfeld pit itself against the hypocrisy of absolutist kings, who were once seen as a necessary virtue by political philosophers, and the empty acclamation of the new crowd. The new “spirit of publicity” was to undergird modernity’s democratic regimes (24).

It also carried dangers, however. While desiring a widened circle of decision-makers, Rosenfeld’s republican theorists never sought to abolish authority itself. ‘Delegation’ remained a paramount value, and the construction of new ‘social’ truths rarely implied granting all citizens an equal share in government. Elitism thus survived, albeit in a different form; the new cult of publicity, Rosenfeld notes, could help “the people hold government officials accountable by checking their misstatements and fabrications” and “reveal what really happened behind closed doors” (84). This was democracy, but with a passive clause.

Rosenfeld here leads us into her first dialectical switch. The advent of social truth brought with it a democratization of state power. A larger subset of citizens (excluding women and colonial subjects) is drawn into the remit of political decision-making. But the new notions of social truth could never be truly universal. Modern states faced feasibility constraints when trying to balance democracy and complexity. They confronted the dilemmas of commerce that were first analyzed by writers such as Abbé de Sieyès and Alexis de Tocqueville, or the capricious ‘public opinion’ discussed by philosopher David Hume.

⁴ See Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

Democratization thus finds itself in a difficult dialectic with de-democratization. Rosenfeld's epistemically emancipated people needed ever more capacious experts for guidance—guardians of the new knowledge. This created the danger for elite capture and a constricted public sphere. Writers like Franklin, Jefferson and Paine might have supported broad suffrages, but were clear about the need for a 'natural aristocracy' to attend to affairs of state. French revolutionaries also created a long set of public institutions such as the *Écoles* to assure elite reproduction.

None of these institutions, as Rosenfeld shows, proved free from oligarchical tendencies. Some of them, like the *Grands Écoles*, quickly undid the democratic promises that drove their founding. As Rosenfeld notes, the community of enlightened citizens that was celebrated by republicans was always "constituted, by definition, out of glaring exclusions "racial and gendered" and shot through with "vast inequalit(ies)" of "resources, education and status" (37). Both in theory and practice, a 'social truth' was simply too good to be true.

Faced with this broken promise, a backlash kicked in. The steady distortion of the democratic process resulting from these factors led to demands for direct influence and insurrection: technocracy begat populism, while populism begat more technocracy. Rosenfeld quotes Maximilien de Robespierre, who offered a pithy summary of this process:

"Democracy perishes by two excesses, the aristocracy of those who govern, or the contempt of the people for the authorities which it has itself established, a contempt in which each faction or individual reaches out for the public power, and reduces the people, through the resulting chaos, to nullity, or the power of a single man" (40).

Before Napoléon Bonaparte himself, Robespierre saw Bonapartism's democratic attraction. While expert knowledge attained ever higher levels—mapping rivers, mountains, moons and even human emotions—popular protest had to develop a larger repertoire of action in order to make its voices heard. Instruments ranged from parties to unions to plebiscites to riots—the "first forms of social bargaining,"⁵ as Eric Hobsbawm noted. Terror was a final option, as Robespierre showed.

Rosenfeld does not downplay the dangers of total publicity. The "punitive culture of the Terror," she notes, proved that the "collision of the enlightened idea of total publicity with the reality of unstoppable counter-revolutionary activity" could produce murderous results (105). The pendulum was bound to swing back, and France had restrictive suffrage for most of the nineteenth century.

Robespierre's oscillation sets out the rest of *Democracy and Truth's* argument. In two middle chapters, Rosenfeld races through a century of political thinking on bureaucracy and popular agency, examining the ways in which social movements sought to counter and contest expert knowledge. All of this shares a reasonable continuity with the republican discussion in the previous chapter. Yet some subtle modifications are also visible. Rosenfeld argues that, although the contest between populism and technocracy might be inscribed into our modern horizon, it has also undergone some careful changes. She here relies on philosopher Hannah Arendt's work on politics and truth.⁶ In the 1970s, Arendt already remarked on the novelty of the

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, "The Machine Breakers," *Past and Present* 1:1 (February 1952): 57-70.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker*, 25 February 1967.

forms of lying displayed in events such as the Watergate Affair. Late-century politicians, she claims, had become accustomed to a completely “defactualized world,” in which the “technocrat lies out of a sense of duty to uphold the images of that are already in place” (87).

