
Critical Exchange

Beyond populism and technocracy: The challenges and limits of democratic epistemology

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It is tempting to see democratic politics today in terms of a contrast between technocracy and populism. One scholar has thus framed a distinction between ‘policy without politics’ and ‘politics without policy’ (Schmidt, 2006), which echoes an early definition of ‘post-truth politics’ as ‘a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)’ (Roberts, 2010). This sort of politics simultaneously opens spaces for populist discourse uncoupled from ‘facts’ and for technocratic policy-making uncoupled from popular accountability. Nadia Urbinati thus highlights ‘the co-development of populism and epistemic



ambitions in government, each fueling the other while both devaluing democratic procedures' (Urbinati, 2014, p. 84). Populism is a backlash to technocracy, and technocracy is a backlash to populism. Each justifies itself in terms of the threat it sees in the other. But both tend implicitly to reinforce the sense that knowledge is the province of experts and that a politics without due deference to experts is reduced to identity struggles with little meaningful epistemic content.

The great value of Sophia Rosenfeld's book, *Democracy and Truth*, is that she resists this framing of the tension, and instead tells a history of democracy through the tension between different claims to knowledge. She outlines a democratic epistemology, characterized by 'a commitment to an undogmatic, open-ended conception of truth' (Rosenfeld, 2019, p. 26). Pluralism and skepticism, Rosenfeld contends, have been 'a key characteristic of modern experiments with popular rule from the start' (p. 27). From the period of the French Revolution and the American founding, she contends, democratic politics has turned around tensions between the undisciplined common knowledge or common sense of the people and the refined, systematized, and eventually bureaucratized knowledge of various experts and elites. Furthermore, she suggests, they are both constitutive elements of democratic politics: what characterizes democratic truth practices in their modern form is not any particular institution, but rather an idea of 'rational disagreement, or agonism, leading to a kind of symbiosis between these different social bodies and their different but complementary ways of knowing' (p. 29). Democratic politics involves two sorts of claims to knowledge, each of which is vital to the material, social, and normative construction and maintenance of a democratic state and people. The question, then, is how to manage the tension between these two faces of democratic politics. How can they be set in a productive relationship? When and how do they risk pulling apart, and in the process undermining democratic politics altogether?

In this Critical Exchange, we take our cue from Rosenfeld's historical exploration of the way technocracy and populism are intertwined, but seek to open up a new set of questions from the point of view of political theory, about the tension between popular and expert knowledge and the place of expertise in contemporary democratic politics. Our guiding question is: 'what can political theory contribute to, and gain from, reflection on the relation between populist and technocratic tendencies in recent democratic politics?' We begin with Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti, who addresses the overall architecture of Rosenfeld's argument, and challenges the idea that we should frame democratic politics as a 'regime of truth'. Instead of than regarding the technocratic and populist tendencies as part of an ongoing struggle that generates a distinctive democratic 'regime of truth', he frames democratic politics in terms of the 'suspension' of claims to truth. Because we recognize that we cannot persuade others of the substantive truth of our beliefs, we must all agree to set aside such claims in the interest of living together in peace. From this point of view, both populist and technocratic politics, by making claims



to truth, violate the terms of this ‘suspension’ of truth in politics. We then turn to Elizabeth Markovits, who reflects on the ‘populist realism’ of our current political moment, and explains it in terms of a tension experienced by political subjects living in liberal democracies, between the abstract claims about popular sovereignty from which those regimes draw their legitimacy, and the practical experience of unfreedom. This leads to a search for who or what could be denying the people their freedom and gives a special appeal to those who symbolize a simple vision of sovereign power. The ‘populist realist’ – exemplified by Trump – is at the same time one who can see through opaque networks of power, yet who ironically demonstrates his control over the world by showing how little factual truth matters to him. Implicit in this view of populist realism is a sense that factual truth itself is false, an obfuscation of reality that arises from actors and institutions with specific interests, values, and commitments.

This mode of unmasking the politics behind claims to factual truth can be destructive, but Rosenfeld rightly emphasizes the politics inherent in producing and advancing claims to factual truth in the political realm. The last two contributions to this exchange engage in particular with this theme (which is, in the literature on populism and technocracy cited above, given far less attention than the ‘populist’ part of the story). Alfred Moore draws on Hannah Arendt – a figure who provides a red thread running through Rosenfeld’s book – and in particular her discussion of ‘factual truth’ in politics, in order to highlight the duality of expertise in politics. The dual quality of expertise, in his reading of Arendt, is that it is at the same time political and antipolitical: political in that it belongs to the realm of things established by communication and common action, but antipolitical in its ‘mode of asserting validity’. This explains some of the patterns of politicization of expert knowledge around issues such as climate change, but it also suggests the difficulties attached to the idea of seeking to keep the politics out of expertise. Moore highlights the role of transparency in making explicit the politics involved in the construction of expertise. Zeynep Pamuk further develops the contestatory dimension of Rosenfeld’s democratic epistemology. As Rosenfeld tells it, democratic politics has always been defined by struggles over what counts as knowledge, and whose knowledge counts. She frames this struggle in terms of two groups with ‘competing and mutually exclusive claims to truth’, and raises the crucial question of how they relate to one another, and how such struggles might be organized. Pamuk takes this insight forward in creative ways by thinking through two ways in which we could resist the monopolistic tendencies of expert knowledge: one drawing on the role of common law juries, and the other drawing on social movements. She concludes with a warning about the role of money in knowledge production and how it can distort and undermine healthy competition, thus suggesting an important line of inquiry into the role of science funding in democratic politics. The exchange concludes with a response from Sophia Rosenfeld.

