
**The Future of Representative
Democracy**

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**A PROPOSAL FOR RETHINKING THE
ORIGINS AND FUTURE OF
REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT**

By John Keane

There has always been a gap between the bold ideals of representative democracy – self-government of citizens through their elected representatives – and its complex, multilayered, and sometimes unimpressive real-world forms. Some contemporary observers (Fukuyama [2006]) draw from this discrepancy the conclusion that expressions of dissatisfaction with representative democracy are normal, even healthy reminders of the precious contingency of a form of good government that has no serious competitors. Other observers (Rosanvallon [1998]; Crouch [2004]; Ginsborg [2005]) draw the opposite conclusion: euphoria is unwarranted, because the mechanisms of representation that lie at the heart of existing democracies are under severe stress, and are triggering public concerns about the future of representative democracy itself. In democratic systems as different as the US, India, Australia, Germany, Great Britain and Argentina, these analysts point to evidence of a creeping malaise: formal membership of political parties has dipped sharply (Schmitter [2004]; Dalton [2004]); voter turnout at elections is becoming more volatile, where it is optional; levels of trust in politicians and government are generally in decline; and there are increasing public perceptions of the deformation of policy-making by the private power of organised business interests and lobbyists. When considered

together, these disparate trends have encouraged some analysts to conclude that representative democracy is breeding political disaffection. Others have argued that its ideals are themselves now under siege, even that we are heading towards an epoch of ‘post-democracy’.

These claims about the decline, decay or disappearance of representative democracy are big and important, but how plausible are they? In this workshop, I shall propose the need to conduct an in-depth investigation of these claims that representative democracy is breeding deep political disaffection and may be in terminal decline. The research would evaluate the performance of a range of present-day representative democracies by reconsidering the European origins and subsequent growth of the language and institutions of representative government, their historic democratisation during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and the possible 21st-century transformation of representative democracy into more complex forms of ‘post-Westminster’ democracy. This in-depth investigation would involve:

- applying the method of ‘dialogue with the dead’ to show that much can be learned about the novelty of our times by revisiting the medieval and early modern origins of representative democracy
- examining from a cosmopolitan perspective the present-day contours and performance of a range of existing representative democracies, many of them – such as India and other Asian and Pacific countries – usually neglected by scholars from the Atlantic region, the birthplace of representative government
- exploring the probable futures of these representative democracies, including their possible transformation into more open and adaptive forms of ‘post-Westminster’ or ‘monitory’ democracy that defy textbook definitions of the nature of representative government
- revising the orthodox arguments in favour of representative forms of government by showing how the new forms of ‘post-Westminster’ representative democracy can be politically successful in handling the most difficult and pressing intergenerational problems, such as climate change, demographic shifts, and biogenetic innovation
- identifying the new sources of public disillusionment with political parties, politicians and parliaments, and assessing the chances of political success of the new types of opposition to representative democracy – political nationalism, new forms of terrorism, and Chinese-style visions of the ‘harmonious society’ – that are on the rise in several regions of the world.

BACKGROUND

The proposed research program would be highly ambitious in scope. It would aim to use empirical, theoretical and interpretative methods on a strongly interdisciplinary basis, drawing

insights from such fields as medieval and early modern history, philosophy, anthropology, jurisprudence and political sociology. The program would be founded on the premise that the invention of representative government is the central achievement of modern politics – and that a clear understanding of the fate of representative democracy in our times is therefore of the highest scholarly importance and public benefit.