To these technocrats, an ‘outside’ to propaganda no longer exists. As the former head of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker later said about his decision to tell the Brussels press corps in 2011 that European markets were in good shape: “When things gets serious, you just have to lie.”⁷ There is a perverse logic to this defactualization. As the historian Adam Tooze notes, “post-truth politics” might be less of a personal perversion than a systemic requirement of twentieth-century governance.⁸ Lying has turned from a matter of convenience into an elite survival tactic. The result is something the historian Isaac Kamola has aptly termed an “epistemic monoculture.”⁹

President Donald Trump remains the worthiest example of this trend. While it was clear that President Richard Nixon and his associates were well aware that they were lying in 1972, it is very much unclear whether Trump himself is even faintly conscious of it. His statements invariably begin with admonitions such as ‘a lot of people are saying’ or ‘as you know.’ The decline of conscious lying is probably one of the most interesting developments in politics in the last ten years. As noted by Rosenfeld, it is intimately linked up with the increasing virtualization of the western economy, in which hearsay and reputation are as important to prosperity as are property rights.

Today’s populism does not escape this speculative loop. The “Populist Reaction” (92) simply reproduces the logic of finance into that of political management, relying on advertising and public relations-techniques to reach constituencies that were previously available only through civil society. As Rosenfeld notes at the end of her third chapter, while “technocracy attached to global capitalism has increasingly threatened to overpower the ideal of cooperative decision-making in the modern, postrevolutionary world,” the populist reaction of “anger and know-nothingness” now “constitutes its own form of risk” (91). In an increasingly volatile digital world, the dialectic between populism and technocracy runs riot.

This new situation implies that our notions of truth have become both more personal and impersonal. More personal, since the range of influences citizens are exposed to is increasingly narrow and subject to customization—not to say private caprice. This is a far cry from philosopher Jürgen Habermas’s public sphere and its culture of *Offentlichkeit*.¹⁰ For Habermas, a shared realm of understanding was crucial to encase processes of democratic deliberation. The private window of the Facebook-feed is a world apart from the Habermasian frontpage, however. On the internet, users can construct their own feeds, personalize storylines,

⁷ Cited in Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 18.

⁸ Tooze, 18.

⁹ Isaac Kamola, *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 19.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

filter content and block info they deem unwelcome. We might even be witnessing the ‘privatization’ of truth, as Rosenfeld notes, in which democratic knowledge becomes completely detached from interpersonal testing.

At the same time, the technologies which compose our new language games have become ever more removed from public control. New algorithms obey a narrow set of prescriptions and are now beyond the reach of moderators themselves. People who watch a single football video on YouTube will quickly be escorted to antisemitic rants and conspiracy theories. Unlike the radio that was so favored by early twentieth-century fascist leaders, the logic of our new media is radically anti-dialogical. What is preferred by the new cybersphere is a kind of intellectual solipsism in which hearsay and rumor are elevated to workable facts, massaged by public-relations gurus and online consultants.

Rosenfeld’s remedies to this are not terribly original. They range from egalitarian measures to counter citizens’ material exclusion from the civic sphere to possible bans on fake content. The latter have seen a rather messy implementation under the administration of President Emmanuel Macron, in which state control over information has been met with much popular resistance. Not surprisingly, an unholy convergence of populism and technocracy is difficult to entangle.

Is it possible to organize four-hundred years of political thought with this dichotomy? Yes and no. It is true that populism and technocracy capture central dimensions of our contemporary democratic crisis. But what kind of populism and technocracy are we talking about? In Rosenfeld’s book, these two traditions remain essentially untouched in the face of historical change, merely mooted and confronting each other in different permutations.