Alfred Moore



Democracy Without Truth: Beyond Populism and Technocracy

I offer here a critical appraisal of two key claims advanced by Sophia Rosenfeld in her provocative and compelling new book, *Democracy and Truth*. The first claim is that modern democracy can be understood as a ‘regime of truth’, in the sense that it amounts to a particular way of producing a ‘shared set of convictions or useful facts’ that function as a ‘platform for crafting government policy’ and therefore ‘binding us all together in a minimal way’ (p. 29). The second claim is that the two wellsprings for producing political truths in democracy – which Rosenfeld calls, respectively, the ‘wisdom of the people’ and the ‘wisdom of elites’ – have recently grown at odds with one another, resulting in a split between ‘populist’ and ‘technocratic’ registers of truth, which threatens the health and stability of existing democratic regimes (pp. 28–29).

The first claim is grounded on a historical analysis that portrays modern democracy as an offspring of the ‘Age of Revolutions’ and therefore sets it in opposition to the *ancien régime*. In the thought of many of the authors who helped lay the grounds for this historical transition, Rosenfeld points out, modern democracy was associated with a ‘particular truth culture’ (p. 22), which cast the *ancien régime* as relying primarily on religious superstition and political dissimulation. This, for her, established a conceptual link between modern democracy and ‘a commitment to demonstrable evidence and accuracy (rather than secrecy, lies and error), and a premium on sincerity and candor (over hypocrisy and corruption)’ (p. 24).

The idea is certainly reassuring, inasmuch as it pits ‘us’ (modern democrats) on the side of ‘truth’ and ‘sincerity’, while relegating ‘them’ (pre-modern anti-democrats) on the side of ‘error’ and ‘dissimulation’. However, it runs counter to a deep pattern in the history of western political thought that has consistently associated truth with authority, and therefore heteronomy, and skepticism – or indeed relativism – with freedom, and therefore democracy. The pattern is already visible, for instance, in Plato’s thought and works. The main defenders of democracy in his dialogues are all ‘sophists’, who believe that ‘man is the measure of all things’ and therefore that there is ultimately no distinction between opinion (*doxa*) and truth (*episteme*). In contrast, Plato’s Socrates stands for the existence of a truth beyond the conflict of opinions, which is why he thinks it makes no sense to distribute political power equally among the members of the *demos*. His belief in truth underpins the idea that political power should be entrusted to ‘philosophers’, since they are most likely to know what political truth amounts to.

The same pattern can also be discerned in the historical period Rosenfeld focuses on. Although she seems to accept the eighteenth-century *philosophes*’ characterization of the *ancien régime* as founded on ‘superstitions’ and ‘dissimulation’ (pp. 22–23), it is difficult to ignore that this political regime also made an extensive use



of the category of ‘truth’ in its own self-justifications. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Joseph de Maistre’s tirade against the French Revolution in his 1797 pamphlet entitled *Considerations on France*:

I am so convinced of the truths I defend that when I consider the general weakening of moral principles, the divergence of opinions, the shaking of spineless monarchies ... it seems to me that all true philosophy must opt between two hypotheses: either a new religion is going to come into existence or Christianity will be rejuvenated in some extraordinary way. You must choose between these two suppositions according to the position you have taken on the truth of Christianity (De Maistre, 1797, p. 45).

Here, ‘truth’ is clearly put in the service of a defense of the *ancien régime*, rather than its critique. In contrast, one of the features de Maistre found most unsettling – and politically dangerous – in the thought of the *ancien régime*’s critics was precisely their philosophical skepticism, which in some cases took the form of a full-blown moral relativism. There is, for instance, a clear line of continuity running from Michel de Montaigne’s moral relativism and his defense of religious toleration, to Pierre Bayle’s and Voltaire’s criticisms of absolute monarchy and their defenses of religious toleration. Similarly, it can be argued that Thomas Hobbes’ critique of the classical idea of ‘natural law’ – in the context of which he argued that ‘good and evil’ are merely ‘names that signify our appetites and aversions’ (Hobbes, 1996, p. 110) – laid the foundations for the emergence of the modern idea of ‘popular sovereignty’ in the thought of authors such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Emmanuel de Sièyes. For, it is only once the political domain is unshackled from the requirement of compliance with a set of pre-existent normative ‘truths’, that the people can be legitimately allowed to rule themselves.

In the 19th century, the conceptual connection between truth and heteronomy, on the one hand, and skepticism and freedom, on the other, was reaffirmed by the Catholic Church’s ‘Syllabus of Errors’ and its reactionary slogan ‘authority, not majority’ (Pius IX, 1861), as well as by Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous comment on the ‘philosophical disposition’ of Americans, in which he suggested that citizens of democratic countries are deeply ‘Cartesian’, in the sense that they display an inclination to ‘doubt’ all the received and revealed truths that they cannot establish for themselves (de Tocqueville, 2010, p. 699). The point was then made explicit in the 20th century by authors such as Hans Kelsen (1929) – who argued that modern democracy can be understood as a form of institutionalized relativism – and Claude Lefort, who maintained that the transition from the *ancien régime* to modern democracy is underpinned by a ‘dissolution of the markers of certainty’, which has led to a ‘disincorporation’ of the domains of ‘Truth’, ‘Power’ and ‘Law’ (Lefort, 1988, pp. 19–20).

From this perspective, democracy doesn’t appear as a ‘regime of truth’, but rather as a political system based on the assumption of the irreducibility of conflict



between competing interests and values within society. Instead of aiming to produce a ‘shared set of convictions and useful facts’ that can ‘bind us all together in a minimal way’ (p. 29), it is therefore best understood as a way of managing conflict and disagreement by giving all competing views and interests within society an equal opportunity to exercise political power, in a provisional and revisable way. The point was cogently advanced by Hans Kelsen in his 1929 treatise on *The Essence and Value of Democracy* when he wrote that:

He who views absolute truth and absolute values as inaccessible to the human understanding must deem not only his own, but also the opinion of others at least as feasible ... He can therefore justify the coercion that a social order inevitably requires in no other way than with the assent of at least the majority of those who are supposed to benefit from the coercive order. Furthermore, because the minority is not absolutely wrong, the coercive order must be constructed in such a way that the minority will not be rendered entirely without rights and itself can become the majority at any time (Kelsen, 1929, pp. 103–104).

