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Illusions of Sovereignty: Understanding Populist Crowds with Hannah Arendt

Lars Rensmann 

Abstract: This article reconstructs Hannah Arendt’s theoretical arguments in relation to current authoritarian-populist crowds, which can be understood as organized mobs of the twenty-first century. Drawn from all classes and originating in societal and political disenfranchisement, in Arendt’s understanding they are rebellious nihilists who falsely believe they represent the people as a whole while they exclude any citizens who do not share their tribal nationalism and leader worshiping. Illuminating conditions of their emergence, Arendt also helps to elucidate what drives the populist crowds’ illusions about an uncompromising “sovereign will” they and their leaders claim to embody. Such illusions benefit from broader modern trends eroding differences between facts, opinion, truth, and lies. In public environments suffering from destabilized factual truths, organized lies can easily fill a political vacuum generated by crises of political modernity. Unpacking interrelated theoretical trajectories, it is argued that an Arendtian framework can significantly contribute to the study of present-day authoritarian populism.

Introduction: Arendt and the Challenge of Authoritarian Populism

Leaders of authoritarian-populist movements around the world make three interrelated claims. First, they claim that they express an unfiltered, unified, and otherwise suppressed “voice of the people,” or Rousseauian *volonté générale*, and sense that they are entitled to enact this general will even if this implies breaking with codes of conduct, rules, and procedures enabling democratically accountable decision-making. Second, they claim that they want to restore the unmediated popular “sovereignty,” which had allegedly been hijacked by a conspiring “corrupt elite” to which “the pure people”

Lars Rensmann is professor of political science and comparative government at the Faculty of Social and Educational Sciences, Innstrasse 41, D-94032, Passau, Germany (lars.rensmann@uni-passau.de).

are antagonistically contrasted,¹ whereby “the people” also have to be liberated from intermediary bodies and institutional checks and balances.² In his inaugural address, Donald J. Trump suggested that his victory meant that “we” are “transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people.”³ Third, as Jan-Werner Müller has shown, populists employ an exclusionary conception of “the people” whereby “only some of the people are really the people.”⁴ Displaying profoundly antipluralistic and exclusivist views of society, the sovereign will, for which populists claim to speak with one voice and which is construed as the only genuine source of democratic legitimacy,⁵ thus presupposes a unified collective identity to which only part of society seem to belong.⁶ Nullifying diverging collective and individual interests and rights, populist claims about a singular, unmediated sovereign will presumably become manifest by acclamation⁷—through the physical presence of populist crowds that allegedly embody

¹Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda,” *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 13 (2018): 1670.

²For a critical account of this populist narrative see Nadia Urbinati, “A Revolt against Intermediary Bodies,” *Constellations* 22, no. 4 (2015): 477–86.

³Donald J. Trump, “Transcript and Analysis: President Trump’s Inaugural Address, Annotated,” *NPR*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/01/20/510629447/watch-live-president-trumps-inauguration-ceremony>.

⁴Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 21. Notions of the “true people” may exclude those who do not believe, do not support the leader, do not identify with the values of the “true patriots,” who are marked as “enemies of the people,” or are otherwise ideologically excluded from the national citizenry based on implicitly or explicitly ethnic, racial, or cultural criteria.

⁵Antipluralistic, exclusionary, and inherently nationalist dimensions of populism and its underlying idea of the “good” or “true” people who are allegedly deprived from sovereign self-rule by “corrupt” elites and intermediary bodies are not necessarily limited to “right-wing” versions of populist claim-making. See Lars Rensmann, “The Noisy Counter-Revolution: Understanding the Cultural Conditions and Dynamics of Populist Politics in Europe in the Digital Age,” *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 125–26.

⁶Glenn Ellmers from the pro-Trump Claremont Institute in Southern California suggests that “most people living in the United States today—certainly more than half—are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term. . . . They do not believe in, live by, or even like the principles, traditions, and ideals that until recently defined America as a nation and as a people. It is not obvious what we should call these citizen-alien, these non-American Americans; but they are something else.” See Glenn Ellmers, “‘Conservatism’ Is No Longer Enough,” *American Mind*, March 24, 2021, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/why-the-claremont-institute-is-not-conservative-and-you-shouldnt-be-either/>.