A full historicization of both terms would have done much to ease this tension. Populism itself, for instance, was not always conceived as a “revolt against intermediary bodies”¹¹ or anti-pluralist fear-mongering. Indeed, the late nineteenth-century movement that lent its name to the term— the American People’s Party— constructed a rich world of farmers’ clubs, cooperatives, colleges and temperance societies. It was this ‘cooperative commonwealth’ that served as the basis of the Populist campaigns of 1892, 1894, and 1896 in which the People’s Party candidates came close to one-fifth of the presidential vote and nearly tanked the Democratic Party in the South.¹²

Unlike today’s digital parties, this populism was deeply deliberative. It built a rich campaign literature, had a large educational circuit, and sent out travelling Alliance lectures. This organizational effort continued to condition rural radicalism for a generation, culminating in New Deal reforms and Progressive trustbusting. Contact with a base was not unmediated or direct. Rather, it was filtered through intricate procedures of

¹¹ Nadia Urbinati, “Antiestablishment and the Substitution of the Whole with One of its Parts,” in Carlos de la Torre, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (London: Routledge, 2018), 46-62.

¹² Walter Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Jason Frank, “Populism and Praxis,” in Paul Taggart et al., eds., *Oxford Handbook of Populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 634.

selection on voting, modelled on the mass parties arising on the other side of the Atlantic. In short, populist knowledge was a form of ‘mass knowledge.’

It is true that this original populism had strong anti-elitist leanings. The Minnesota lawyer and Populist Ignatius Donnelly, for instance, saw modern science as a racket that was dependent on “brands of foreign approval” and “Brahminism.” “What we call ‘Science’ in this country,” he claimed in the 1890s, “is upheld by a congeries of schoolmasters repeating what someone else has told them.”¹³ His Populist colleague Benjamin Flower saw new medical schools as dangerous “knowledge trusts.”¹⁴ Both hoped for a rebellion against the “dispossession of decision-making.”¹⁵

Historians and social scientists like Richard Hofstadter and Daniel Bell—both of whom are cited by Rosenfeld—were right to see a “paranoid style” in this literature.¹⁶ Populists like Donnelly and Flower did engage in conspiracy thinking. Yet this did not imply an unmediated notion of knowledge. Populists crafted and formed a large campaign literature (a “cooperative counterculture,”¹⁷ as New Left historians saw it) which exchanged opinions between mass and cadre and circulated knowledge. A vast gap separates this ‘big p’ Populism from its contemporary ‘small p’ variant.

The same can be said about the term ‘technocracy’ as wielded by Rosenfeld. There is no denying that technocratic thinking shares a very deep roots in the Western tradition. But the modality of its *technos*—i.e., its claim to legitimacy—is not unchanging. As authors such as Chris Bickerton, Daniele Caramani and Carlo Acetti have noted, contemporary technocrats rarely root their claim to rule in hard-boiled defenses of epistemic privilege.¹⁸ Rather, technocrats now cast their action as supplementary devices to democratic regimes, capable of solving the inherent slowness of the democratic processes. As the Italian technocrat Mario Monti put it in an interview in 2012, there apparently was “a hidden demand in Italy for a boring

¹³ Cited in Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 64.

¹⁴ Lasch, 64.

¹⁵ See Jean-Louis Marin Lamellet, “What’s the Matter with Benjamin O. Flower? Populism, Antimonopoly Politics and the “Paranoid Style” at the Turn of the Century,” in *European Journal of American Studies* 8 (Spring 2013), 2-23.

¹⁶ Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right*, Glencoe: Free Press, 1955; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Knopf, 1955).

¹⁷ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

¹⁸ See Daniele Caramani, “Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government,” in *American Political Science Review* 111:1 (February 2019): 54-67; Chris Bickerton and Carlo Acetti, “Populism and Technocracy,” in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

government which would try to tell the truth in non-political jargon.”¹⁹ Democracies, so he claimed, were badly equipped to respond to sudden market shocks. In that case, technocrats stepped in.

