

A Cult *of* Democracy— Toward *a* Pluralistic Politics

by Cyndi Suarez

IN THE UNITED STATES AND GLOBALLY, THERE IS much concern about both the devolution of democracy and the resurgence of racism and xenophobia. There is a sense that things are breaking down and the world no longer makes sense. But these challenges are intertwined and what are actually dying are the dominant narratives undergirding them. The bold-faced resurgence of some of their most extreme characteristics, while very dangerous, is also a testament to this final battle.

In 2019, as white supremacists balance entitled anger and outsized fears—deciding it is time to be more explicit (again) about the underlying goal of domination through an outright offensive for a white ethno-state, fearing the rise of people

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they consider different—we are still hailing too many firsts: the first black woman, the first gay, the first Muslim, the youngest. These leaders are running and winning because things are increasingly not working for more and more voters. Inequality has risen. Most people can't afford to cover basic needs like food, housing, education, and healthcare. And the earth is dying. The overarching task now is to construct a new narrative.

FIRST POINT: We urgently need a new narrative.

Democracy has been broadly defined as “a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.”¹

Even though many wonder why democracy looks the way it does today, for some of those who study democracy, it comes as no surprise. Many, like Chantal Mouffe, professor of political theory at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster, are calling the current state of democracy in the West a “populist moment.”

In her new book, *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe argues that this moment has been brought to us by the centrist policies of neoliberalism, which sought to hide conflict and different political interests in the midst of increasingly plural democracies with a “blurring of the frontier between right and left.”²

Mouffe contends that the rise of right wing populism reflects a break in the story as non-elite whites seek to recoup what they perceive as decreasing political and economic power. She proposes what she frames as a new democratic project for our times—the left needs to offer a democratic alternative that also *overlaps* with the political interests of the excluded “other.”

To do this, we must center what Mouffe calls “the *affects* of democracy.”³ Our identities are comprised in large part by the groups with which we identify; in other words, our identities are built upon our emotional connection to other people. The new narrative must take into account that politics is not only what we think,

but what we feel. The left, she says, must focus on offering new political identities that support pluralism.

SECOND POINT: The new narrative is about the deepening of democracy; to enact it, we must evolve identities that not only make us think but also care about the collective.

Where Mouffe goes wrong is in her admittedly controversial claim that pluralistic democracies must engage as legitimate all of the demands made by its populace, even the xenophobic. While “these will be fought with vigor,” the “right to defend those ideas will never be questioned.”⁴ Instead, she argues, we must focus on the democratic aspirations that exist across perceived political differences.

Mouffe makes the mistake many liberals make when she assumes a level playing field.

Michael G. Hanchard, Africana professor at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Marginalized Populations project, in his new book, *The Spectre of Race: How Discrimination Haunts Western Democracy*, describes how, rather than being new, Western democracy has always contained multiple regimes based on difference, known as racial democracies or ethno-regimes. The problem is that they are also unequal.

An understanding of this submerged history and its forces may lead us to conclude that this populist moment of mobilization against elites is also yet another half loop in the cycle of Western democracy that seeks to subordinate a portion of the social body for the benefit of the political elite, which in the West has been historically defined racially as white. Hanchard, having taken the time to understand this submerged narrative, starts not with an unexamined assumption but with a studied claim: that the practice of Western democracy has been one in which, from the beginning, “difference, figured as race, was rendered politically salient.”⁵

For Hanchard, tracking the organizing effect of race on the development of Western democracy hinges on the distinction between the *ethos*, or ideals, of democracy and the *ethnos* (the prevailing idea about who is the “highest, typical

human being” in a nation) of its institutions and practices.⁶

He traces the concept of *ethnos* back to classical Athens, considered the font of Western democracy, where “Slavery was rationalized as a necessary institution that allowed citizens to fully participate in civic life without material constraints.”⁷ Aristotle articulated the tension this produced for the legitimacy of the developing institution of democracy. Hanchard notes, “Contrary to many of his peers, Aristotle questioned the justification for slavery and was concerned about its corrosive effects upon both the slaves and citizens in classical Athens.”⁸

Ethnos shows up as a claim of racial homogeneity and superiority in heterogeneous societies; it articulates difference (gender, geographic origin, race, culture), and then creates political institutions and practices to manage this difference in order to secure privileged access to social resources for a political elite.