⁷Juan Pablo Aranda Vargas, “Populism, Acclamation, and Democracy: The Politics of Glory in the Populist Era,” *Constellations* 28, no. 4 (2021): 481–95.

the people's will and identity, which are supposedly expressed by the populist leader's iterations.

In the European context, populist actors who call for the restoration of (national) "sovereignty" often self-identify with "sovereignism," or as "sovereignists." These populist sovereignists call for the transfer of power from supranational (European) institutions back to the authority of the nation-states and "the people."⁸ But implicitly here, too, the populist appeal to the restoration of some sort of seemingly "unrestricted" national sovereignty and to the "true people's" allegedly unfiltered sovereign will is directed against any kind of presumed distortions thereof, against rules and intermediary institutions as well as universalistic rights and norms that are inherent to constitutional democracies.

In this article, I reconstruct Hannah Arendt's political theory in relation to authoritarian populism and the emergence of populist crowds in our moment. I employ Arendt's work to lay out theoretical paths for illuminating the dynamics and impact of what I call multiple illusions of sovereignty⁹ on which authoritarian, right-wing populists thrive—and for better understanding why they are so successful. Arendt's conceptual framework, I argue, can contribute to the development of a critical theory of authoritarian populism. While this article neither provides a comprehensive reconstruction of all aspects of Arendt's work that can be related to populism nor aims at a general theory of populism, it offers key elements and trajectories for studying contemporary authoritarian populism through an Arendtian lens.

Most political theorizing on present-day populism looks exclusively at the relationship between populism and liberal democracy¹⁰—suggesting either that liberal failures enable populism or that populism can be seen as a "shadow side of democracy,"¹¹ if not a potentially progressive response to problems and paradoxes of liberal representative democracy.¹² By contrast, Arendt's theorizing points to broader historical, societal, and political dynamics at play in political modernity that undermine what she understands as the

⁸The successful campaign for Brexit, which called for political independence from the EU, was celebrated by populists as a "sovereign exit" from supranational constraints that was demanded by "the people" of the UK. The Leave campaign also displayed connections to xenophobic claims and, ultimately, nativist violence. See Jennet Kirkpatrick, "The Fantasy of Exit: Campaign Use and Abuse of Exit in the UK's 2016 Brexit Debate," *New Political Science*, online May 23, 2022, doi:10.1080/07393148.2022.2062197.

⁹See also Caroline Ashcroft, *Violence and Power in the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 26; Kirkpatrick, "Fantasy of Exit."

¹⁰Müller, *What Is Populism?*; Nadia Urbinati, "Political Theory of Populism," *Annual Review of Political Science*, no. 22 (2019): 111–27.

¹¹Michael Follert, "The Silent Majority, Populism, and the Shadow Sides of Democracy," *Constellations* 28, no. 4 (2021): 455–65.

¹²Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 2005).

common world,¹³ affecting both democracies and autocracies alike. These can be favorable to the rise of populist crowds, which we can conceptualize with Arendt as twenty-first-century organized mobs.

Recent scholarship on Arendt has addressed different aspects of her work that can help advance a critical theory of authoritarian populism and the populist crowd. This includes revisiting her understanding of the historical “mob”¹⁴ and its conditions, her critique of sovereignty claims¹⁵ to which populist crowds appeal, and her reflections on truth and politics in a post-truth age.¹⁶ However, these elements have not yet been linked comprehensively and fully reconstructed as an Arendtian framework for the study of contemporary populism. This article aims to accomplish that synthesis. With Arendt, organized mobs, fantasies of sovereignty, and nihilistic relativism rendering factual truth irrelevant should be conceived as deeply intertwined phenomena. They can be situated in societal and political enabling conditions that point to problematic erosions of a common world in twenty-first-century political modernity.