Starting from this conception of democracy, one also reaches a very different diagnosis of the danger posed by ‘populism’ and ‘technocracy’ to contemporary democratic regimes, compared to the one implicit in Rosenfeld’s second claim. The fact that these political forms pit the ‘wisdom of the people’ against the ‘wisdom of elites’ doesn’t necessarily appear as a problem, because democratic institutions are designed to deal with conflict and disagreement. Instead, the problem posed by populism and technocracy is that they reintroduce an orientation towards ‘truth’ within the framework of a political regime that is based in its exclusion – or at least suspension – from the political domain.

Populism identifies political ‘truth’ with a reified and monolithic conception of the ‘popular will’, whereas technocracy is based on the assumption that ‘experts’ have access to a vision of political truth which is not available to ordinary people, in virtue of their specialized training and professional competence. As such, they are both opposed to the very idea of democracy as a political regime based on the ‘regulated rivalry’ between conflicting interests and opinions, in which collectively binding decisions are made – in an always provisional and revisable way – through the procedure of majority rule and in respecting of the rights of minorities.

This is manifested most clearly by the analogous way in which populists and technocrats relate to their political opponents. Whereas democracy is based on the assumption of the legitimacy of disagreement and therefore opposition, both populists and technocrats treat their political opponents as ‘enemies’, either of the people as a whole or of the interests of ‘truth’ itself. The reason is that if you start from the assumption that politics is about discovering and implementing some kind of context-transcending ‘truth’, disagreement and conflict can only appear as a sign of error – and it makes no sense to tolerate error.



From this, in turn, it follows that democracy cannot be seen as occupying some kind of intermediary position between populism and technocracy, as Rosenfeld effectively suggests in her book. Above and beyond their different ways of construing and proposing to discover political ‘truth’, populism and technocracy prove to be equally at odds with democracy itself. So, trying to find some kind of ‘balance’ between them is not going to result in a more democratic system overall, but rather in an irresolvable conflict between monolithic conceptions of political truth, which is bound to undercut the scope for political disagreement and reciprocal toleration.

This emerges in the last chapter of Rosenfeld’s book, where she proposes some remedies for the growing split between populism and technocracy in contemporary democratic regimes. Relying on the assumption that the ‘wisdom of the people’ and the ‘wisdom of elites’ need to work ‘in tandem’ with one another, she proposes a distinctively technocratic set of measures for dealing with populism’s ‘flooding tactics’ (p. 156). These basically boil down to a ‘juridical restriction’ of the allowable sphere of free speech, and an enhancement of the ‘epistemic authority’ of ‘knowledge-producing institutions’. In this respect, for instance, Rosenfeld writes that:

The legal system – and faith in its processes to discover and punish forms of deception regardless of their place of origin – remains essential to enforcing the idea that striving for something called ‘the truth’ is, at once, an epistemological and an ethical obligation in our lives in common ... Schools, colleges and universities, public and private, play an equally critical role in this business, even as we recognize them as often undemocratic and coercive spaces, [since] they provide us with a special opportunity to instill the epistemic-moral aspirations essential to fostering a truly democratic truth culture (p. 167).

It may perhaps appear surprising that a book which begins by describing democracy as a way of producing a ‘shared set of convictions or useful facts’ to ‘bind us all together in a minimal way’ (p. 29) ends up calling for forms of legal censorship and political indoctrination by institutions it explicitly describes as ‘coercive’ and ‘undemocratic’. However, if the key argument I have sought to advance here is correct – namely, that truth functions politically as a justification of authority, whereas self-government is predicated on its exclusion from the political domain – it follows that any attempt to construe democracy as a ‘regime of truth’ is ultimately bound to contradict itself.

Freedom does not lie at the point of intersection between two contradictory forms of heteronomy, but rather at the point at which politics is dis-anchored from truth.

Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti



Populist Realism, Truth, and Democratic Freedom

Sophia Rosenfeld's *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* is a deeply impressive work, offering a concise intellectual history of the complex relationship between democracy and truth. Deftly moving from the 18th century to the present, Rosenfeld clearly charts the ways in which democratic equality, authority and expertise, and empirical truth have mutually undergirded *and* undermined one another. Beginning with a depressing portrait of the 'post-truth' present in Western democracies, particularly in the United States, she then moves to fuller discussions of the twin pressures now threatening the very project of liberal democracy: the rise of technocracy and the rise of a pathological populism – interrelated, codependent phenomena. In the final sections, she examines the usual suspects receiving the blame for the contemporary manifestation of these tensions (post-modern philosophy, Facebook, and so on), consistently returning to the structures, particularly financial and economic, that drive an enthusiasm for sensationalistic information and epistemic closure (the kind coming from social media and news bubbles, rather than the technical philosophical term). As I listen to Ambassador Yovanovitch testify in the impeachment hearings this morning – while President Trump attacks her on Twitter – it is difficult to quibble with the careful historical excavation or the often alarming implications of Rosenfeld's study. I am both grateful for her work and slightly terrified.

This tension between authority and equality is not new; it was a central concern in ancient Athens as well. The Athenian Assembly opened with a ritual question: who of the Athenians has advice to give? The ideal of *isegoria* gave each citizen an equal right to speak and offer useful advice to the *demos* as it deliberated; this invitation proclaimed the Athenian faith in the judgment of *all* citizens. The problem with a figure like Socrates, then, was that he came along and told people, often quite publicly, that they did not know what they were talking about, that they might be mistaken about the truth. Critics of his, like Aristophanes, skewered Socrates (and other leading public figures) for this elitism. In many of his comedies, for example, Aristophanes seems to be saying that the only way out of the troubles dogging his protagonist is to avoid intellectual innovation, the rhetorical tricks of politicians, and urban life more generally. That is, most people can do well enough on their own, providing they keep it simple and look to the past as an example of life well-lived. The mythos around the simple man focused on his ability to sensibly guide the *polis* through difficult moments because he did not overthink things and saw them instead as they *really* were – and not as goofballs like Socrates in his *Thinkery* would fool you with words into believing, despite your own good sense. This is one reason speakers in Athens – including Socrates in Plato's telling – constantly and unbelievably claim to have no skill in public speaking. They – like



Trump and so many other near contemporaries as Rosenfeld details – are just telling it like it is.