The dual nature of Western democracy was embraced and further articulated by the main colonial powers in their day-to-day management of the colonies and responses to the anticolonial movements they engendered. Hanchard outlines this arc for us when he writes, “The most robust, long-standing democratic polities in the contemporary world—France, Britain, and the United States—have been housed in societies that have profited from slave labor, empire, and colonialism.”⁹

Hanchard’s main claim is that Western powers didn’t just shape racialized peoples and colonized regions; this history of racism and colonization also shaped Western democracy.

In the colonies, where whites were physically outnumbered, the political elite developed racialized divide and conquer tactics. Hanchard explains, “Tactics devised and utilized to manage subject populations in a colonial territory, or even within the metropole, became part of the strategies of containment in the domestic sphere in the post-World War II period, evidenced in the following areas of governance: immigration, policing, and counterterrorism policies, and in the monitoring of dissent.”¹⁰ He concludes, “The legal, juridical,

and institutional empowerment of citizens has been dynamically related to limiting second class citizens or prohibiting noncitizens from access to citizenship, as well as certain key economic and political institutions.”¹¹

From its inception, Western democracy has always been a balancing act of inclusive institutions and practices for those deemed legitimate and a different exclusive set for the illegitimate. Hanchard notes Hannah Arendt’s observation on the problem: “Racism deliberately cut across all national boundaries, whether defined by geographical, linguistic, traditional or any other standards, and denied national-political existence as such.”¹²

Thus, not only are ethno-regimes not level playing fields, inequality is a consistent feature of ethno-regimes in that their institutions and practices *produce* inequality.

The logic behind this approach is that the more difference is acknowledged in politics, the more elites consider politics to be impossible. In practice, it turns out that the opposite is true: the less difference is acknowledged, the more the need for politics. Hanchard brilliantly outlines the massive project that it was (and is) to create dual (or triad—citizen, second class citizen, and noncitizen) regimes. The resources required to sustain it are vast and widespread.

The *Atlantic*’s Ibram X. Kendi writes about the effort put into these regimes in the United States: “trace the issues rending American politics to their root, and more often than not you’ll find soil poisoned by racism.”¹³ Kendi spells out how racism affects the very rules of democracy.

Those people of color not imprisoned or deported are robbed of their political power by other means . . . In the old days, before the Voting Rights Act, states and counties suppressed voting by men and eventually women of color through property requirements, literacy tests, and poll taxes—while tacitly condoning employer intimidation and Ku Klux Klan violence. Now states and counties suppress voters through early-voting restrictions, limits on

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absentee and mail-in ballots, poll closures, felon disenfranchisement, and laws requiring voters to have a photo ID.

Voters of color who can't be kept from the polls are herded into districts where their ballots, in effect, don't count . . .

When the Supreme Court stripped federal preclearance from the Voting Rights Act in 2013, it removed one of the last antiracist policies from federal law.¹⁴

How can those positioned as illegitimate engage democratically across difference—especially while legitimizing xenophobia, as Mouffe proposes we do—when the very act triggers the white polity to erode their democratic rights? Instead, as Hanchard demonstrates, “many aspects of social inequality have political roots.”¹⁵ Contrary to Mouffe's assertions (and her goal of building pluralist democracies), not only is xenophobia not compatible with democracy, in a system where racism has served as an actively silent design principle for exclusion, it must be actively named and designed against.