Unpacking these theoretical trajectories in view of today’s authoritarian-populist crowds, the article takes four steps. First, I look at Arendt’s conceptualization of the organized mob manifest in a specific type of crowd. It is driven by tribal nationalism and rebellious nihilism, and it threatens

¹³Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha, “Understanding Political Modernity: Rereading Arendt and Adorno in Comparative Perspective,” in *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, ed. Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 1–27.

¹⁴Margaret Canovan, “The People, the Masses, and the Mobilization of Power: The Paradox of Hannah Arendt’s ‘Populism,’” *Social Research* 69, no. 2 (2002): 403–22; Casper Verstegen, “Rethinking the Mob: An Analysis of Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Mob,” *Arendt Studies*, online first, February 19, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.5840/arendtstudies202221846>.

¹⁵Ashcroft, *Violence and Power*; João Batista Farias Júnior, “Hannah Arendt and the Promises of Politics beyond Sovereignty,” *Argumentos: Revista de Filosofia* 13 (2021): 105–14; Shmuel Lederman, “Arendt on Sovereignty,” in *Reading Texts on Sovereignty: Textual Moments in the History of Political Thought*, ed. Stella Achilleos and Antonis Balasopoulos (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 163–70; Daniel Loick, *A Critique of Sovereignty* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019); Lars Rensmann, “Rethinking European Democracy after Its Legitimacy Crisis: On Hannah Arendt and the European Union,” *Journal of European Studies* 49, no. 3–4 (2019): 217–38.

¹⁶Richard J. Bernstein, *Why Read Arendt Now* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 67–83; Cathy Caruth, “Lying and History,” in *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*, ed. Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz, and Thomas Keenan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Ned O’Gorman, *Politics for Everybody: Reading Hannah Arendt in Uncertain Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Yasemin Sari, “Arendt, Truth, and Epistemic Responsibility,” *Arendt Studies*, no. 2 (2018): 149–70; Linda Zerilli, “Rethinking the Politics of Post-truth with Hannah Arendt,” in *Political Phenomenology: Experience, Ontology, Episteme*, ed. Thomas Bedorf and Steffen Herrmann (New York: Routledge, 2020), 152–64.

democratic plurality and diversity. The article does so, second, against the backdrop of conditions of modern society theorized by Arendt. Third, Arendt's thorough critique of sovereignty is reconstructed in view of fantasies about a unified but suppressed sovereign will that are mobilized by populist crowds today. Fourth, the article turns to organized lies in a post-truth age I explore how profoundly fractured political communities and the loss of a common world nurture alternative, fictitious worlds which populist crowds inhabit, and how this helps explain their current rise. By way of conclusion, these elements of an Arendtian theory of authoritarian populism are discussed in relation to each other in contemporary perspective.

Rebellious Nihilists: The Populist Crowd as an Organized Mob of the Twenty-First Century

Arendt's analysis of the mob and her reflections on the modern conditions for its emergence can serve as the starting point for grounding a contemporary critique of authoritarian-populist crowds. Diverging historical conditions notwithstanding, it is argued here that Arendt's "organized mob"—mostly drawn from a special case, context, and period, namely nineteenth-century France—has theoretical relevance for understanding contemporary authoritarian-populist movements. This mob shares more features with the latter than the "totalitarian mass" of the twentieth century. The populist crowd, through this lens, can be viewed as a specific type of crowd that advances tribal nationalism and rebellious nihilism while profoundly threatening democratic freedom, plurality, and diversity. Uninterested in political dialogue or agreements among distinct individuals who engage in speech and action, which she views as the hallmarks of politics, Arendt conceives the mob essentially as apolitical and prone to substituting politics altogether with violence.

