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Introduction: Democracy in Crisis

There is widespread recognition that democracy faces a crisis. The dominant narrative has focused on the illiberal behaviors of "populist" leaders whose discursive styles and lack of respect for liberal norms and institutions have threatened democratic stability.[1] The arguments suggest that if opportunistic populists are not kept from power, there is a risk of democratic backsliding leading to the emergence of hybrid, competitive authoritarian regimes in which democratic institutions are politicized and used by populists to skew the playing field to such an extent that an opposition's capacity to compete is seriously compromised.[2]

While mainstream analyses raise salient issues regarding the dangers of bending liberal norms, there are several issues with such appraisals. First, and most fundamentally, the symptoms of the crisis of democracy are conflated with the causes of the crisis of democracy. That is, by identifying populism as the major threat to democratic rule, the underlying causes that foster support for outsiders receive far less attention. From this, a second issue emerges whereby "populists" of all ideological stripes are understood as threats to democracy, irrespective of what it is that they seek to do when elected to office, or what forces shape their behaviors following election. Populism has become a

1. For example, see Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018); Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy. Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save it* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
2. For a discussion of hybrid regimes and competitive authoritarianism, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

catch-all term to describe – and in most cases denigrate – any challenger to the political status quo irrespective of fundamental differences between "populists" in terms of their stances on socio-economic, political, and identity issues. As such, the terms outsiders and anti-system parties are used here to describe leaders/parties who come from outside the traditional mainstream party system, who call into question the functioning of democracy, and who raise concerns regarding elite capture of institutions.

Outsider, anti-system leaders and parties should be understood as responses to neoliberalization processes which fostered de-democratization processes. With ideological origins in the liberal Weber-Schumpeter model of democracy,[3] proponents of a neoliberal infused democracy believe that both political and economic life should be a matter of individual freedom and initiative. A free market society with a minimal state is the goal.[4] While neoliberalism is a contested concept, fundamentally it is an ideology "founded on an idealized vision of market rule and liberal freedoms, combining a utilitarian conception of market rationality and competitive individualism with deep antipathies to social redistribution and solidarity."[5] Projects of neoliberalization are not simply about a withdrawal of the state but are instead concerned with its capture and reuse. Neoliberalization processes thus entail both rollback politics of deregulation and dismantlement, and rollout politics of pro-corporate and market-conforming governance. Rollback and rollout neoliberalization processes "sought to create a political economy and social order where public policy is premised upon the dominance of the investor" and where dominant economic forces are insulated from democratic rule and popular accountability.[6]

Democracy in the neoliberal has become a technocratic affair with experts in non-majoritarian institutions, including independent central banks, playing an increasingly dominant role.[7] The rules of the game are designed to "'lock in' commitments to neo liberalism and to 'lock

3. Alison Ayers and Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Democracy against Neoliberalism: Paradoxes, Limitations, Transcendence," *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 4–5 (2015): 598.
4. See for example Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1960);Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge, 1976); Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974).
5. Jamie Peck, Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore, "Actually Existing Neoliberalism," in Damien Cahill, Melinda Cooper, and Marijn Konings (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2018): 6.
6. Stephen Gill, "New Constitutionalism, Democratization and Global Political Economy," *Global Change, Peace and Security* 10, no. 1 (1998): 23.
7. Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2013).

out' other potential political economy alternatives."[8] Labor has become "flexible," meaning precarious. Austerity and social-welfare retrenchment are the norm. Individual risk has increased as socialization of risk decreased, while neoliberal policy design allowed inequality to reach unprecedented levels.[9] Rising economic inequality is translated back onto rising political inequality in a vicious feedback cycle, as the owners of wealth increasingly set the rules of the game that promote their own interests.[10] This extremely narrow (low-quality political citizenship) and shallow (low-quality socio-economic citizenship) form of democracy underpinned by neoliberal rationale may be defined as "market democracy" in which the state's role is to guarantee the protection of the interests of transnational and domestic capital, irrespective of whether such interests run contrary to those of domestic citizens.[11] This market model of democracy was promoted as "the only game in town" by both center-right and center-left parties. Unsurprisingly, the de politicization of politics under market democracy, and its embrace by political parties on both the right and the left, meant that democracy became "devalued" as a political currency.[12] The neoliberal response to the 1970s "crisis of *too much* democracy" engendered a crisis of *too little* democracy today.

Where the interests of the wealthiest sectors of society are organized into politics, while issues concerning popular classes are increasingly organized out, democracy becomes unstable. Where party–voter distances widen, while party–party differences narrow, popular indifference and distrust of parties and political institutions more generally grows. This combination of mistrust in the political system alongside anomie and withdrawal from participation opened space for a movement of opposition that could threaten "democracy as we know it."[13]

8. Gill, "New Constitutionalism," 79.
9. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
10. See for example Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); Merike Blofield (ed.), *The Great Gap: Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution in Latin America* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2011).
11. John Brown, "Escaping the Confines of Market Democracy: Lessons from Venezuela," *Socialism and Democracy*, 32, no. 2 (2018): 14–31.
12. Ronaldo Munck, "Neoliberalism and Politics, and the Politics of Neoliberalism," in Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (eds), *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2005): 60.
13. Philippe Schmitter, "'Real-existing' Democracy and Its Discontents: Sources, Conditions, Causes, Symptoms, and Prospects," *Chinese Political Science Review* 4, no. 2 (2019): 152.