There is a growing literature on the subject of representative democracy. Three are broad trends in this literature: (a) scholarship that is preoccupied with normative and strategic questions concerning the rise of new forms of identity politics, such as multiculturalism, and with the need for better representation of new social interests in government, for instance through an analysis of the meaning of fair representation and the search for electoral mechanisms that can better ensure the representation of diverse social interests (Kymlicka [1995]; Young [2000], Phillips [1995]; Guinier [1994]); (b) approaches that target the semantics of ‘representation’ and ‘democracy’, and the way in which these terms were combined in practice into a new form of territorially bound constitutional state known as ‘representative democracy’ (C.B. Macpherson [1977] was among the leading contributors; others include Bobbio [1984]; Friedrich [1968], Sartori [1987], Manin [1997]; Pitkin [1967; 2004]); and (c) theories of ‘deliberative democracy’ that explore one vital (if narrow) dimension of representation, to do with how and why processes of public deliberation can and should be fed into decision-making processes (Habermas [1993, 1996]; Elster [1998]; Goodin [2005]; Dryzek [2000]).

There is now an opportunity to synthesise and expand these different but overlapping approaches by productively broadening their theoretical and empirical horizons and charging them with a strong current of historically based awareness of present-day trends and possible mutations within the world of existing representative democracies. Much of the literature remains too wedded to transatlantic concerns and rather too fixated on the present. A more cosmopolitan perspective and a robust sense of history are needed to come to terms with both the present and future of representative democracy. It is a striking fact that we still await an in-depth, cosmopolitan scholarly account of the life and times of representative democracy.

Previous studies of the origins of representative government (notably Guizot [1861]) have supposed its historical inevitability; my research will instead highlight its deeply contingent, even ‘flimsy’ character. I will show how it took many centuries and numerous rebellions and revolutionary upheavals – and significant amounts of unscrupulous behaviour, money and good luck – to consolidate representative institutions in their European birthplace. Church hierarchies had to be resisted in the name of true religion. Monarchs had to be brought under the control of assemblies. Legislatures had to be subjected to democratic election, and in turn these democratic

elements had to be grafted onto pre-democratic institutions of representation. The model of representative democracy that resulted is familiar today, in scores of countries, as a cluster of territorially defined governing institutions that include written constitutions, independent judiciaries and laws that guarantee such procedures as *habeas corpus* (prohibitions of torture and imprisonment), the periodic election of politicians, limits to their terms of office, voting by secret ballot, competitive political parties, referendum and recall, electoral colleges, civil society, and civil liberties such as the right to assemble in public and the liberty of the press.

The proposed research project would be unusual because it would draw on the existing literature to emphasise the utter originality of these institutional inventions. Compared with the previous assembly-based forms of democracy associated with the classical Greek world, the invention of representative government and its subsequent democratisation greatly expanded the geographic scale of the institutions of self-government. (Most states of the Greek world of assembly democracy – for instance, Mantinea and Argos – were no bigger than a few dozen square kilometres. Most modern representative democracies are orders of much larger magnitude.) As time passed, and despite its localised origins in towns, rural districts and large-scale imperial settings (Blockmans [1997]), representative democracy came to be housed mainly within territorial states protected by standing armies and equipped with powers to make and enforce laws and to extract taxes from their populations. The whole process fundamentally altered the meaning of democracy. Representative democracy came to signify a type of government in which people, understood as voters faced with a genuine choice between at least two alternatives, were free to elect others who then acted in defence of their interests. Much ink and blood was to be spilled in defining what exactly representation meant, who was entitled to represent whom, and what had to be done when representatives snubbed or disappointed those they were supposed to represent. However, what was common to the new age of representative democracy that matured during the early years of the 20th century was the belief that good government was government by representatives of the people.

Representative democracy, usually in opposition to monarchic despotism, was praised by its supporters as a way of governing better by openly airing differences of opinion – not only among the represented themselves, but between representatives and their electors. The project I have in mind uses Thomas Paine's intriguing remark 'Athens, by representation, would have surpassed her own democracy' as a vital clue to the entirely novel case that was made at the end of the 18th century for the superiority of representative government. The case was put by publicists, constitution makers and citizens, using forceful arguments (Montesquieu [1989]; Constant [1988]; d'Holbach [1781-2]; Sieyès [1985]; Paine [1995]). Representative government was praised as a way of freeing citizens from the fear of leaders to whom power is entrusted; the

elected representative temporarily ‘in office’ was seen as a positive substitute for power personified in the body of unelected monarchs and tyrants. Representative government was hailed as an effective new method of apportioning blame for poor political performance – a new way of encouraging the rotation of leadership, guided by merit and humility. It was thought of as a new form of humble government, a way of creating space for dissenting political minorities and levelling competition for power, which in turn enabled elected representatives to test their political competence and leadership skills, in the presence of others equipped with the power to sack them.