The mob is a central yet underrated concept in Arendt's seminal study *Origins of Totalitarianism*, a book dedicated to understanding the genealogy of unprecedented genocidal terror unleashed by new totalitarian regimes and the mass movements which supported them.¹⁷ While totalitarian leaders originated from the mob, and the mob can be viewed as totalitarian movements' predecessors, Arendt sees the mob as distinct from the atomized masses that ultimately served as the basis of totalitarian movements. Whereas the mob assembles the disenfranchised members of bourgeois society and advances a tribalistic, nationalistic rebellion, in Arendt's conception the totalitarian masses of the twentieth century had lost any sort of self-interest or

¹⁷Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Lars Rensmann, "Totalitarianism and Evil," in *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, ed. Patrick Hayden (New York: Routledge, 2014), 89–109.

purpose and should be understood as entirely atomized and detached from the common world. However, she situates both the masses and the mob within the horizon of political modernity; they are placed in the context of her analysis of modern transformations of society and politics.¹⁸

For Arendt, the modern mob and its organization first emerged in the nineteenth century, in the transition to modern society. On the one hand, the historical organized mob she describes can be categorized as a politically extremist formation ready to dismantle democratic constitutions and institutions. In so doing, the mob politicizes every aspect of life from a tribalist, nationalist, and partisan perspective. Such politicization is at odds with the recognition of a shared world inhabited by a political community, with constitutional checks, and with the pluralism of a democratic republican polity. In line with Arendt's understanding of human agency and the nonautonomous houses for freedom,¹⁹ such a polity requires not only a constitutional framework but also its acceptance and mutual recognition, the toleration of political opponents in the agora, as well as some kind of institutional forbearance.²⁰ On the other hand, however, the mob is profoundly apolitical in Arendt's emphatic understanding of politics. The mob is actualized in a specific, apolitical type of crowd—in the sense that the crowd constituted by the mob lacks specific, shared political or policy goals and what Arendt defines as genuine politics: namely, that distinct individuals engage with each other by means of speech and that they act in concert based on the individuality they disclose in the public realm. The mob excludes, suppresses, intimidates, and violently threatens voices not in line with the mob and its leader. Such a mob denies the right to speak and act to others while it construes itself as a single, homogeneous voice. Despite its aggressively politicized and partisan rhetoric, then, in Arendt's view the mob is apolitical insofar as it leaves no room for open debate, diverse viewpoints, and agreements that can only be made by distinct individuals recognizing each other's distinctness and agency.

While the modern mob most certainly does not represent the people as a whole, Arendt suggests that a defining feature of it is that it is drawn from all classes, despite its members' potential subjective and partly objective affinity to the petty bourgeoisie.²¹ The "déclassés of all classes"²² is Arendt's definition of the mob; it is a group in which the residue of all classes and all strata of society is represented. This allows the mob to appear as somehow

¹⁸For a reconstruction of this broader context, see Rensmann and Gandesha, "Understanding Political Modernity," 10–17.

¹⁹Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 76.

²⁰See also Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about Our Future* (New York: Random House, 2018), chap. 5.

²¹At times Arendt calls the modern mob "the underworld of the bourgeois class." Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1968), 337.

²²*Ibid.*, 10.

representative of the whole and be falsely—or demagogically—construed as the people in their entirety. Herein lies the delusion that the identity of the mob, which challenges more traditional political affiliations such as membership in a conventional political party, can be equated with a sovereign demos or some kind of democratic sovereign will. But regarding “the mob” as identical with “the people” would in fact be a “fundamental error,”²³ Arendt is right to point out: “This composition made it seem that the mob and its representatives had abolished class differences, that those standing outside the class-divided nation were the people itself . . . rather than its distortion and caricature.”²⁴ While the people in “all great revolutions fight for true representation, the mob always will shout for the ‘strong man,’ the ‘great leader.’ For the mob hates society from which it is excluded. . . . Plebiscites, therefore, with which modern mob leaders have obtained such excellent results, are an old concept of politicians who rely upon the mob.”²⁵

The mob’s unconditional, *a priori* identification with “the people” explains why the mob may be uninterested in actual electoral processes and outcomes but prefers undemocratic modes of representation instead. Today, most populist crowds recruit their members from all strata of society,²⁶ while current populist crowds and their leaders also claim or pretend that they embody “the people” as a whole, no matter how small their actual size or how marginal their status in society. Such crowds do not seem to fight for the genuine representation of their distinct interests, either, but prefer authoritarian strongmen allegedly embodying the people or being construed as its voice, merging populist claims with authoritarian desires to overcome democratic procedures and institutional constraints. Rather than seeking better representation for those who are disenfranchised and who may have legitimate but unrepresented political grievances, the populists’ playing field is the extraordinary politics of the crowd that rebels against the very possibility of genuine democratic opinion-formation and decision-making. In this light,

²³Ibid., 107.