Kendi concludes,

[O]nly an embrace of antiracism can save the union. Antiracist ideas are built on the bedrock of racial equality. They recognize that any observed disparities between groups are the product not of hierarchy among races but of racist systems that create and perpetuate inequities. Antiracist policies seek to close the gaps in rights, resources, and opportunities that racist policies have opened and maintained.¹⁶

THIRD POINT: Racism is an actively silent design principle for exclusion in Western democracy, and deepening democracy requires actively designing against it.

Clearly, in the United States, the project of deepening democracy needs to overlap with the project of centering anti-racism. This, in spite of everything, is actually not controversial. A recent study—by Ian Haney López, author of *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class*, and Anat Shenker-Orsorio, author of *Don't Buy It: The Trouble*

with Talking Nonsense about the Economy—found that “Democrats can prevail by telling a story that ties together race and class, calling out the right's exploitation of racial anxiety as a tactic to divide and distract.”¹⁷ Stories like this one:

No matter where we come from or what our color, most of us work hard for our families. But today, certain politicians and their greedy lobbyists hurt everyone by handing kickbacks to the rich, defunding our schools, and threatening seniors with cuts to Medicare and Social Security. Then they turn around and point the finger for our hard times at poor families, Black people, and new immigrants. We need to join together with people from all walks of life to fight for our future, just like we won better wages, safer workplaces, and civil rights in our past. By joining together, we can elect new leaders who work for all of us, not just the wealthy few.¹⁸

Using focus groups, studies from four states, and an online national survey of 2,000 adults, Haney López and Shenker-Orsorio found that stories like this that address both race and class together beat right-wing stories and “standard left-of-center, race-neutral” ones.¹⁹ They note, “Overt mentions of race outperformed colorblind statements in rebutting conservative talking points.”²⁰ They conclude,

Here's the secret: The race-class message describes racism as a strategy that the reactionary rich are using against all people. By moving away from conversations about racial prejudice that implicitly pit whites against others, the race-class message makes clear how strategic racism hurts everyone, of every race. It signals to whites that they have more to gain from coming together across racial lines to tackle racial and economic injustice than from siding with politicians who distract the country with racial broadsides.²¹

Hanchard observes that “the exclusion of certain populations from participation in a polity [is] based on superficial differences that are

perceived as irreconcilable.”²² And this is the dominant narrative that wants to die. Luckily, many in the United States appear to be ready for a bigger politics, if we can only step up to the challenge. The new narrative is about universalizing democracy. We do need to develop new political identities, Mouffe is right about that. These need to help us manage what Hanchard identifies as the “first form of inequality”—perceptual discrimination.²³

FOURTH POINT: The drama in the story, the hero’s challenge, is to overcome the negative affects of political differences with a bigger narrative in order to universalize democracy across acknowledged difference.

Luckily, much has already been done to guide and anchor such efforts. For example, at the levels of rights, any legitimate, pluralist democracy should seek to comply with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,²⁴ which includes additional articles from the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, starting from the assumption that “the existence of racial barriers is repugnant to the ideals of any human society.”²⁵

In terms of institutions and practices, French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville’s description of key elements of the democratic character of the U.S. associations that proliferated in the 1800s are often recalled in efforts to remember our earlier forms. They align along the following:

- Structures for deliberation
- Processes for transparency and accountability
- Stewards of rules and procedures
- Practices that ensure access and leadership development
- Products that capture shared practices²⁶

As for political identity, the *Atlantic’s* Yoni Appelbaum, in a recent series on democracy, writes of that earlier time, “Democracy had become the *shared civic religion* of a people who otherwise had little in common. Its rituals conferred legitimacy regardless of ideology.”²⁷ (Italics mine.) He concludes, “There is no easy

fix for our current predicament; simply voting Trump out of office won’t suffice. To stop the rot afflicting American government, Americans are going to have to *get back* in the habit of democracy.”²⁸ (Italics mine.)