Early champions of representative democracy sometimes saw it as a formula for overcoming the dangers of civil war. Especially during the early years of the French Revolution, many others offered a more pragmatic justification of representation. It was seen as the practical expression of a simple reality: that it was not feasible for all of the people to be involved all of the time, even if they were so inclined, in the business of government. Given that reality, so the argument ran, the people must delegate the task of government to representatives who are chosen at regular elections. The job of these representatives is to monitor the expenditure of public money, domestic and foreign policies, and all other actions of government. Representatives put arguments on behalf of their constituents to the government and its bureaucracy. Representatives debate issues and make laws. They decide who will govern and how, on behalf of the people. This reasoning explains why some early champions of representative government praised it as the best antidote to the ills generated by ‘democracy’. Government by representatives was seen as an ingenious invention that could be used to block the political participation of the poor and the illiterate by conducting government in their name, as ‘the sovereign people’. This paradoxical defence of representative government based on ‘the people’ treated talk of representative democracy as oxymoronic.

Under pressure from the political upheavals that erupted during the second half of the 18th century, however, this attack on democracy proved indefensible. The ideals of representative government and democracy were fused. The strange-sounding term ‘representative democracy’ began to be used in France and England and the new American republic, for instance by the framers of constitutions and by influential political writers when referring to a new type of government with its roots in popular consent. Nobody knows who first spoke of ‘representative democracy’. My project will look carefully at this puzzle; and it will examine the political writers and thinkers who broke new ground, including the French nobleman who had been foreign minister under Louis XV, the Marquis d’Argenson (1694–1757). He may have been the first to tease out the new meaning of democracy as representation; ‘False democracy’, he noted in his *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et present de la France* (1765), ‘soon collapses into anarchy. It is government of the multitude ... In *true democracy*, one acts through deputies,

who are authorised by election; the mission of those elected by the people and the authority that such officials carry constitute the public power’.

By paying attention to these kinds of historical moves, the research will probe how, as a way of naming and handling power, representative democracy proved to be a type of political system and a whole way of life without historical precedent; and the research will underscore the flipside of that point, that the changes that led to the formation of representative democracy were neither inevitable nor politically uncontested. Representative democracy was born of many and different power conflicts, many of them bitterly fought in opposition to ruling groups, whether church hierarchies, landowners or imperial monarchies, often in the name of ‘the people’. Exactly who ‘the people’ were has proved to be a deep source of controversy throughout the era of representative democracy. The age of representative democracy witnessed the birth of neologisms, such as ‘aristocratic democracy’ (which first happened in the Low Countries at the end of the 16th century) and new references to ‘republican democracy’ (which began in the United States in the late 18th century). Later came ‘social’, ‘liberal’ and ‘Christian democracy’, and even ‘bourgeois’, ‘workers’ and ‘socialist democracy’. These new terms corresponded to the many kinds of struggles by groups for equal access to governmental power – struggles that resulted, sometimes by design and sometimes by simple accident or unintended consequence, in institutions and ideals and ways of life that had no precedent. Not until the early decades of the 20th century did the right to vote for representatives come to be seen as a *universal* entitlement. That happened first for adult men and later – usually much later – for adult women. But even then, as the experiences of totalitarianism and military dictatorship proved, the opponents of democratic representation fought hard and with considerable success against its perceived inefficiencies, its fatal flaws, and its supposed evils. They demonstrated that representative democracy in any form was not inevitable – that it had no built-in historical guarantees.