²⁴Ibid., 155.

²⁵Ibid., 107. For Arendt true representation, which can be contrasted with its simulacrum of the modern mob, entails the inclusion of diverse voices, organized interest groups, and elected representatives, rather than surrendering rights and representation to an unrestrained and unchecked authoritarian leader allegedly embodying a unified “voice of the people.”

²⁶Only two reliable predictors of the populist vote stand out transnationally: (1) the level of education, i.e., voters with higher educational background are less likely to vote for an authoritarian-populist party; and (2) the rural-urban cleavage, i.e., rural voters are more likely to vote for an authoritarian-populist party. See Jonna Rickardsson, “The Urban–Rural Divide in Radical Right Populist Support: The Role of Resident’s Characteristics, Urbanization Trends and Public Service Supply,” *Annals of Regional Science* 67 (2021): 211–42; Oscar Mazzoleni and Gilles Ivaldi, “Economic Populist Sovereignism and Electoral Support for Radical Right-Wing Populism,” *Political Studies* 70, no. 2 (2022): 304–26.

the mob Arendt analyzes can be contrasted with both democratic rallies calling for inclusion or better policies and extraordinary politics to which crowds genuinely need to resort under conditions of dictatorship.²⁷

In Arendt's phenomenology, certain exclusivist and discriminatory ideologies and features are characteristic of the organized mob. They drive the modern mob to become a political force to be reckoned with. Arendt observes that first and foremost tribal nationalism is the mob's driving ideology.²⁸ It is also typical of authoritarian populist crowds today. In the nineteenth century, this was still a "new kind of nationalist feeling whose violence proved an excellent motor to set mob masses in motion and quite adequate to replace the older national patriotism as an emotional center."²⁹ The ideology of tribal nationalism and its ethnically exclusive underpinnings "helped anybody feel himself an aristocrat who had been selected by birth," and enabled elevating an "ever-growing mob" of déclassés by means of ideologies of a "chosen race."³⁰ Politically speaking, "tribal nationalism always insists that its own people is surrounded by 'a world of enemies,' 'one against all,' that a fundamental difference exists between this people and all others. It claims its people to be unique, individual, incompatible with all others, and denies theoretically the very possibility of a common mankind long before it is used to destroy the humanity of man."³¹ If it enters government, the mob will always "take the form of transformation of nations into races"³² and address conflicts in multicultural society by means of violence that is justified by "the sheer vulgarity of race concepts."³³

Arendt sees antisemitism as a second major ideological feature energizing an organized mob and the crowds emerging from it: "While it is a mistake to assume that the mob preys only on Jews, the Jews must be accorded first place among its favorite victims."³⁴ The steady growth of the modern mob since the nineteenth century "produced leaders who, undisturbed by the question of whether the Jews were sufficiently important to be made the focus of a political ideology, repeatedly saw in them the 'key to history' and the central cause of all evils."³⁵ The antisemitic "mob which cried 'Death to the Jews'"³⁶ identified the figural Jew culturally with "all things they detested,"³⁷ instead of,

²⁷Lars Rensmann, "Reading Arendt in Tehran: On Extraordinary Democratic Politics and the Failure of Revolutions," *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 1, no. 3 (2014): 299–315.

²⁸Verstegen, "Rethinking the Mob."

²⁹Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 226.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 69.

³¹*Ibid.*, 227.

³²*Ibid.*, 157.