So as I applaud Rosenfeld's careful excavation of the contemporary crisis, I also want to draw attention to the fact that the tension between equality and truth (however conceived) is perhaps inherent to democratic forms themselves, and to how that is revealed by the remarkably consistent recourse to what I've elsewhere described as a *hypersincerity*, which relies on a realist rhetorical tone. At the same time, the tension takes on very different shades in different contexts, for sure – and Rosenfeld's brief volume does so much to elucidate the specific developments of the last few hundred years. The current flavor of realist rhetoric circulating today is a particularly populist one. As Rosenfeld describes it, this populism trades on the 'exaltation of the *real* people, the unjustifiably powerless' who have 'been betrayed by the very individuals in whom they had put their trust' (pp. 99, 100). The conspiracy theories and xenophobia of the current moment mark it as critically different from other realist rhetorical styles and distinctly populist – although the ways in which the realist style often invokes the real as simple, unadorned, and commonsensical make this link seem inevitable.

The basic pitch goes like this: like other *realist* rhetoricians before, the populist realist claims to be The One who can see the world clearly, unafraid of confronting the Politically Correct or the Beltway insiders. There are certain brutal realities out there, known to The One because of the time he has spent living in the 'real world'. Much of this is standard realist rhetorical fare. The populist inflection comes along in the promised return to a past in which The People had power, before the overeducated outsiders wrested power, status, and wealth from them. And so in the US, we have a member of the New York elite posing as the only hope for real Americans left behind by technocratic globalism. This is clear in the ways in which Trump has explained away his elite status – he knows how the 1% plays the game. An old party pic with the Clintons is just more proof that he's the man the people need – an insider willing to work for them. Trump's hypersincerity and plain speech signaling (grammatical errors as proof that he is either too busy solving *real* problems or else just one of the people) are nothing new. But it is amalgamated with a pathological populism – with common sense and unfiltered vision, the populist realist leader promises a return to a glorious past, when life was simpler and the *people* were in control of their lives.

It is this yearning for their own sovereignty – control over their lives – that makes the 'post-truth' populist realist so irresistible to many. As Rosenfeld points out, economic systems and financial structures lie at the root here, although I want to propose a different mechanism than the ones Rosenfeld examines (like the rise of market-driven social media). Instead, I want to think about what Sheldon Wolin termed 'inverted totalitarianism' – illiberal, managed democracy where corporate and state power work together to shore up elite economic control. Inverted totalitarianism is the political form of neoliberal economics – state and economic



power linked for its own benefit, meant to manage the *demos*'s potential unruliness. Coupled with state power, this form all the while continues to trumpet 'popular sovereignty' as the source of its legitimacy, but which now is limited to periodic and outrageously expensive elections. This leaves us with a 'devalitized agency', in Ali Aslam's (2017, p. 2) words, a bewildering loss of freedom in an era animated by a passion for freedom. My hunch is that the desire for freedom of those living in an era of inverted totalitarianism gets displaced elsewhere – onto the figure of Trump. Political subjects living in liberal democracies, states that claim their legitimacy through popular sovereignty, are increasingly frustrated by the practical experience of their unfreedom. Having no obvious recourse – that is, these global forces seem too massive and unbounded to really tackle – many political subjects see Trump as their champion. He has sovereign power – he can command and control the world, in part because he can see it so clearly. And, ironically, in this case, controlling the world means demonstrating to all of us how little factual truth matters to him in the end. He can reshape it – he makes the claims he wants, without regard for an outside empirical reality. What kind of power is more self-made, more unbounded than being able to do that with impunity? The sovereign is absolute, has no rule above him. In this version, not even facts provide that rule or higher authority. And so populist realists in an era of inverted totalitarianism will find an easy sport mocking expertise and truth not simply because democratic equality can lie in tension with other forms of authority – as it has since Athens – but because the failure to realize more meaningful forms of democracy leaves the people ripe for the truth-bashing pandering demagogue.

Realism – which has so many different and seemingly contradictory manifestations – generally relies on a claim to really see the world, to remain grounded in reality, as opposed to fantastic or abstract ideals. Yet the most fascinating thing about the version of populist realism that Rosenfeld so expertly chronicles is how it becomes a claim to a sort of sovereign power that undermines the factual reality that purports to ground the realist. In this way, populist realism is, hopefully and happily, necessarily tragic. That, it cannot last because the hubris of this position always leads to overreach and self-destruction. The question is how much of the social fabric weaving us together into political community is destroyed in the process.

Elizabeth Markovits

Dealing with the Duality of Expertise

'Without common belief', Tocqueville wrote at the beginning of volume two of *Democracy in America*, 'no society can exist'. By common belief he meant belief taken 'on trust and without discussion' (de Tocqueville, 1990, p. 8). Shared beliefs, on this view, are constitutive of social order, and where such shared beliefs cease to



exist, social order itself will disintegrate. The sorts of shared beliefs he had in mind were rooted in tradition and religion, but his point was a general one: no social body – if it is to be a social body at all – can do without some unreflective background of shared belief. Of course, it is almost axiomatic of pluralistic liberal democracies that we do not share beliefs about religion or what Rawls (1993, p. xvi) called ‘comprehensive doctrines’. But something of Tocqueville’s intuition is firmly present in liberal anxieties about the fate of truth in democratic politics. Historian Daniel Rodgers (2017), for instance, commenting on ‘post-truth’ politics, worries that ‘where truths are utterly free to be individually chosen, where the processes of inquiry are marginalized, the social disintegrates’. Thus, it is often thought that democracy presupposes some minimal agreement about what reality looks like, and that this minimum is given by – in Rawls’s phrase – ‘common sense and the existing scientific consensus’ (Rawls, 1999 [1971], p. 480).