NEW METHODOLOGIES

Fundamental to the originality of the proposed research is the principle that representative democracy is vulnerable to the vagaries of time and space. Specifically, the conceptual innovations of the research are (a) the moving of the history of representative democracy and its geographic spread to a central position in the analysis of its contemporary forms; and (b) the measuring of these forms against past ideals and established models of representative government. These conceptual innovations would be essential to the assessment of the new challenges and obstacles confronting all representative democracies as they face up to the future.

The existing literature on representative democracy has very important things to say about the need for improved forms of representation of citizens' interests, the present-day meaning of representative democracy, and the importance of processes of public deliberation in a democracy. The new research program would combine these various themes and take them to a higher and richer plane. The fundamental point of the program is its hypothesis that paying attention to the past, present and future of representative democracy (a) greatly complicates conventional accounts that are centred on European experiences; (b) forces a radical change of perspective or Gestalt switch in our understanding of the present-day institutional dynamics and weaknesses of representative democracy, and its future desirability; and (c) requires the invention of new methodologies for realising the aims of the project.

There are three methods in particular that need to be brought to bear on the subject:

Rethinking the classics. The project's concern with the present-day contours and probable futures of representative democracy would need to use the method of 'dialogue with the dead' to bring a much-needed sense of historicity to bear on all of the critical questions. The method would help to reveal the limits of an earlier phase of European reflection on the origins of representative government initiated by figures such as d'Holbach, Guizot and J. S. Mill [1861]. Although many vital insights can be gleaned from their foundational work, and from the subsequent scholarly research of Max Weber [1958], Otto Hintze [1975], James Bryce [1921] and others in the early years of the 20th century, the program of research would not lapse into antiquarianism. It would draw upon the best existing literature and apply the latest empirical findings to highlight what is different about our times, and why the 'classic' accounts of the nature of representative democracy now need to be revised heavily. The whole approach would be radically different from the 'classic' accounts of the rise of representative democracy by taking into account the major setbacks of the first half of the 20th century. The research would demonstrate why representative democracy survived total collapse, and how the language and institutions of representative democracy subsequently 'migrated' to every continent, with some startling successes, as the differing cases of Japan, Taiwan and South Africa show.

Cosmopolitan perspectives. Much current research on representative democracy could usefully draw upon case studies and materials drawn from non-Western countries. The proposed research would do that by bringing to the subject a strong sense of cosmopolitanism, above all by drawing on detailed studies of the invention of new forms of representative democracy in contexts as different as Papua New Guinea, China and India. The research would likely show that originally

European forms of representative democracy undergo striking mutations when they are implanted in unfamiliar soils. There is currently no good account of this mutation process, despite its scholarly and political importance. The research would show that the process of transplantation that began during the 19th century (in Australia and Spanish America, for instance) and that culminated in 20th-century experiments with representative democracy in the Asian and Pacific region was of epochal importance. It extended the hand of representative democracy globally, to potentially billions of people who had one thing in common: they were not European. The research program would investigate the utterly novel ways in which host societies redefine the meaning and customs of representative government, as in Papua New Guinea (Ketan [2004]), and the ways in which ‘post-Westminster’ representative democracies have invented and harnessed a wide range of new devices for publicly monitoring and checking the exercise of power. Of great interest to the research would be cases such as India, with its invention of *panchayat* self-government, the rise of regional parties headed by iridescent figures like Mayawati, *satyagraha*, compulsory quotas for women and minority groups, railway courts, *lok adalats*, water consultation schemes and public interest litigation.