³³*Ibid.*, 55.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 108.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 10.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 82.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 108.

for example, targeting economic groups or “the wealthy” representatives of capitalism. Alongside tribal nationalism, antisemitic resentments feature prominently in contemporary populist crowds, which seem to believe that they are subjected to the power of an evil, secretive, and string-pulling elite. Accordingly, authoritarian populists the world over blame the Jewish-American philanthropist George Soros for orchestrating cultural revolutions, migration, and a “Great Replacement” of Western native populations.³⁸

Arendt’s analytic description of the mob discloses, third, a toxic combination of a rogue mentality and rebellious nihilism.³⁹ The “outstanding” feature of the “mob mentality” was a “mixture of gullibility and cynicism . . . before it became an everyday phenomenon of masses.”⁴⁰ The organized mob, then, incorporates this mentality, “the attraction of evil and crime,”⁴¹ when it attacks the foundations of the political community as a shared world—and the foundations of democracy at large. In contrast to a political rally, the nihilistic crowds of the mob also tend to declare that they are prone to use or tolerate, when push comes to shove, means of criminal violence against those who are the subject of their hate: certain elite groups, discriminated minorities, and especially Jews. Arendt points out that the organized mob with its “nihilistic attitudes”⁴² is well capable of unleashing a “campaign of terror” against declared enemies of the nation or the people.

Fourth and finally, what was “new and surprising” when the modern mob first emerged in the nineteenth century “was the organization of the mob and the hero-worship enjoyed by its leaders.”⁴³ Such blind leadership-worshipping Arendt detects once the mob appeared in an organized form. It seems to require specific qualities of the leaders; their openly displayed “lust for power,”⁴⁴ ruthlessness, and vulgarity are needed to concretize ideas for the organization of the mob. These leaders “began to tell the mob that each of its members could become such a lofty all-important walking embodiment of something ideal if he would only join the movement.”⁴⁵ For Arendt, the link between autocracy and “the mob leaders’ genuine talents for creating new forms of organization”⁴⁶ is obvious. Successes of modern mobs, then,

³⁸Bess Levin, “Trump: ‘A Lot of People Say’ George Soros Is Funding Migrant Caravan,” *Vanity Fair*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/10/donald-trump-george-soros-caravan>; Nick Thorpe, “Hungary Vilifies Financier Soros with Crude Poster Campaign,” *BBC News*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40554844>.

³⁹Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 317.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 382.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 307.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 156.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 325.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 249.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 318.

point to the “possibility of converting democracy into a despotism whose tyrants would rise from the mob and lean on it for support.”⁴⁷

Notwithstanding the limits of historical transfer, here current authoritarian-populist discourses also resonate. Arendt’s conception of the mob and its ideological features seems to mirror, and thus can help illuminate, the dynamics of contemporary populist crowds and the violent rhetoric, grievances, and leader worshiping that appear to mobilize them. Trump voters, for instance, were made part of the lofty mission to “save America” from “American carnage,” transforming economic and cultural grievances into tribalistic nationalist narratives with apocalyptic and violent underpinnings.

Isolated Together: Populist Crowds and the Modern Origins of Mob Politics, Revisited

Sociohistorically and genealogically, Arendt understands the mob as “the by-product of bourgeois society, directly produced by it and therefore never quite separable from it.”⁴⁸ We need to understand the “rise of the mob out of the capitalist organization”;⁴⁹ it originated in the disintegration of entire groups of people that capitalist society rendered without political or social representation. As the “refuse of all classes,”⁵⁰ the mob is “accumulated from those left behind after each of capitalism’s economic cycles.”⁵¹ “Excluded as it is from society and political representation,” Arendt argues, “the mob turns of necessity to extraparliamentary action. Moreover, it is inclined to seek the real forces of political life in those movements and influences which are hidden from view and work behind the scenes.”⁵² By the end of the nineteenth century,

the déclassés of capitalist society were finally ready to unite and establish mob organizations of their own; their propaganda and their attraction rested on the assumption that a society which had shown its willingness to incorporate crime in the form of vice into its very structure would by now be ready to cleanse itself of viciousness by openly admitting criminals and by publicly committing crimes.⁵³

By this Arendt means that first, society had accepted crime and violence as a modus vivendi of societal organization, which allowed for a second step:

⁴⁷Ibid., 155. For Arendt, despotism means the eclipse of public freedom and dispersed power, and it signifies arbitrary rule by an unchecked leader or group of leaders.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 107.

⁵¹Canovan, “The People, the Masses,” 405.