As parties and politicians become more detached from their traditional social bases, while inequality and socioeconomic precarity become entrenched, democracy is viewed by excluded sectors as a facade for the maintenance of elite privilege, and space for anti-system outsiders widens. Appealing to a sense of personal danger and a shared sense of political exclusion, such candidates may, not wholly inaccurately, portray the political class as having failed, and that it will go on failing, effectively barring citizens from any realistic prospect of a better life.[14]

Hence, while mainstream analyses locate "populism" as the threat to democracy, they confuse the symptoms of the crisis of democracy with its underlying causes. By painting all outsiders as threats to democracy, including anti-system leaders or parties that seek to respond to the underlying causes of the crisis of democracy, mainstream accounts of "populists" miss the very crux of the matter. This is not to suggest that all outsiders offer a genuine response to the narrowing of and shallowing of democratic quality over the course of neoliberalization processes. They do not. But neither should we fall into the trap of assuming that all outsiders are threats to democracy. I turn briefly to a discussion of leftist outsiders in Latin America as these cases, and the responses within academia and beyond, highlight such dilemmas and debates regarding populism/anti-system outsiders, illiberalism, and (de-)democratization processes.

Latin America's Anti-System Outsiders during the Pink Tide

Anti-system outsiders emerged in cases where labor-based and center-left parties were at the forefront of advancing neoliberal policies, a configuration found in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.[15] Neoliberal policies were adopted in a bait-and-switch manner whereby center-left candidates reneged on pre-election promises not to adopt market-friendly reforms. The adoption of neoliberal policies by center-left parties caused party systems to converge around variants of market orthodoxy, programmatically de-aligning partisan competition and channeling societal opposition into extra-systemic forms of social and electoral protest, thereby opening vacant political space for outsiders on the left flank of mainstream parties.

14. John Dunn, "The Challenge of Populism: Why Populist Politics Spreads in the World," *Populism* 2 no. 1 (2019): 56.
15. Kenneth Roberts, *Changing Course: Party Systems in Latin America's Neoliberal Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Reflecting popular protester sentiment, the electoral campaigns of progressive antisystem candidates such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia engaged in strident critiques of mainstream party systems, overtly critiqued neoliberalism and global capitalism, challenged domestic and transnational economic elite control of wealth and resources and called for a strong state that guaranteed social citizenship for all sectors of society. Echoing the broader "populist" analyses of outsider-candidates mentioned above, scholars from the liberal tradition described how Chávez and Morales threatened democracy by challenging liberal norms.[16] Likewise, Levitsky and Loxton[17] describe these cases as "competitive authoritarian" whereby democratic institutions exist and are used as the primary routes to power, but incumbents then abuse state powers to skew electoral competition in their favor to such an extent that an opposition's ability to compete is seriously compromised.

The Andean cases have become a sort of parable in mainstream accounts regarding the dangers of "populism," with liberal scholars warning what awaits the "developed" democracies if outsiders are not kept from power. The problems with such analyses are that they do not sufficiently couch executive behaviors within empirical realities, ignore opposition destabilization tactics, fail to account for the contested nature of democracy in the continent, and ultimately only capture a part of the story. Fundamentally, these analyses elide detailed discussion as to *why* left-presidents behaved in illiberal ways as well as *what* it is that they actually sought to do with boosted presidential powers. While liberal scholars have decried the "hyper-presidential" nature of the "radical" left cases, anti-system outsiders in the Andes emphasized that entrenched political elites and regional powers blocked programs for change, and hence argued for a strong president who relied on "plebiscitarian appeals for popular support" so as to "counter the bias toward the status quo."[18] Hence, while liberal analysts rightly raise concerns regarding the stability of democracy where presidents accrue power in the office of the executive, progressive-outsiders and their support base highlight that a *stable*

16. See for example Jorge G. Castaneda, "Latin America's Left Turn," *Foreign Affairs* 65, no. 3 (2006): 28–43; Kurt Weyland, "Latin America's Authoritarian Drift: The Threat from the Populist Left," *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013): 18–32.
17. Steven Levitsky and James Loxton, "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Andes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 107–36.
18. Gerardo Munck, "Building Democracy … Which Democracy? Ideology and Models of Democracy in Post-Transition Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 3 (2015): 374.

democracy that adheres to liberal norms does not automatically equate with a *quality* democracy. Indeed, the quest for "democratic stability" as a response to the "crisis of too much democracy" meant that for popular sectors "stable" democracies had become an incubator for the maintenance of political and economic exclusion, and hence, a new conception of democratic inclusion was required, even if this entailed challenging the boundaries of liberal democratic norms.