Hanchard does us the favor of clarifying this narrative when he writes,

Alexis de Tocqueville, a commentator on democracy in the United States, did not consider the Indian question or the Negro question to have significant import for the practice of United States democracy. [Gunnar] Myrdal and [Gustave de] Beaumont [Tocqueville’s friend who accompanied him on his journey to the United States], on the other hand, perceived racial discrimination of *USAfrican Americans as a clear barometer of democracy* in an otherwise egalitarian democracy.²⁹ (Italics mine.)

Like Tocqueville, Beaumont wrote about democracy in the United States, including the central role of race, but his writing never became popular.³⁰ This is, perhaps, not surprising. Hanchard points out,

Democracy is only one form of political rule that has tolerated, in fact benefited from, inequality, but it is also the only form of political rule for which inequality poses challenges to its ideological legitimacy.³¹

Hanchard points to Latin American political theorist Guillermo O’Donnell—whose political thinking acknowledged the plurality of Latin American societies (which developed democracy from a history of colonial rule and authoritarian regimes)—as someone whose work may have something to offer toward the expansion of Western democracy at this moment. He describes O’Donnell as someone who “understood the installation of democratic institutions and practices as neither immanent nor cyclical but the result of political mobilization against authoritarian, oligarchic, and other forms of nondemocratic rule.”³²

Further, O’Donnell understood the political identities that enact these regimes. Hanchard writes, “Antidemocratic politics and social inequality produced social and political

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behaviors and cultures of arrogance among elites, on the one hand, and subservience and resignation among popular groups, on the other.”³³ Countering these suggests potential axes for new, pluralistic political identities.

In *The Quality of Democracy*, O'Donnell concludes,

Today, efforts to win citizen rights are coupled with pressures for the democratization of the state and social opportunities. The people living in these countries—more than the theoreticians—have discovered that democracy must be seen as a permanent, day-to-day conquest and an order that is perfectible through citizen action.³⁴

Given Western democracy's history of political exclusion, O'Donnell identifies *agency* as a “grounding factor of democracy,” connecting “democracy, human development, and human rights.”³⁵ For him, political identity orients around the human being as agent. “The enacting of agency requires the universalistic attainment of at least some basic rights and capabilities.”³⁶

O'Donnell takes into account contestation, or conflict, in democratic practice, and highlights the need for what he called “an enabling institutional milieu for the struggles usually needed in order to inscribe need-claims as effective rights.”³⁷ Thus, pluralistic democracy is not given, but asserted—constantly enacted by people who practice acting as if they had rights.

This is the new democratic project—rising to the challenge of pluralism, democracy beyond political regimes, beyond the bounds of state politics to everyday life. We need to stop harking back to some better days of democracy and think about what we have to move forward to, observing the artifacts that need to be carried forward and envisioning the ones that have not yet been realized.

Democracy must be held more dear than fear or hatred of difference.

FIFTH POINT: The bigger narrative must help create a shared civic religion, at every step, day after day—a cult of democracy.

We need to move beyond uniting the left as a response to the so-called united right. As my friend

and organizer Nijmie Dzurinko recently posted on Facebook, “The task is not to unite the left. The task is to unite the bottom.” To unite the bottom, we must actively design against political exclusion.

How does our sector serve as a nourishing field for the building of a pluralist democracy, especially when we have our own ways of constructing and managing the “other”? How do we, to use Hanchard's frame, contribute to making our society less ethnocentric and more ethos-centric? (Hint: We can start with our own organizations.) How do our own institutions and practices serve as the playing field for democratic decision making and shape political identities that enact pluralism?

Many like to think of these as different projects, but they are not. Civil society is the training ground for democracy—to think otherwise is a blind spot in our work for social justice. Our main job is to guard against inequality in the political regime and in our organizations. But we should go further—we should be able to harness difference. Humans are part of nature and nature doesn't have a problem with diversity. In fact, it thrives on it, and we should too.

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