This distinctive twist on the Tocquevillean theme – that we can and should disagree on all sorts of matters of profound existential importance, but not on simple matters of fact – was expressed with characteristic subtlety by Hannah Arendt. ‘Factual truth’, as she described it in *Truth and Politics*, is ‘the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us’ (Arendt, 2006, p. 259). By ‘factual truth’ Arendt primarily had in mind ‘brutally elementary’ historical facts, concerning ‘events and circumstances in which many are involved’, ‘established by witnesses and depend[ing] upon testimony’ (p. 234). Such factual truths are at once coercive and strangely fragile. They are coercive in the sense that it is not a matter of choice whether global warming exists or Germany started the first world war (to take Arendt’s example). ‘[T]hose things which men cannot change at will’ thus set a limit to political life (p. 259). Historical truths and scientific truths might be arrived at in different ways, but ‘once perceived as true and pronounced to be so, they have in common that they are beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent’ (p. 235). ‘All truths... are opposed to opinion in their mode of asserting validity’. Thus, from the point of view of politics, ‘truth has a despotic character’ (pp. 235–236).

Yet factual truths are produced and maintained by many hands in the common world, and thus ‘belong to the same realm’ as opinion (p. 234). This duality – that factual truth is at once ‘political by nature’ (p. 234) and ‘beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent’ (p. 235) – captures something important about our current politics of expertise. Because once the status of factual truth places a claim beyond dispute, that status becomes a valuable political commodity. There is great power in presenting expert claims as though they did not involve human decisions, negotiations, disputes, or disagreements. The claim that there is an ‘expert consensus’ on a given issue – from climate change (see Moore, 2017, pp. 118–146) to the benefits of global trade (see Rodrik, 2015, p. 65) – is meant to close debate on some questions and shift the debate to others. But it is for precisely this reason that factual truth is also peculiarly fragile. By taking the shape of claims that are



beyond dispute, opinion, or consent, factual truths become sites of intense struggle. They are at once coercive and fragile.

When Arendt writes that ‘factual truth’ is ‘political by nature’, she means in part that it is liable to be politicized. Thus, as she puts it, the ‘statesman may be tempted to appeal to truth’ (Arendt, 2006, p. 242). Yet one of the most valuable aspects of Rosenfeld’s *Democracy and Truth* is her sensitivity to a deeper sense in which factual truth is political. While Arendt’s truths are – in her revealing language – ‘perceived’ and ‘pronounced’ (p. 235), Rosenfeld emphasizes how they are *constructed* and *produced*. As Rosenfeld points out, ‘factual truth’ is always produced by people with specific social positions, histories, interests, values, and ideals. Thus, she points out that alongside the abstract ideals of the enlightenment there grew up ‘new class lines... around the determination and expression of truth’ (Rosenfeld, 2019, p. 49) and ‘new forms of “natural” social distinction’, including a persistent strand of intellectual meritocracy that ‘has never been separable from money and property, education, and social standing, [and] which has thus traditionally involved assumptions about gender, race, ethnicity, and religious identity too’ (pp. 49–50). Intellectual meritocracy has taken different forms, most powerfully through the nineteenth and twentieth century in tandem with the growth of government and the regulation of an ever widening sphere of social and economic activities, but Rosenfeld always keeps in view the ways in which the production of various sorts of factual claims were tied up with interpretations and thus with politics (p. 72).

This heightened recognition of the political character of claims to expert knowledge raises (related) theoretical and practical problems. The theoretical problem has to do with the concept of expert authority invoked by Tocqueville and Arendt. If we cannot have expert authority as a source of common belief taken ‘on trust and without discussion’, then can we have it at all? Can we imagine a sort of expert authority that is not antipolitical in its ‘mode of asserting validity’? And if so, how can expert authority be constructed and communicated in a way that goes with the grain of a society with increasingly well-developed capacities to contest and challenge expert judgments? The practical problem is rooted in precisely those capacities of ordinary citizens to question and contest claims to expert knowledge, capacities which have been enhanced considerably over the last half-century, due to factors including the expansion of higher education, changing forms of communication and association, and the rise of freedom of information laws through which (among other things) expert deliberations have been forced into the public domain. It is worth noting, for instance, that the ‘climate-gate’ controversy was prompted in part by a long series of freedom of information requests made by denialists looking for opportunities to discredit the expert consensus on climate change, and that among the more incriminating emails that were revealed to the public were those showing scientists trying to resist those FOI requests. In an echo of the more general dynamic of mutual backlash that Rosenfeld finds between populism and



technocracy, the suspicion of the denialists prompted responses from the scientists that seemed to confirm some of those suspicions.

In this context, it seems hard to fall back (as Arendt did) on norms of impartiality and institutional separation as a way of keeping ‘factual truth’ functional for politics without either dominating it or being corrupted by it. Rather than thinking of ways of keeping politics out of expertise, we should think of ways of organizing politics into expertise. The challenge, then, is to find ways to conduct a sort of politics of expertise that makes its politics more explicit. This means, in particular, that expert authority cannot simply be asserted in the manner described by Arendt (and Tocqueville) as ‘beyond agreement, dispute, opinion, or consent’ (Arendt, 2006, p. 235). It must be organized into political processes of disagreement, dispute, and so on. One general move is to make explicit the ways in which collective judgments are formed, and to more clearly articulate not just the uncertainties, but also the values and disagreements that were part of those judgments. To take one very concrete example, experts could make visible the differences in their judgments by holding votes on particular questions. Such a practice of voting on expert committees was studied in the context of medicines evaluation in the USA, and it revealed some fascinating differences between different disciplines with regard to judgments of risk (Guston, 2005). But most importantly, it announces that expert authority does not have to take the form of claims that are simply ‘perceived’ and ‘pronounced’ to be true (in Arendt’s language), but that expert judgments can take the form of discussions and decisions that admit of degrees of disagreement as well as agreement, and which seek to make explicit the ways in which values and interests might feed into those disagreements. Thus, one way of supporting healthier interaction and engagement between popular and expert knowledge, or at least of resisting the sort of mutual backlash described above, is to develop ways of making value dimensions in expert judgments legible and explicit.