Once again, this points to the logical fallacy of much of the academic theorizing on "illiberal populists" in Latin America, and beyond. It is precisely because "stable democracy" in the market era came to mean low-quality democracy that outsiders emerged. However, whether such outsiders were able to respond to popular critiques of the market model of democracy was greatly influenced by resistance efforts from those who opposed the advancement of a post-neoliberal model. As Ellner[19] stresses, the left-led governments in Latin America confronted powerful oppositions with clashes emerging regarding distinct visions of society and democracy. From the outset, opposition-blocs that adhered to strict neoliberal rationale rejected the legitimacy of progressive-outsiders' reform projects which supported, to greater or lesser degrees, nationalistic economic goals, regional integration to act as a counterbalance to US influence, ambitious social programs, non-elite input into decision-making processes and an increased role for the state in the economy. Moreover, opposition-blocs were backed, at times openly and at times more covertly, by North American and European politicians and state agencies. Opposition-blocs in the political sphere, who had been in office before the election of the progressive-outsiders, had traditionally held close linkages to, and supported the agendas of, privileged sectors including business groups, landowners, media owners, and church hierarchies. That is, an elite or oligarchic class existed.[20]

Oligarchy combines economic and political power, and this power may be exercised formally or informally to ensure that public institutions serve private interests. In Latin America, oligarchy has tended to be organized within business families, political families, and mafias.[21] It is "the political oligarchies that do most to constrain the reach of democratic politics. The radical economic and social

19. Steve Ellner (ed.), *Latin America's Pink Tide: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings* (Lanham, MD and London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020): 1.
20. Joe Foweraker, *Polity: Demystifying Democracy in Latin America and Beyond* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2018).
21. Ibid., 2–3.

extremes of Latin America do not simply describe a continuum from very poor to very rich but rather reveal a pattern of oligarchic interest and control."[22] Oligarchic actors allied to powerful economic interests have traditionally targeted the executive to capture benefits that flow as patronage and privilege, capturing political parties and the democratic system to defend the status quo. Echoing and re-enforcing popular sector concerns, progressive-outsiders in the Andes represented a challenge to oligarchic and corporate interests, with calls for an overhaul of the distribution of political and economic power.

While accounts of the Andean cases couched in the liberal tradition highlight the use of executive powers to curb the power of opponents of wealth redistribution as authoritarian behavior, in the most unequal region in the world strict respect for liberal norms may mean that radical challenges to inequality remain off the table. As Grugel and Riggirozzi[23] stress, there remains a fundamental question over whether it is possible to reach a cross-party or inter-elite consensus over some measure of social and economic redistribution or, whether on the contrary, an entrenchment of socio-economic privilege is still the price that must be paid for liberal democracy. Such issues resonate outside the Latin American region. Indeed, this is precisely the situation in Europe and North America where center-left parties have abandoned any pretense of adhering to a project that would curb the spiraling inequality fostered by neoliberal globalization. These parties have succumbed to Margaret Thatcher's dictum that there is no alternative. To more coherently capture the nuances – of both empirical realities and academic debates – regarding leftist outsider challengers, oligarchy and democratic quality – it is essential that we advance more flexible conceptualizations that can account for the potential of simultaneous democratization and de-democratization processes.

Re-conceptualizing Left-led Democratization: The Challenges of Escaping the Confines of Market Democracy

To respond to the shortcomings of liberal analyses of progressive outsider-led processes and the calls from heterodox scholars for a more rigorous appraisal of the clashes between competing social blocs, we need to reconceptualize how we evaluate democratic

22. Ibid., 91.
23. Jean Grugel and Pia Riggirozzi, "Neoliberal Disruption and Neoliberalism's Afterlife: What is left of Post-neoliberalism," *Critical Social Policy* 38, no. 3 (2018): 561.

quality. The democratization literature identifies hundreds of democracies "with adjectives."[24] Disputes and differing adjectives placed in front of democracy are really about *how much* democracy is desirable or practicable.[25] As such democracy may be understood as existing on a continuum of "how much democracy exists in reality." Democratic quality then is not a dichotomous variable that either does or does not exist.

Narrow and shallow democratic quality: A market model of democracy

The market model of democracy can be understood as an extremely thin liberal democracy underpinned by neoliberal rationale whereby public policy is premised upon the dominance of the investor and economic elite interests (domestic and transnational), irrespective of how such policy matrices impact on popular sector political and socio-economic citizenship. Market democracy "explicitly isolates the political from the socioeconomic sphere and restricts democracy to the political sphere."[26] Citizenship is commodified whereby goods such as education, health, housing, welfare, and water are to be purchased on the market.[27] Rather than the state guaranteeing quality social citizenship, "subjects" are treated as individual entrepreneurs in every aspect of life, responsible for their own well-being, and citizenship is reduced to success in this entrepreneurship.[28]

In sum, market democracy entails a shallow and narrow form of political and social citizenship. It is shallow because it fosters unaccountable, technocratic decision-making procedures dominated by capital and aligned supranational bodies. Indeed, the central objective of a market democracy is to foster an ideal environment for FDI and domestic capital. At the same time that the interests of capital are organized in and protected from democratic input, the interests of labor and popular sectors must be organized out so as to allow for capital accumulation. Privatization of public assets, cuts to taxation and

24. David Collier and Steven Levitsky, "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research," *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (1997): 430–451.
25. David Beetham, "Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Democratization," *Political Studies* 40, no. S1 (1992): 40.
26. William Robinson, "Promoting Polyarchy in Latin America: The Oxymoron of 'Market Democracy'," in Eric Hershberg and Fred Rosen (eds), *Latin America after Neoliberalism* (New York: The New Press, 2006): 100.
27. Emir Sader, *The New Mole: Paths of the Latin American Left* (London: Verso, 2011): 132.
28. Thomas Lemke, "'The Birth of Bio-politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the College de France on Neo-liberal Governmentality," *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 201.

welfare spending, labor flexibilization, and deregulation of business and financial sectors are thus core features. Policies aimed at tackling inequality are not features of "ideal" market democracies.

