

Editorial

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Introduction to the Second Part of the Special Issue: Towards Foolproof Democracy: Improving Public Debate and Political Decision-Making

<https://doi.org/10.1515/mopp-2020-0041>

The recent surge of populism, nationalism and authoritarian tendencies in the political arena as well as the widespread propagation of fake news, conspiracy theories and disinformation in social media are increasingly worrisome and pose a severe threat to democratic societies and the rule of law. Political decisions in such societies must, first and foremost, be guided by evidence and reason. Unfortunately, the events of the last years have shown that existing institutions and mechanisms are more and more vulnerable to misuse, leaving democracies well and truly adrift from wholesome deliberative practices. It thus seems imperative that those institutions and mechanisms be redesigned in an attempt to make democracy ‘foolproof’ – that is, to provide some sort of immunisation against these threats, even if it is, of course, nearly impossible to achieve such a lofty ideal in practice.

This is the second part of a special issue that explores ways to make democracies ‘foolproof’ in the explicated sense. It gathers three contributions that have emerged out of a conference held at the New College of the Humanities (London) in March 2019. They discuss the threat of fake news to modern democracy (Brian Ball), the empirical unresponsiveness of democracies to the preferences of voters (Gordon Arlen and Enzo Rossi), and how Deweyan democratic education might be able to alleviate many of the current problems (Philip Kitcher and Natalia Rogach Alexander).

In the first contribution, titled ‘Defeating Fake News: On Journalism, Knowledge, and Democracy’, Ball seeks to explain how fake news and other cognate phenomena, for example, the sharing of polarised views on social media, pose a

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threat to legitimate journalism and deliberative democracy. He argues that they do so by playing the role of defeaters to journalistic testimony that would otherwise help establish a type of knowledge crucial to the proper functioning of democracies. To be precise, Ball claims that journalism, when done properly, aims to make people better informed and, in doing so, puts them in an advantageous position to defend the common good. He conceives of the latter notion as primarily a collective good, that is, not merely an aggregate of individual goods, and holds that knowledge of this good and the ways to obtain it are a *sine qua non* for potent decision-making in democracies. In short, legitimate journalism helps to produce such decision-making through its transmission of knowledge of the common good to the people. Fake news and cognate phenomena, argues Ball, prevent people from forming true beliefs. Taking an anti-reductionist stance on testimony, he stresses that in the absence of defeaters, a hearer who receives testimony from a speaker is justified in believing that testimony as true and such a belief effectively constitutes knowledge. Applying this stance to the case in question, he notes that proper journalists, *qua* speakers, seek to eliminate potential defeaters and, provided those efforts are successful, their audience, *qua* hearers, attain knowledge through the transmission of testimony. Who might provide defeaters to legitimate journalism? The answer is both those who do so with malicious intent and those without. The former are branded ‘hostile agents’. These agents do not necessarily disseminate false information but may rather opt in favour of muddling the waters. The resulting uncertainty, Ball reasons, makes it difficult for people to put their trust in journalism and, more broadly, deliberative democracy. The latter agents, for example, social media bots or algorithms, may not have malicious intent but the effects of their defeater spreading are no less pernicious. Ball concludes by expressing the hope that his explication of how the aforesaid phenomena pose a threat to common good seeking journalism and democratic decision-making may help in finding ways to overcome it.

In their contribution, titled ‘Must Realists Be Pessimists About Democracy? Responding to Epistemic and Oligarchic Challenges’, Arlen and Rossi examine the implications of empirical studies – namely, those that track the unresponsiveness of real democracies to the preferences of voters – on normative political theory. The studies cited focus on voting behaviour as well as on the dominance of elite voices in the policy process. Two findings are identified. First, when voting, the vast majority of people seem to opt for group identity over policy or leadership qualities. They thus seem to exhibit some sort of epistemic incompetence in that their voting behaviour is not geared towards safeguarding their own interests. Second, political decision-making is predominantly guided by the interests of the economic elites. That dominance, Arlen and Rossi argue, becomes heightened in light of the first finding, as the voters’ epistemic incompetence makes it easier for elites to get

their way. The two findings are conceived of as posing two challenges to democracy, aptly labelled ‘epistemic’ and ‘oligarchic’. The solution to these challenges is not, the two authors are quick to point out, epistocracy. As they put it, ‘it is hardly clear that more elitism would solve these problems.’ The solution, in their view, needs to centre around class-specific institutions that secure the power of those who are less well off. What Arlen and Rossi have in mind is a neo-Roman tribunate style model that can be characterised as ‘plebeian’ in nature. Such a model would, in their view, enhance the voice of the non-wealthy and increase their awareness of key policy issues, thereby addressing the two aforementioned challenges. They go on to articulate some details of the model, for example, the establishment of a handful of plebeian assemblies each with its own set of responsibilities, with the aim of ensuring that the resulting system provides checks and balances to oligarchic power and promotes better understanding of public policy in the wider community. The paper concludes with some fleeting ruminations on how this model fits within the realist framework in political thought.

The third and final contribution, titled ‘Educating Democratic Character’, takes an even more foundational approach to the topic and sketches a solution to many of the current problems based on a reinterpretation of Dewey’s work on democratic education. Kitcher and Alexander advocate educational reform based on Deweyan democracy, aiming at personal growth in the sense of constant character formation. They interpret Dewey such that education should be an intelligent and never-ending revision of one’s habits in the light of a sympathetic, responsible and wide-ranging survey of their consequences. According to the authors, Dewey saw social interactions and especially communication at the core of character formation. Revising personal and social habits is best done in open-minded communication and inquiry with others. As such, individual and communal growth are inextricably intertwined. The creative individuality needed for a functioning democracy is developed in a constructive dialogue with the social environment, which has three basic functions. First, such dialogue enables citizens to better tackle the practical problems posed by the environment and thus to better sustain themselves. Second, it facilitates citizens to experience their environment in a more enriched way and thus to flourish. Third, it helps citizens to commit themselves to deliberative procedures that aim at constructive consensus and thus to practice Deweyan democracy. Kitcher and Alexander argue that education that fosters certain growth-enabling habits is needed for these functions to be fulfilled. In particular, personal growth requires – most crucially – habits of openness, empathy and a willingness to engage with one’s social environment. In the last sections of their contribution, the authors reply to some worries that such an apparently naïve and optimistic outlook might attract. They address the inherent tendency of Deweyan democratic education to reduce diversity

(which might seem problematic) and the tension between vocational choice based on individual autonomy and the strategic shaping of society due to its need for experts. Most importantly, they also stress that the Deweyan project is anti-utopian, as it denies the ‘perfect society’ – instead, we need to constantly improve democracy as we find it. In summary, based on their interpretation of Deweyan democratic education, the authors call for far-reaching educational and social reform that has the primary goal of educating democratic character.

Such a meliorist stance is very much in line with what we, as editors, had in mind when we set out to organize the conference and the special issue. Indeed, all three papers adopt this stance in their own way and contribute to the great discussion humanity is having over the future of democratic societies. We very much hope that both parts of the special issue will provide readers with new insights that ultimately make democracy at least a little bit more ‘foolproof’ – and thus less vulnerable to populism, disinformation and democracy’s own inherent weaknesses.