But we should not be deceived about the depth of the problems that the current fears about democracy and truth have revealed. As Tocqueville suggests, what is at stake in this discussion – and Rosenfeld is right to emphasize it – is not a narrow question of deference to experts on this or that particular issue, however important that issue might be (from vaccine safety to climate change), but rather of constituting the social order. We should not fall into the trap of thinking that if only we could agree on some common set of facts then we could proceed to have reasonable disagreements about what we as a community ought to do. It is tempting to think – like Rodgers above – that society is falling apart because we no longer believe the same things. But it might be the other way round: perhaps we no longer believe the same things because society is falling apart. To the extent that this is the case, solutions will not come from the better organization and communication of knowledge, whether popular or expert, nor from institutions and practices of competition and interaction between them, but from the generation of substantive



relations of common interest and mutual commitment. Nonetheless, we might at least begin – following Rosenfeld – with a more subtle and productive sense of what is going on in the very real conflict between ‘populist’ and ‘technocratic’ tendencies in our politics.

Alfred Moore

The People vs. the Experts: A Productive Struggle?

From the authors of the *Federalist Papers* to John Dewey and contemporary deliberative democrats, many theorists of democracy have subscribed to the same ideal for how truth should be handled in a democracy. At the core of this ideal is an epistemological division of labor between ordinary people and experts. Democratic decisions ultimately depend on the judgments of ordinary people, but since ordinary people do not possess the high-quality information required to make good judgments, they must turn to experts. Experts provide the information that can improve public deliberation and correct mistakes. Ordinary people use this information to make better judgments and then turn once again to experts, who are tasked with devising the means to implement chosen ends. This process is supported by a set of background epistemic norms and institutions, including plain (anti-rhetorical) speech, free speech, and norms of honesty, trust, and cooperation.

The problem with this ideal, according to historian Sophia Rosenfeld, is that it has never been realized in anything remotely close to this form. Instead, the history of democracy has been a constant struggle between rule by expert truths and rule by majority instinct. As each group has tried to assert its exclusive claim to determining what counts as truth, the damage has been to democracy itself. Rosenfeld’s attention to the struggle between ordinary people and experts forcefully reveals what was wrong with the original ideal: It failed to account for struggle, and therefore, for politics. It was essentially an ideal of collective rational inquiry. Once we accept this critique, the question we must ask is whether it is possible to envision a different ideal for truth and expertise in democracy – one that avoids the naiveté of the original without devolving into the dangerous extremes of technocracy or populism. My goal in this essay is to answer this question in the affirmative and sketch the outlines of such an ideal.

The building blocks of Rosenfeld’s account – two groups with competing and mutually exclusive claims to the truth – can provide the starting point for a solution. The challenge is to find ways to make the inevitable political struggle over truth a productive one. While the original ideal intended to wish away the struggle, technocracy and populism both declare a single winner who wants to end the competition. What democracies need instead is an ongoing and well-organized competition between these two forces. Ordinary people can act as a check on expert rule and improve expert knowledge by confronting it with their own claims to



knowledge. The main danger to democracy is not this struggle itself, but the possibility of an end to the struggle, first through the formation of an expert monopoly in knowledge, and secondly through the populist backlash that inevitably follows. One way to reduce the danger of an expert monopoly is to ensure more competition among experts, so that ‘the experts’ don’t speak in a single authoritative voice that drowns out others. This must be complemented by a healthy dose of skepticism and mistrust on the part of ordinary people so that competing expert claims are scrutinized and contested, rather than taken on authority. This attitude of skepticism is distinct from the attitude of denial that is prevalent nowadays. While the former continues the engagement over truth claims, the latter is a refusal to engage. Formal institutions designed to organize competition and harness skepticism would be instrumental for realizing this ideal, but extra-institutional politics can often produce the same effects.

Let me illustrate what I have in mind with two existing political organizations that exemplify this logic and successfully deal with competing truth claims from experts and ordinary people: the first are common law juries, the second are social movements. The jury trial is essentially a structured competition: there are two sides by design and each produces its own experts. The jury must judge the facts of the case and brings its own experiential knowledge to the task. This set-up combines the belief that experts possess valuable and relevant knowledge with the admission that the knowledge of any particular expert can be flawed and must be publicly examined. It also embodies the fundamentally democratic idea that the ultimate judgment lies with ordinary citizens. A particularly fascinating jury for our purposes is the coroner’s jury from nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England, whose task was to rule on the cause of death in suspicious or violent cases. The jury would examine the body, hear testimony from an increasingly professionalized and sophisticated cadre of medical experts, and freely interject in the proceedings with questions and comments. What made the coroner’s jury successful was its ability to legitimate the knowledge and status of experts, even while remaining a ‘people’s court’ where ordinary citizens retained significant power to check and contest expert knowledge claims (Burney, 2000).

The recent popular and academic interest in small-scale democratic experiments, such as citizen juries and consensus conferences, shows the promise of giving a more directly political (rather than purely judicial) role for juries. But these experiments get one thing wrong: most existing designs involve citizens listening to experts and then deliberating among themselves (or with the experts) *in light of* the expert views provided. This epitomizes the logic of the ideal we started out with – that experts and ordinary people have different roles to play vis-à-vis truth claims within a deliberative system. What I propose instead is to experiment with something closer to a real jury by structuring these institutions adversarially. Competing experts should make their case and cross-examine one another, and the



jury should have the final say on which truth claims should form the basis of the policy under consideration.