Deep and extended democratic quality: A "post-neoliberal" democracy

While an "ideal-type" narrow and shallow market democracy occupies one pole of the democratic quality continuum, a "post-neoliberal" model occupies the other pole. Roberts suggests that robust democratization involves two components; a deepening and an extending.[29] The logic of deepening involves intensifying popular sovereignty in the political sphere. Such deepening entails increasing popular self-determination by means of more direct participation in decision making processes and/or more effective mechanisms for holding elected representatives and public officials accountable to their constituents.[30] While liberal theorists see democracy as a set of rules, procedures and institutions, "thick theorists" on the other hand see democracy as a process that must be continually reproduced, a "way of regulating power relations in such a way as to maximize the opportunities for individuals to influence the conditions in which they live, to participate in and influence debates about the key decisions which affect society."[31] Democracy should facilitate the active involvement of the citizenry, reach political consensus through dialogue, devise and implement public policies that foster a productive economy and a healthy society, and ensure that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth.[32]

A deep democracy, then, seeks to redistribute political power away from economic elites and traditional political elites toward popular sectors. It is associated with, though not limited to, a re-politicization of politics more broadly by restricting technocratic control over issues regarding economic, health, and welfare policies; boosting

29. Kenneth Roberts, *Deepening Democracy? The Modern Left and Social Movements in Chile and Peru* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
30. Ibid., 30.
31. Mary Kaldor and Ivan Vejvoda, "Democratization in Central and East European Countries," *International Affairs* 73, no. 1 (1997): 67.
32. Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London: Verso, 2003): 5;see also Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970);Crawford Brough Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

spaces for popular deliberative participation; re-call referenda; and strengthening unions. Following Etchemendy[33] who outlines how governments can engage working-class organizations, deepened democracies will see governments: (1) granting state positions to militants or leaders of labor unions or territorial-social movements (TSMs);[34] (2) fostering the involvement of labor unions and TSMs in the design and implementation of (generally social and/or labor) policies that benefit popular organizations or their constituencies; and (3) promoting or actively tolerating collective action on the part of unions and/or TSMs. Support for collective action relates to Silva's conceptualization of informal contestatory interest intermediation – "routinized interactions where the government proposes a policy, affected popular sector organizations protest vigorously, negotiation ensues, and government abides by agreements." Contestatory interest intermediation is in fact both an outcome of post-neoliberal democratization projects *and* an intervening variable that shapes the direction of processes. That is, while contestatory interest intermediation signifies a deepening of democracy, if contestatory intermediation emerges during a post-neoliberal democratization process it is likely to influence whether and how a process further evolves.

Eduardo Silva, "Reorganizing Popular Sector Incorporation: Propositions from Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela," *Politics & Society* 45, no. 1 (2017): 96.

An extensive democracy meanwhile entails attempting to redress social and economic inequalities so as to prevent economic power from skewing the articulation of popular interests and blocking the exercise of popular sovereignty. Social equality is not simply a substantive outcome that is external to the functioning of democracy, but is also a prerequisite for equal access and unbiased democratic contestation, and is thus a vital indicator of procedural fairness.[35] This substantive understanding therefore envisions democracy as a transformative project that addresses the social and economic inequalities of society. It is about boosting the quality of state guarantees for social citizenship for all citizens irrespective of capacity to pay in areas including

33. Sebastian Etchemendy, "The Politics of Popular Coalitions: Unions and Territorial Social Movements in Post-neoliberal Latin America (2000–15)," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 52, no. 1 (2019): 157–88.
34. As Etchemendy (Ibid.) describes, TSMs are not single-issue social movements. Rather, they are territorially anchored organizations such as urban associations, community groups, cooperatives, indigenous rural groups, etc. TSMs' demand-making generally relates to the allocation of state economic resources.
35. Roberts, *Deepening Democracy*, 29–30.

education, food, health, housing, and information. Progressive taxation, high corporation taxes, universal pensions, wealth and inheritance taxes, judicial support for workplace democracy, communal land ownership schemes, and nationalization of key sectors of the economy are some components of an extended democracy.