Modelling. The research program would need to develop the techniques of modelling to forge a new political language for investigating ‘post-Westminster’ or ‘monitory’ democracy. The research supposes that a highly original model of ‘monitory democracy’ is needed to make sense of really important trends of our time. The use of this model would radically upend prevailing theoretical and political assumptions. It would challenge head-on the best available studies of representation and democracy (Manin [1997]). The model would help make the case that many so-called representative democracies, and not only India and PNG, bear little resemblance to textbook accounts of representative democracy, which suppose that citizens’ needs are best championed through elected parliamentary representatives chosen by political parties. The model would support the claim that many democracies are moving away from textbook models of representative government. From this research perspective, the new historical form of ‘monitory’ or ‘post-Westminster’ democracy is one in which (a) representative ideals and democratic mechanisms begin to extend sideways and downwards, throughout government and into the nooks and crannies of civil society; (b) extra-parliamentary power-monitoring institutions, such as integrity commissions, local courts, workplace tribunals and media enquiries, greatly complicate and potentially bring more humility to the established Westminster-style model of domestic policymaking, politics and publicity; and (c) representative democratic mechanisms begin to operate across borders, so that bodies like EU-style open methods of co-ordination (OMCs), summits, forums and human rights watch organisations begin to play a significant role in shaping and determining public and private policy agendas. These several trends are beginning to be recognised by some observers (Mulgan [2006]; Offe [2003]; Smith [2005]), but nobody has

put them all together in the form of a comprehensive model of what is happening to representative democracy as past generations have known and experienced it. In contrast to those practitioners and activists and scholars (Barber [1984]; Castoriadis [1991]) who suppose that the fundamental choice facing contemporary democracies is that between accepting the terms of Westminster-style electoral democracy and the embrace of more participatory forms of ‘deep’ and ‘direct’ democracy – in effect, a choice between embracing the present or returning to the imagined spirit of Athenian democracy – the proposed project would carve out a third possibility, one that has much contemporary history on its side, an option – the growth of ‘monitory democracy’ – whose contours and potentials need to be recognised for what they are: a brand new historical form of democracy mixed with multiple new forms of representation

THEMES

The conceptual framework, design and methods of the research would be integrated by subdividing the research program into three dynamically interrelated themes, to be developed in parallel:

Theme 1: Founding visions of representative democracy

The project would revisit the classical accounts of the historical origins and the modern development of the ideals of representative government, such as those offered by d’Holbach and Condorcet [1785], Weber and Hintze, Guizot and J. S. Mill. Here, the work would be partly conceptual and focussed on matters of political ethics, and partly concerned with matters of history and geographic comparison. The research would concentrate on clarifying and developing new perspectives on the variety of historical meanings of the languages of representation and representative democracy. The research would do so through international comparisons, so that cases otherwise as different as Japan and Australia, India and Germany, PNG and the US, would be examined for the purpose of posing and answering new questions, such as:

- Were the institutions of representative government an invention of the European region, as has been usually claimed (by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Otto von Gierke and others)?
- Is it possible to identify a ‘root concept’ or ‘core language’ of representative democracy, or is it better to emphasise different basic historical types of representative democracy and the mutations and pathways that led to their creation?

- Given that the respective principles and practices of representation and democracy had different and disparate origins, how and where and when were they combined into something new? Who first spoke of ‘representative democracy’ and what did they mean by that oxymoron? (The language of ‘representative democracy’ seems to have been born of Anglo-French-American parentage. Why?)
- How, when and using which means did the language and institutions of representative democracy begin to cross the oceans and become embedded in the soils of other continents? To what extent – the case Asian and Pacific countries would be of special interest – did these languages and institutions undergo important mutations?
- Why did the exponents of representative democracy everywhere consider it to be a desirable mode of government, and why did its opponents, who ranged from liberals, monarchists, communists and anarchists to totalitarian champions of ‘people power’, complain so loudly about its weaknesses? Can anything be learned today from these past critics?
- Are there present-day parallels with the kind of swingeing attack on representative democracy mounted by the 19th-century English comparative jurist, Sir Henry Sumner Maine, whose *Popular Government* (1885) concluded that if representative democracy had triumphed early in Britain then ‘there would have been no reformation of religion, no change of dynasty, no toleration of Dissent, not even an accurate Calendar’, and who added: ‘The threshing-machine, the power-loom, the spinning-jenny, and possibly the steam-engine, would have been prohibited.’