Another political organization that embodies the ideal of contestation between the truth claims of experts and ordinary people is social movements (Moore, 2017). Activists have often successfully confronted experts and forced them to change or revise their views to align the knowledge base of democratic policies more closely with the interests and knowledge of ordinary people. While some movements have indeed been built on a rejection of the scientific way of knowing and thus would count among examples of populist backlash, many others have started from a distrust of experts but have still engaged with experts on the terrain of scientific truth. These latter movements are the interesting ones from our perspective because they resist expert rule without rejecting the value of expert knowledge wholesale. A history of the democratic struggles over truth cannot be complete without attention to how social movements have wrangled with experts over the definition of truth at many crucial junctures.

I will mention two examples. The first is the AIDS movement, where activists famously succeeded in confronting experts on matters of scientific truth and methodology (Epstein, 1996). AIDS activists fought for the power to make their own truth claims heard by scientists, frequently capitalizing on existing fault lines between rival experts. In doing so, they broke the monopoly of experts over decisions about policies and research priorities. And they did so without making exclusive claims to knowledge themselves, or denying the relevance of medical expertise to their case. The second example is the women's health movement, which empowered women from the 1970s on to take control of their own bodies by demanding more and different medical choices on issues ranging from childbirth to abortion to breast cancer treatments (Kline, 2010). Feminists successfully challenged a male-dominated medical establishment's monopolization of knowledge about women's bodies, but without rejecting the necessity of mainstream medicine for women's health. Neither of these movements can be classified as examples of the collaborative Deweyan ideal because they involved adversarial forms of action that stemmed from deep mistrust of established experts. They are thus better described as illustrations of the alternative ideal I have sketched, which views struggle as instrumental for democratically and epistemically valuable outcomes.

I singled out one institutional and one extra-institutional political organization in order to show that the kind of productive competition I have identified as an alternative can be realized at different political spaces and at different distances from established channels of power. Neither juries nor social movements always work perfectly, but we know that they can work and that they are good for democracy and for truth when they do.

Before I conclude, I want to highlight what I think is a major obstacle to the realization of this model. Unsurprisingly, this ideal will be thwarted most by forces



that increase the tendency of some experts to monopolize knowledge, shutting off avenues for contestation and competition, whether from other experts or from ordinary people. The increasing role of money in the production of expertise clearly has this effect. The almost complete dependence of expert knowledge on funding means that those who do not have funding are either driven out from the production of knowledge or incentivized to work under the dominant, highly funded paradigms. Those who control the distribution of funding thus effectively control the knowledge that becomes politically salient (Pamuk, 2018). These people also have strong incentives to protect their paradigms against challenges. This builds on a Kuhnian picture of science, but with money factored in.

Rosenfeld also touches on this problem and points out that the increasing partnership between universities and industry means that the gap between public funding and public needs is increasing. This point cannot be emphasized enough; not only does this shut out ordinary citizens and social movements from the determination of research priorities, but it also unfairly skews the resulting public struggle over truth since potentially valuable dissenting views cannot be developed due to a lack of funding. Funding bodies are thus one of the insufficiently discussed but crucial institutions that shape the democratic struggle over truth. Laws protecting freedom of speech and inquiry are not enough in societies where some experts enjoy large amounts of funding. To make a productive democratic competition over truth possible, it is necessary to rethink the distribution of money for research and devise rules that will serve as the equivalent of antitrust for funding research: to promote broader competition over the truth for the public interest.

Zeynep Pamuk

Response

This forum represents just what I had hoped for *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (2019), namely that, as history of how we got to this moment, it would inspire new ideas on the part of savvy theorists of political language and practice. I found myself nodding in agreement, albeit with a few provisos that I outline below, with most of these suggestions for avenues worth pursuing in the future. Let me say a word about each in turn.

Elizabeth Markovits, after a cogent summary of *Democracy and Truth's* main points, rightly notes that the central tension in modern democracy, here redefined as one between equality and truth, is nothing new. It is inherent in democratic forms from the start – meaning since antiquity – and manifests itself repeatedly in a baldly realist rhetorical mode that she calls ‘hypersincerity’. But Markovits also argues that the ‘inverted totalitarianism’ (in Sheldon Wolin’s terms) produced by a neoliberal political order has given this rhetoric a peculiar and distinctive populist



inflection at present because ‘the failure to realize more meaningful forms of democracy leaves the people ripe for the truth-bashing of a pandering demagogue’ (see this Critical Exchange). Who could disagree (though I would add the failure to realize more meaningful forms of economic empowerment, too)? Then, however, Markovits goes farther with the claim that, because this rhetoric is built on a contradiction – populist realism necessarily undermines the factual reality that it purports to expand – it cannot last. And that, to a historian, is a slightly odd argument, one that might need to be demonstrated on an empirical level to be convincing. Last in what sense? Or, how long counts as ‘lasting’? Nothing in politics is eternal after all, and all systems or modes eventually collapse, sometimes from the weight of their contradictions, but just as often because of other factors entirely. Markovits’s final claim does, though, prompt some new, present-minded questions on my part: Why do such epistemic contradictions currently seem to be unproblematic even to those who recognize their existence, as in the legions of voters who, surveys show, accept that President Donald Trump lies and cheats but do not seem to care? Should we assume that increased public exposure to these contradictions – i.e., the message to the effect that you think he is more real than other politicians, but he is actually detaching you from reality, or you think he is speaking for you, but he is really speaking only for the 1% or even himself – is where this kind of politics becomes vulnerable? Or might this be a hopeless strategy for breaking the Trumpian spell of this moment?