The notion of a democratization process that deepens and extends democratic quality resonates with Silva and Rossi's[36] concept of popular sector (re)incorporation. Incorporation for these authors involves the expansion of substantive rights "in ways that the expressed interests of major, politically significant new and old popular sector organizations find, at minimum, programmatic expression in left governments."[37] Moreover, incorporation relates to the "concrete institutional mechanisms that link popular organizations to the political arena and policy-making."[38]

Centralization

While democratic quality may be assessed along a shallow-deep continuum regarding the quality of popular sector political inclusion and a narrow-extensive continuum regarding the quality of social citizenship, as liberal critiques of left-led process have emphasized, democratic quality must also be assessed in terms of liberal/illiberal standards and, in particular, the centralization of power in the executive. Such centralization of decision-making power may encompass an increase in the size and resources of the executive branch, a curtailment of judicial autonomy, an assertion of decree power against legislative oversight or resistance, and a centralization of political control to the detriment of local and regional political authorities.[39] While such centralization of power clearly challenges liberal norms, to fully conceptualize centralization and its impact on democratic quality requires evaluating it in relation to efforts to deepen and extend democracy. That is, beyond a simple description of the illiberal nature of centralization, it is necessary to ask why such centralization occurs and what executive power is used for.

36. Eduardo Silva and Federico Rossi (eds.), *Reshaping the Political Arena in Latin America: From Resisting Neoliberalism to the Second Incorporation* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018).
37. Federico Rossi and Eduardo Silva, "Introduction: Reshaping the Political Arena," in Eduardo Silva and Federico Rossi (eds), *Reshaping the Political Arena in Latin America: From Resisting Neoliberalism to the Second Incorporation* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018): 9.
38. Ibid.
39. Foweraker, *Polity*, 118–119

A continuum that runs from authoritarian centralization via regressive centralization to progressive centralization is advanced here. "Progressive centralization" sees a strengthening of executive power which is used to bypass elite opposition forces whose central aim is to limit the scope of left-led democratization processes. Elections are held and are free. However, state resources may be used to limit the capacity of opposition-blocs whose dominance over the media and the economy would allow them to skew the electoral playing field in their direction. At the same time, the executive remains open to, and is guided by, popular organizations who participate in new spaces of participation, thereby ensuring that the executive is responsive to popular concerns rather than personalistic projects. Progressive centralization occurs, then, where increased executive power is used to overcome elite opposition to redistributive projects, while it is simultaneously counterbalanced from below by popular power, thereby fostering a dual process of democratic extending and deepening for popular sectors, at the same time that respect for liberal norms declines.[40] If presidential powers are boosted so as to overcome opposition destabilization tactics and to adhere to programmatic demands that emerge from popular participatory spaces and that call for redress of embedded socio-economic exclusion, the term progressive centralization is more useful than competitive authoritarianism.

Regressive centralization occurs where executive power is used to confront the power of elite opponents to redistributive reforms, like the more progressive form detailed above. However, it is also used to sideline or coopt popular organizations that critique the direction of the left-led processes. At the same time that regressive centralization is used to curb elite opposition powers as well as the contestatory capacity of critical popular sector organizations, some more "loyal" or less contestatory popular organizations may retain access to the executive to influence agendas and policymaking, while also receiving state funding for projects. Similar to "progressive centralization," elections are held and the outcomes respected, but state resources are used by the ruling party to counterbalance elite opposition powers.

40. I emphasize here that I do not advocate a boosting of executive power. A process which bends liberal norms entails enormous dangers, as numerous liberal scholars rightly stress. The conceptualizations advanced here, particularly "progressive centralization" should not therefore be understood as a normative target that aspiring democratizers should strive for. Rather, the conceptualization seeks to offer a more flexible, and accurate, tool for appraising empirical realities. Democratic deepening and extending should be understood as the objectives of democratization projects, bending liberal norms should not.

While under regressive centralization, popular sector capacity to challenge executive decisions is weakened via clientelism and co-optation, when state powers are used to physically repress both elite opposition and contestatory popular sectors the term authoritarian centralization is more apt. Moreover, under authoritarian centralization the outcomes of elections that do not go the way of the ruling party are rejected/ignored. The use of police and army forces or state-sponsored militia to repress popular discontent and elite opposition-blocs and the failure to respect electoral outcomes is what differentiates authoritarian centralization from regressive centralization (see Table 1).

Incorporating an analysis of a centralization continuum with a continuum that runs from market democracy (narrow, shallow) to post-neoliberal democracy (deep, extended) allows us to account for the concerns of both liberal and participative-substantive scholars. That is, conceptualizing democratic quality in such a manner allows for us to concurrently conceive of a "diminished subtype" *and* "adjective-plus"[41] concept of democracy and to grasp empirical realities in which processes may contain simultaneous democratizing and de-democratizing features. For example, in a purely liberal account, the centralizing component of "progressive centralization" would lead to some sort of diminished-subtype concept such as "illiberal democracy." Conversely, from a more participative-substantive approach, the use of state powers to boost spaces of poplar sector incorporation would lead to an adjective-plus concept such as "radical-inclusionary democracy" or some such. The approach taken here allows us to account for both approaches at the same time, thereby enriching how we theorize democratization, in particular left-led outsider/populist cases, as well as helping us to overcome partial analyses of empirical cases which fail to grasp nuanced realities.