Theme 2: The performance of existing representative democracies

The research would examine the evidence for the widespread claim that present-day institutions of representation are malfunctioning when measured in terms of the norms of representative democracy. This theme would cast doubt on notions of the existence of a ‘golden age’ of representative democracy; it would suppose that the actual performance of representative institutions is bound to have a decisive impact on the future of representative forms of democracy. It is expected that the more detailed inquiries, drawing in part on interviews and various ‘democratic audits’ and studies of the ‘quality’ of democracy, would concentrate especially on the following kinds of challenges to existing models of representative democracy:

- *endogenous pressures*, such as lobbying, campaign fund raising, new governmental forms of media manipulation, government by moonlight in policy areas such as defence spending, the weakening of legislatures, and the growth of unaccountable statutory bodies, pressures that have

the combined effect of hollowing out or restricting representative mechanisms within such institutions as political parties, electoral and judicial arrangements and governmental executive and administrative systems;

- *sub-governmental dynamics*, including the development of ‘parallel’ and ‘criss-crossing’ forms of representation structured by new digital communication media and ‘e-politics’, the growth of professional civil society organisations, and the shaping of governmental agendas by such forces as private business interests and new forms of expertise; and
- *cross-border developments* that outflank the standard territorially-bound institutions of representative government, including not only global commodity chains, but new supra-state forms of decision making, including summits, regional forums, truth and reconciliation commissions, transnational policy networks and UN-brokered deals, all of which tend to have either ‘policy-laundering’ or ‘trouble-making’ effects on existing mechanisms of representation.

Theme 3: The future of representative democracy

The research would reconsider the well-known claim by Tocqueville that one of the great virtues of democracy is that it makes ‘retrievable mistakes’ (Tocqueville [1969]). The inquiry would ask whether, in matters of representation, Tocqueville’s insight still applies to actually existing democracies. Among the principal points to be addressed would be:

- Are we witnessing, as some observers claim, the emergence in some countries of post-democratic polities held together by strong-armed, heavily media-led government, the decline of active citizenship and its replacement by a culture of consumption, scripted telepopulist appeals to ‘the people’ and the selective application of force to marginal and dissenting minorities?
- Or are there observable present-day transformations – such as the Internet and ‘e-politics’ – that imply or promise a different and more positive future for representative forms of democracy? Are there good prospects for the reform of political parties, legislatures and other conventional institutions of democratic representation?
- In war-ravaged and other contexts previously denied representative democracy, for instance in the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste and Indonesia, might it be possible to leapfrog the standard pathways associated with the originally European model of territorially bound representative democracy?
- Can the mechanisms and ‘spirit’ of representative government be plausibly extended to cross-border institutions, such as APEC-style inter-governmental processes, markets and business and other non-governmental bodies? Is such a process already underway (as the novel

system of ‘peer review’ panels in bodies such as APEC suggests)? What are the present defects of these inventions, and are they desirable?

This third theme would give priority to long-term processes of institutional innovation within the world of actually existing democracies, including the Asian and Pacific region, which would be treated as an important test case. Among the claims of the project is that within this and other regions of the world the decades since 1945 have witnessed the invention of about a hundred new devices for the public monitoring and control of power. These inventions include public interest litigation, participatory budgeting, truth and reconciliation bodies, freedom of information laws, integrity commissions, human rights organisations, carbon councils, workplace co-determination, weblogs, democracy cafes, cross-border OMCs, summits, citizens’ assemblies and many other experiments, all of which now form part of the political landscape of actually existing democracies. The research project would analyse the historical novelty of these inventions, which prompt clearly original questions: Might some parts of the world be living through an historic transformation of democracy, one that results in more complex and differently constituted forms of self-government marked by the proliferation of multiple mechanisms for ensuring the public accountability of power wherever it is exercised? If so, what might be the core institutions and defining qualities of this coming ‘monitory’ or ‘post-Westminster’ democracy?