This is an existential difference with the Platonic guardian or the Fordist planner. Technocracy might be a constant variable in political thought. But its interface with society is constantly changing—and so its relation with democracy. The specificity of contemporary technocracy resides in its reliance on a *weak theory of democratic legitimacy*, rather than a brute claim to rule. As the historian Immanuel Wallerstein noted, the eternal problem with meritocracy—the cloak in which contemporary technocracy drapes itself as the “final avatar of bourgeois privilege”—is that “from the point of view of the bourgeoisie... it is the least (not the most) defensible, because its basis is the thinnest.”²⁰ In Wallerstein’s view, “the oppressed may swallow being ruled by and giving reward to those who are to the manner born. But being ruled by and giving reward to people whose only asserted claim (and that a dubious one) is that they are smarter, that is too much to swallow.”²¹ Today’s populism faces the first elite that is properly post-aristocratic. It is a class, as Wallerstein notes, which faces “neither tsar nor paternal industrialist.”²² Undone of its mass elements and previous aristocratic auras, politics is bound to become volatile.

Historicizing ‘populism’ and ‘technocracy’ allows for a cautious rereading of Rosenfeld’s theses. Both concepts do function well as organizing axes of our age. It is also true that the philosophical roots of both traditions are old and in need of thorough histories—something Rosenfeld provides with great flair. But ‘populism’ and ‘technocracy’ always appear under very specific character masks, and do not easily translate back into past struggles.

Writers like Jan-Werner Müller and David Runciman have talked about the imperative to look back on the past for explanations our democratic crisis.²³ Often enough these ventures end in a search for parallels akin to Friedrich Nietzsche’s “instructive” or “monumental history,” in which the past is set up as a warning to the present.²⁴ Others, like Rosenfeld, stick to more subtle approaches, seeking to dig out migrations or *détournements*.

¹⁹ Mario Monti, “Interview: Mario Monti’s Long March to Get the Italian Economy on Its Feet”, in *Knowledge@Wharton*, 9 May 2012, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/mario-montis-long-march-to-get-the-italian-economy-on-its-feet/>.

²⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Bourgeois(ie) as Concept and Reality,” *New Left Review* 167 (January/February 1988), 106.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Müller, “Democracy’s Midlife Crisis,” *The Nation*; David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London: Basic Books, 2017).

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Cosimo, 2005).

The danger in both approaches, however, is a turn away from real discontinuities. We are no longer in the 1930s. Nor are we the inhabitants of an ailing ancient regime. Perhaps the most important factor is the practical absence of a mobilized citizenry in our contemporary truth-regime. Both in the 1930s and 1790s, masses were on the move, fighting wars, contesting elections, populating public space.

It is a serious question whether these ‘masses’ still exist today. In March 2019, the British journalist Paul Mason posted a comment to his Twitter feed in which he claimed that the Brexit-process, rattled by another parliamentary rejection, was “now in the hands of the masses.”²⁵ The strange—not to say burlesque—nature of this statement speaks volumes about today’s populist moment. Contemporary ‘populists’ like Boris Johnson, Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán might have their followers, sympathizers, likes, shares. Yet they hardly have masses. Masses can move, march, chant, fight, and operate as public entities. In contrast to twentieth-century fascism, the new populist constituency is no mass but a ‘swarm.’ Swarms roam, rage, scream, cacophonically, only to end in a monotonous drone. Their movements are headed not by party tribunes, but by what political scientist Paulo Gerbaudo has called “hyper-leaders,”²⁶ figures whose personal charisma is the only glue tying together a coalition (no ‘Corbynism without Corbyn’, or ‘Trumpism without Trump’). And since democracy no longer is a mass affair, its truths can no longer be negotiated in a public arena.

Looking at previous eras might tell us something about the nature of our quandaries. Rosenfeld’s *Democracy and Truth* is one of the few books to offer a properly historical angle on our contemporary populist moment. Refusing to jump from Paine to John Dewey to Trump and back, Rosenfeld nonetheless tracks a modern morphology of populist and technocrat politics, and how these traditions came to determine our age. That history can tell us much about some of our current problems. Unfortunately, it cannot tell us whether they are also the right problems to worry about.

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²⁵ See Paul Mason, “Brexit: in case it’s not obvious... last night @theresa_may lost the last vestiges of control over the process. There are three agents now: the EU, parliament and the masses...” <https://twitter.com/paulmasonnews/status/1108986007679062016>, 21 March 2019, 11:57 PM.

²⁶ Paulo Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party* (London: Pluto Press, 2018).