Oligarchy, Populisms, and Pathways out of Crises of Democracy

The self-reinforcing spiral of democratic narrowing and shallowing over the course of the neoliberal era has fostered a crisis of too little democracy in Latin America, Europe and the United States. We have entered what Crouch[42] labels "post-democracy," a scenario in

41. For a discussion of diminished subtypes and adjective+ concepts, see Gary Goertz, *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006): 74–80.
42. Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy after the Crises* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020): 4.

Table 1: Reconceptualizing democratization

	PROGRESSIVE CENTRALIZATION	REGRESSIVE CENTRALIZATION	AUTHORITARIAN CENTRALIZATION
LIBERAL DEMOCRACY	• Elections generally free • Electoral outcomes respected • Use of decrees to bypass political opposition in legislature or judiciary • Limiting power of opposition-controlled mayoralties/local governments • Use of state resources to limit economic and media power of opposition-bloc	• Elections generally free • Electoral outcomes respected • Use of decrees to bypass political opposition in legislature or judiciary • Limiting power of opposition-controlled mayoralties/local governments • Use of state resources to limit economic and media power of opposition-bloc	• Elections generally unfree • Electoral outcomes not respected • Use of state forces of repression to side-line opposition • Use of state forces of repression against contestatory popular sectors
DEEPENED DEMOCRACY	• Participatory spaces created and linked to executive, bottom-up shaping of agenda and influence in policymaking • Party or ministerial/state positions for union and movement leaders • Contestatory interest intermediation supported	• Top-down control of some participatory spaces, clientelism • Loyal or core sectors of popular base retain bottom-up influence on executive via participatory spaces • Co-opting of popular sector leaders in party or ministerial/state positions • Contestatory interest intermediation ignored/weakened via top-down meddling in organization leaderships	• Top-down control of participatory spaces, clientelism • Contestatory interest intermediation repressed

(*Table continued*)

Table 1: Continued

	PROGRESSIVE CENTRALIZATION	REGRESSIVE CENTRALIZATION	AUTHORITARIAN CENTRALIZATION
EXTENDED DEMOCRACY	• Boosted popular sector social citizenship (pensions, education, health, nutrition) • Pro-worker labor laws • Progressive taxation • Land reform/redistribution • Nationalizations of key sectors of economy	• Boosted popular sector social citizenship (pensions, education, health, nutrition) directed toward loyal sectors of base • Pro-worker labor laws for loyal sectors • Progressive taxation • Land reform/redistribution • Nationalizations of key sectors of economy	• Use of executive controlled scarce resources to guarantee allegiance of some popular sectors

which democratic institutions remain, but the energy of the political system has passed into the hands of a select political and corporate elite who ensure that politics responds to their concerns. The neoliberal project has exacerbated inequalities and opened new avenues for economic power to manipulate the political system, reigniting the inherent tension within liberal democracies around equalities of citizens' votes and inequalities of economic power.

Dahl's[43] theory of polyarchy argued that if there were sufficient numbers of groups seeking to influence government, with each group influencing policy in one specific area, then no single interest could dominate. As such, issues of economic inequality and capacity for one group to shape politics in their image would be limited. In Dahl's conceptualization of democratization, democracy could be evaluated on two axes. One axis evaluates whether or not there are avenues for public contestation and political competition, while a second axis measures the breath of participation (i.e., whether all citizens have access to these channels of participation).

In the market democracy era, the notion of a functioning polyarchy whereby all groups in society have equal access to decision-makers and capacity to shape policymaking is clearly non-existent. Inequality has spiraled and the lobbying capacity of capital has increased. There is a vicious cycle as increasing wealth allows economic elites to design policies that lock in advantages to capital, thereby furthering economic inequality, and, consequently, political power inequalities. Neoliberal responses to neoliberal-fueled crises of capitalism in Latin America in the 1990s and the United States and Europe in the 2000s further eroded living standards and job quality and security for middle- and popular-classes at the same time that wealth levels of economic elites expanded. Reductions in public spending rather than increased taxation of wealth was the response to debt crises. Labor market flexibilization rather than training was the prescribed medicine that would supposedly make debtor countries more competitive on the global market. Privatization to allow for "efficient" operation and reduced state burdens went hand in hand with declining standards of public service provision – which negatively impacted the wellbeing of lower-income groups while benefitting the interests of capital. Free-floating capital, the core ideal of proponents of a market democracy – triggered

43. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).

competition between governments for investment via reductions in environmental, labor, and social protection standards.

The neoliberalization of democracy has shattered any illusion that unfettered capitalism and democracy go hand in hand. Democracy has been hollowed out. As parties of the center-left and center-right coalesce around neoliberal logic and technocratic governance, Madisonian concerns regarding checks and balances on elected leaders (government of the people) have come to dominate ideas of popular democracy (government by the people). Social-democratic/socialist parties and their constituent union bases have lost their ideological commitment to the economic concerns of working and popular classes at the same time that inequality and precarity have increased. The capitalist market economy has been sealed off from democratic oversight, a sort of "Hayekian social dictatorship" in which the democratic channels for the articulation of popular-sector interests have been blocked – "either because only the same outcomes can ever emerge or because what emerges no longer makes any difference to the 'markets'."[44]

The neoliberal emphasis on low taxation and high debt from financial markets to fund state programs has meant that state managers/party leaders have become more responsive to the concerns of global financial markets than to the needs of their own citizens.[45] Neoliberal elites seek to insulate themselves from popular demands at the same time that they support strong checks and balances on elected officials to ensure there can be no deviation from market democracy. Indeed, Crouch[46] states that the preferred regime of capitalists is post-democracy:

> Where all forms of democracy continue, including the rule of law, but where the electorate has become passive, not engaging in disturbing activism, and not generating a civil society vibrant enough to produce awkward counter-lobbies that try to rival the quiet work of business interests in the corridors of government.