The research would pose new questions about the efficiency and effectiveness and desirability of this new historical form of democracy. Are there reasons for thinking that ‘monitory’ democracy is blessed with advantages over other, competitor systems of government? Are its mechanisms better guarantors of such precious norms as freedom of communication, human rights and a plurality of ways of life? Are the emergent ‘monitory’ democracies better able to deliver sustainable economic growth, to guarantee security, to reduce surplus forms of violence at home and abroad, even to win wars and promote democracy in circumstances where it never before existed? And how ‘time conscious’ and ‘future competent’ can these democracies become? Is it true (as Tocqueville and others have claimed) that democracy is a peculiarly self-centred political form, prone for the most part to worry only about the present, and to forget about the future? Or might it be that in the face of pressing new and highly complex inter-generational difficulties, so-called ‘wicked’ problems such as climate change, demographic decline and biogenetic innovations, ‘monitory’ or ‘post-Westminster’ democracies are ultrasensitive to ‘history’ and therefore uniquely positioned to extend a vote to the future – to define, and best and effectively implement, new policies of inter-generational justice attuned to the great complexities of our times?

The research would make no assumptions about the inevitability of these trends and transformations. Unusually, it would address the resurgence at the global level of open attacks on the ideals and institutions of representative democracy. The research would concentrate on a new development with very old roots: a creeping disillusionment with democracy itself. The disillusionment with democracy stems in part from the dysfunctions of conventional, Westminster-style representative democracy. Journalists, scholars, politicians and others have noted such trends as the increasing disaffection with political parties and electoral politics, the merger of communication media with formal politics, and the visible growth of new strata of poor citizens who are consistently outvoted by more privileged and powerful majorities. Particularly since 2001, coolness towards democracy, considered as a norm, a set of institutions and as a way of life, has been reinforced by concerns about democracy promotion through war, and by the reassertion of state authority, often using questionable legal and police methods.

These disparate trends would serve as a backdrop to research on the sceptics and opponents of democracy. The project would document and assess the plausibility and chances of political success of the key claims made by the contemporary opponents of democracy. It would push well beyond the limits of 'end of history' perspectives to ask: who are the new critics, sceptics and enemies of democracy? And how potentially effective is their reticence about democracy – a reticence that has no single identifiable voice, but instead spans a wide political spectrum, ranging from critics of neo-liberal globalisation, liberals and neo-Marxists to human rights activists, disparate strands of conservatism and neo-traditionalist and religious groups?

In raising these questions, the focus would be interdisciplinary and cosmopolitan, in the sense that it would draw on work by practitioners and scholars from several different disciplines within various contexts – from Italy and Singapore, Australia and the United States, Russia and China – in which systematic doubts about democracy are being expressed (Ranciere [2006]); Milner [2003]; Caplan [2007]). Attention would be paid to the history of previous attacks on the language and institutions of democracy from, say, Plato to Heidegger. The focus, however, would be on current-day trends, and their novelty. The research would for instance explore the resurgence of nationalist politics and the respectable body of 'demo-sceptic' literature that claims that civil strife, ethnic conflict, xenophobia and even genocide are produced by attempts to democratise multi-ethnic societies. Consideration would be given to Chinese claims about the superiority of the principles of the 'harmonious society', to green claims about the deficiencies of democracy, and to the impact of the American-led 'war on terror' on new ways of handling relationships between governors and governed. The literature on 'democratic peace', 'democracy push-back' and the new jurisprudence of pre-emption and prevention would receive thorough

scrutiny. So would the claims that democracy is only one value among others, and that actually existing representative democracies are prone to the dangers of ‘illiberal democracy’.

The third stream of research would naturally address the ways in which representative democracy as a political form makes itself permanently vulnerable to public criticism because its mechanisms of representation encourage the ‘de-naturing’ of power and the interrogation of their own weaknesses. Finally, and by no means of least importance, the research would investigate a striking paradox of our times: that following the global victory of the 19th- and 20th-century struggles for the universal franchise, the principal threats to the legitimacy and functioning of contemporary democratic institutions and representative ideals may well turn out to be actors dressed in the language of democracy.

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