Alfred Moore might side with the second of these possibilities. Moore endorses Alexis de Tocqueville’s conviction that a social body needs some basic shared beliefs. He also endorses John Rawls’ position that, in a democracy, these are not going to be comprehensive doctrines, though an investment in truth and in how to get there (hint: it involves both science and common sense) might count as one of these low-level shared beliefs or, indeed, a basic truth by itself. Moore, though, sees a certain irony here, as do I and as did Hannah Arendt before both of us. For precisely because what Arendt called ‘factual truth’ has an exalted status in democracies, it always ends up generating new conflicts in practice about how it should be employed once it is established and, even more, about how it was produced in the first place. According to Moore, that leaves those of us interested in this predicament with an important task: to look for ways to make expertise more honest. That is, he calls on all of us to highlight rather than disguise the politics – the debates, the value judgments, even the fights – that are part of the process of crafting our shared truth claims. Yet, he also signals that such efforts may well be insufficient. As he puts it, ‘It is tempting to think ... that society is falling apart because we no longer believe the same things. But it might be the other way around. Perhaps we no longer believe the same things because society is falling apart’ (see this Critical Exchange). Which may well be right. But this perspective also suggests that any effort to target specifically the epistemic problem before us – as Markovits implies is necessary – is bound to fail. Society has to be reconstituted



first. But how, without any truth claims to ground it, might this be done? Here, Moore is perhaps suggesting, as I do in the final chapter of *Democracy and Truth*, that the problem would have to be tackled on multiple levels simultaneously. Any meaningful improvement would require re-establishing some baseline factual truths through vigilant fact-checking, bulking up institutions committed to methods for arriving at truth while also letting students and others see the messy business of how the sausage is made, *and*, most idealistically, investing in new forms of equality that leave us less vulnerable to the ravages of late capitalism. But I am actually not convinced even by the practical ‘solutions’ that I articulate in my book, and Moore offers more of a theoretical approach and an important caveat – rather than anything concrete – leaving real innovation on this front to others.

This is where Zeynep Pamuk is especially helpful. Pamuk accepts that a longstanding tension between technocrats and populists, as well as between expertise and common sense, is the end product of our modern, Enlightenment-inspired political configuration. But then she poses the 64,000-dollar-question: Can we actually do better than Enlightenment theorists, or than the essential later democratic theorist John Dewey, in thinking up ways to stave off the twin threats of technocracy and populism? Here Pamuk gets concrete – and inspiring too. Like Moore, Pamuk is a fan of open competition among ideas and their exponents as the precursor to any decision made in a democracy: common law juries are a key example for her. She also draws our attention to social movements that successfully apply skepticism to expert opinion without denying the importance of expertise itself – AIDS activists and women’s health advocates have in recent years, she points out, illustrated that this is an approach with legs. But it might be worth noting that Pamuk’s examples, like those of the other authors in this forum, are almost entirely drawn from conflicts around scientific truth, from climate change to public health disputes. One wonders about the possibility of social movements that approach with skepticism the ‘factual truths’ of our shared but often equally contested history – like who invaded Belgium at the start of WWI and when and why – that Arendt (and Moore) say are especially important to political life. Pamuk also draws our attention to the extremely important role of big money in shaping what counts as expertise in the first place, a problem everywhere, but one that is especially acute in the United States, where so much knowledge production and dissemination depends on private funds. Other obstacles to the success of social movements of the type that Pamuk describes come to mind as well. In an illiberal moment, illiberal institutions might make protest or adversarial politics difficult to orchestrate or even treacherous, especially as illiberal courts find ways to constrain counter-hegemonic movements. Popular exhaustion or growing apathy or loss of confidence in democracy in the first place could stymie such initiatives, too. Or bastardized forms of democracy, like elections conducted with severe voting restrictions or unrepresentative forms of representation (the US Senate itself comes to mind), could do the same. Still, Pamuk gets us thinking about more than



resistance by shifting the question to how to break the political/epistemic cycle in which we are caught in the first place.

Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti stands out as the group's pessimist or true cynic. His intriguing argument is that we would be better off giving up caring about truth in the first place as it does not, and should not, have much, if any, place in democratic political life. To make this argument seem novel, he rather distorts the content of my own. I never, of course, claim that all truths matter to democracy (they don't: as I say, only very specific and minimal kinds do) or that the Enlightenment got it right about the old regime or anything else (historians like me describe ideas for their influence, but don't take their job to be making claims about their actual validity). I also find it a stretch to relabel my plea for teaching children both methods of arriving at truths *and* healthy skepticism about all existing claims as an argument for 'political indoctrination' or to characterize my call for holding media companies responsible when they allow falsehoods to circulate that lead to physical harm as a defense of 'legal censorship', especially since there is no society anywhere without extensive laws regarding speech. But that does not mean that there isn't an interesting idea here in Invernizzi-Accetti's essay – and actually one I think we share: that both in practice and in theory, truth is bound always to be a problematic intrusion into any democracy. That is, of course, precisely why big truths, like the nature of God, have in democracies generally been taken off the table as impossible, indeed wrong, to adjudicate in the political sphere. It is also why claims for exclusive or absolute truth in either the populist or technocratic mode are perpetual threats. Skepticism is indeed intrinsic to democracy. So is pluralism.

But must we throw the baby out with the bath water? Does Invernizzi-Accetti really want to get *all* truth out of politics? For I cannot help but wonder if he thinks we can really maintain any kind of effective democratic or even quasi-democratic political system without *some* low-level, general, and contingent consensus about what causes what, what is broadly desirable, what is dangerous, and, especially how to characterize what has already happened (Arendt's factual truths, once again). If we cannot at least agree for the moment that there is substantial evidence that the planet is getting warmer and that it is doing so as a result of human activity, how do we even begin to debate climate policies? If we don't accept the basic, demonstrated truth of the existence of a slave system centered on people of African descent and the, yes, fact of a civil war fought in the 1860s over its continuation, how can any serious conversation – or even serious fights – about race in this country be conducted? Much as it might sound clever or sophisticated to say that the pursuit of truth is completely and totally outside the concerns of democracy, it also seems obvious that without some baseline of collectively established, *de facto* facts, we enter the realm of pure power politics. What should worry us is how hard a time we are having at the moment coming up with just that form of truth. We are already seeing the social and political consequences. This forum, overall, is a



deeply thought-provoking series of reflections on what that might or should mean, and I'm grateful to all of these authors for it.

Sophia Rosenfeld

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