There is to be no alternative to neoliberalism. Checks on elected officials have become so severe and the breath of participation so narrow (whereby capital dictates policy, not citizens) that the agenda of politics has been set from the outset, making democratic participation seem like a futile pursuit for regular citizens.

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44. Wolfgang Streeck, *The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism: Buying Time* (London: Verso Books, 2017): 172.
45. Streeck, *The Delayed Crisis*.
46. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, 39.

Democracy in the neoliberal era has thus become oligarchic, not only in so-called developing democracies but in the "developed" West as well. While some theorists may resist the notion of oligarchy as relevant to examinations of contemporary democracies, it has become increasingly evident that mechanisms of representation and participation have become incapable of restraining transnationally oriented elites who work with local counterparts in the state and economy, utilizing the structural power of the global economy to reorganize state institutions and provide a more favorable set of institutions (to mobile capital, not to local citizens).[47] As Cameron[48] stresses:

> Oligarchic modes of rule are endemic wherever there are high levels of inequality and the poor are constrained in their capacity for organization and collective action. The surfacing of oligarchy in its current form is inextricably linked to the global spread of neoliberalism. By weakening the capacity of popular sector organizations to engage in the activities of citizenship and representation that would balance corporate influence, neoliberalism turns democracy, as we understand it today (to wit, democratized representative government), into something closer to representative government as it was originally understood: government by the few on behalf of the many. And since the many are excluded by the weakening of popular organizations, this formula is as oligarchic as it is democratic.

Horizontal accountability in representative democracy, essential to curb executive power, has always sought to protect the status quo.[49] Today, this status quo entails gross inequality and precarity for swathes of the population. When "people's life opportunities are systematically undermined because of factors beyond their control, they are likely to feel disillusionment and resentment."[50]

As the interests of the rich are organized into politics while popular concerns are organized out, with party-voter distances widening, while parties of the left and right programmatically converge around neoliberalism and austerity, popular distrust of parties and politicians increases. With mainstream parties no longer offering ideological

47. Robinson, "Promoting Polyarchy," 102; This phenomenon is not limited to Latin American democracies or developing states. For example, Bartels concludes that in the US the "political system seems to be functioning not as a 'democracy' but as an 'oligarchy'." Larry Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018): 287.
48. Maxwell Cameron, "The Return of Oligarchy? Threats to Representative Democracy in Latin America," *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2021): 786.
49. Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021): 200.
50. Frederick Solt, "Economic Inequality and Democratic Political Engagement," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 1 (2008): 48.

alternatives to neoliberal-infused citizenship and with union power decimated, popular sector capacity to have their concerns heard and responded to, to check elite power, has dwindled. This combination of mistrust in the oligarchic political system alongside withdrawal from participation has triggered varying forms of "populist" backlash.[51]

Slater[52] argues that democracies will careen between oligarchic forms and domineering populist forms as intense conflicts between partisan actors deploying competing visions of democratic accountability emerge. Populists will call for more substantial inclusivity or vertical accountability, while opponents will defend democracy for the constraints against excessive concentration of unaccountable power in the executive – that is, horizontal accountability. Such competing visions speak to the democratizing potential and dangers of populism. While many theorists condemn populism as a threat to liberal democracy, Berman notes that "although it is certainly true that democracy unchecked by liberalism can slide into excessive majoritarianism or oppressive populism, liberalism unchecked by democracy can easily deteriorate into oligarchy."[53] As Cameron[54] notes:

> Without denying populism's potentially deleterious effects on democracy, the focus is partially misplaced because oligarchic modes of rule and populist mobilization are co-constitutive. … Populism is both a typical reaction to oligarchic modes of rule and an endemic feature of democratic politics in unequal societies.

Foweraker[55] cogently details how oligarchic rule fosters populist responses, but he argues that populists will only achieve a readjustment between oligarchic and democratic practice, with populism tending to "reinforce bureaucratic patrimonialism, the unevenness of the rule of law, and the lack of universalistic citizenship."[56] While

51. For the remainder of this discussion my focus is on the potentials and pitfalls of anti-neoliberal outsiders, not on nativist xenophobic populists that have emerged in many northern and western European cases and in the US. For a discussion of the conjunctural factors that shaped the variation in the nature of response to the crises of market, see John Brown, "Neoliberalization, De-democratization, and Populist Responses in Western Europe, the US, and Latin America," *Critical Sociology* 46, no. 7–8 (2020): 1173–87.
52. Dan Slater, "Democratic Careening," *World Politics* 65, no. 4 (2013): 729–63.
53. Sheri Berman, "The Pipe Dream of Undemocratic Liberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 3 (2017): 30.
54. Cameron, "The Return of Oligarchy?," 786.
55. Foweraker, *Polity*.
56. Cameron, "The Return of Oligarchy," 786.

such concerns regarding the dangers of domineering populism are clearly legitimate, we must address why anti-neoliberal outsider responses to oligarchy tend toward a centralization of executive power, and whether such centralization can be used to advance rather than limit a (re-)democratization project.

Slater[57] states that there is "ample reason to believe that elected executives seeking to broaden substantive democratic inclusion might clash with elites who prize democracy's constraints on absolute power more than its promise to empower the many." Understanding these power struggles, between the anti-neoliberal outsiders elected to respond to oligarchic domination of democracy and the elites who seek to defend their domination of the political system, requires that democratization theorists take a broader view than a simple institutional appraisal and that the sole focus of analysis is not only on the "illiberal populist" or "competitive authoritarian," but on how anti-neoliberal outsiders interact with the oligarchic opposition. That is, elites and newly elected leaders challenging oligarchic democracy will not only utilize political power to advance their agenda or limit their opponents. It is likely that the conjunctural relative balance of ideological, economic, military, and political powers, as well as the prevailing transnational forces will shape the directions and outcomes of processes, including whether and how executive power is used to curb opposition-elite power.

While Dahl conceived of democratization entailing a dual move toward increased checks and balances on government as well as a broadening of the scope of who is invited to participate, where oligarchic opposition seek to restrict deepening and extending processes via institutional and extra-institutional means, increased executive powers to block oligarchic power may be a component of a radical-substantive democratization process. Given the current legitimacy crisis facing democracy, the goal must be to re-politicize politics by limiting the scope of market forces to determine, ex-ante and ex-post, the agenda of government and to re-democratize democracy. As Streeck[58] states:

> If democracy means that social justice must not be reduced to market justice, then the main task of democratic politics should be to reverse the institutional devastation wrought by four decades of neoliberal progress. … Today democratization should mean building institutions through which markets can be brought back under the control of society: labor markets that leave scope for

57. Slater, "Democratic Careening," 732–733.
58. Streeck, *The Delayed Crisis*, 173–174.

social life, product markets that do not destroy nature, credit markets that do not mass-produce unsustainable promises.

However, achieving such goals will surely trigger an oligarchic backlash, which may therefore witness the use of illiberal actions by elected outsider anti-system leftists who seek to break up oligarchic sources of power in ideological, economic, military, or political spheres. While Levitsky and Ziblatt[59] cogently demonstrate how the erosion of the norms and liberal "guardrails" for democracy may cause democracies to "die," if the norms of democracy are set so as to provide the perfect environment for the protection of entrenched elite interests and the free mobility of capital which in turn fosters inequalities, exclusion and recurring economic and environmental crises, how can democracy be "saved"? Indeed, while Grugel and Riggirozzi's[60] question as to whether entrenched socio-economic inequality is the price that must be paid for a stable liberal democracy is pertinent, in the long run, this dichotomy must be overcome if democracy is to retain/regain popular legitimacy.

Democracy is thus at a critical juncture. In an increasingly unequal world, it is only by democratizing democracy – by simultaneously deepening and extending the quality of participation – that justified popular anger with political systems can be assuaged. Not only is such democratization the best way to stymie support for xenophobic nativists who are capturing the moment of popular discontent, but more generally it is the only way to jolt democracy out of its current malaise. However, it is inconceivable that such a re-democratization of democracy can occur without mass popular organizing and protesting, and it is also inconceivable that the beneficiaries of exclusionary market democracy will not utilize oligarchic powers to limit reforms. That is, (re-)democratization processes will inherently entail tensions and pushback from those who have long-enjoyed dominant status. Challenging oligarchic power and bringing unelected market forces under social control will therefore push liberal democracy and respect for all liberal norms to its limits. As theorists, and as citizens, we must ask the question of what we want our democracies to be, and how we can get there. If we wish to avoid a careening back and forth between oligarchic rule and domineering illiberal populism it is essential that we set our ideals and standards high. Accepting that a deep, substantive democracy is

59. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).
60. Grugel and Riggirozzi, "Neoliberal Disruption," 561.

out of reach because oligarchic elites and mobile capital will block advances is not only normatively undesirable, but it fosters the unstable democratic equilibria facing us today. Accepting unconstrained executive power and a president/government that takes decisions in the name of popular sectors without input from below is also clearly unacceptable. However, rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater by wholeheartedly labelling all processes that challenge liberal norms as undemocratic, we must assess why liberal norms are being bent, what executive power is being used for and, critically, whether it is tethered to powerful civil society organizations capable of preventing illiberal democratization becoming authoritarian centralization. The neoliberal response to the "crisis of too much democracy" fostered a crisis of too little democracy today that has sparked a "populist" backlash. To counteract the rising support for xenophobic nativists and the enormous dangers this entails, the best antidote is a dose of democracy administered by an anti-neoliberal party that is guided from below by an organized popular base. Despite all the challenges and tensions inherent to such a process, what alternative do we have?

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