⁵²Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 108.

⁵³Ibid., 87–88.

publicly legitimizing crime and violence and openly accepting criminals—real estate bosses with mafia links, convicted fraudsters, or violent criminals—as politicians and leaders, and thus advancing “mob morality” to become the general norm. Consequently, Arendt already observes a full-fledged “decline” of nineteenth-century society into broadened “mob morality.”⁵⁴ This paved the way for the rise of new authoritarian-nationalist or pan-nationalist movements, and eventually helped facilitate totalitarian masses and movements within the horizon of political modernity.⁵⁵ Such growth of the mob and mob morality in modern society could engender temporary alliances between mob, capital, and elite, who jointly helped advance the destruction of hitherto eroded organized interests and party systems in class society. Most violently in Central and Eastern Europe, an alliance between mob and capital opposed existing institutions and virtually all established parties.⁵⁶

Arendt sees some decisive distinctions between nineteenth-century mob organizations and twentieth-century totalitarian mass movements that are recruited from atomized masses: the relationship between masses and class society from which they emerged “is not the same as the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the mob which was a by-product of capitalist production. The masses share with the mob . . . one characteristic, namely, that both stand outside all social ramifications and normal political representation.”⁵⁷ And like “the earlier mob leaders,” the “spokesmen for totalitarian movements possessed an unerring instinct for anything that ordinary party propaganda or public opinion did not care or dare to touch.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, the difference between the mob and the masses in Arendt’s conception points, as Margaret Canovan has argued, to differences in scale and distinct relationships to a common world. The members of the mob appear to have “lost their places in a world that is still standing” whereas the masses preceding totalitarianism “are left stranded by the collapse of the world itself.”⁵⁹ The

⁵⁴Ibid., 69.

⁵⁵For Arendt, these developments are necessary conditions for the rise of totalitarianism but should never be understood as sufficient conditions or causal mechanisms explaining the unprecedented phenomenon of totalitarianism.

⁵⁶Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 153. Such alliances between the elite and the mob were partly enabled by the “genuine delight with which the former watched the latter destroy respectability” (ibid., 333). Eventually, high society “admitted its readiness to accept the revolutionary change in moral standards which Hobbes’s ‘realism’ had proposed, and . . . now being proposed anew by the mob and its leaders” (ibid., 156). In France of the Third Republic, society’s elite and those politicians who had “created a new class of *déclassés* . . . adopt[ed] the language and outlook of the mob” (ibid., 109).

⁵⁷Ibid., 314.

⁵⁸Ibid., 351.

⁵⁹Canovan, “The People, the Masses,” 407. Following Richard Bernstein, Canovan suggests that there is also a populist element in Arendt. This is unfounded. As

latter were so atomized and detached from a common world that “neither tribal nationalism nor rebellious nihilism are characteristic of . . . the masses as they were to the mob.”⁶⁰ The totalitarian masses, then, Arendt defines by a “radical loss of self-interest”⁶¹—shaped by total war and systemic collapse, they are prepared not just to destroy but also to get destroyed. Unlike the mob, their “unconditional loyalty”⁶² to the totalitarian movement and its leader implies the readiness to sacrifice oneself entirely, and even to betray one’s children.

Yet Arendt also recognizes multiple connections and continuities between the organized mob and the substrate of mass movements supporting totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Her theorizing points to broader, lasting conditions and contradictions of political modernity that seem favorable to both the emergence of mobs, susceptible to authoritarian rule and “new mob policies,”⁶³ and totalitarian mass movements. The modern dissolution of traditional societal bonds and organized interests under economic, bureaucratic, and administrative imperatives was already visible in the creation of the mob which experienced different degrees of uprootedness, the “preliminary condition for superfluousness,” and isolation, the “preliminary condition for loneliness.”⁶⁴ The evolution of modern masses can be viewed as a radicalization of the disenfranchisement of the mob, which emerged from groups that felt excluded from society and representation. Tyranny, to which the mob aspires, isolates individuals. It deprives them of the political realm but “generally leaves the productive capacities intact”; totalitarianism’s loneliness, however, destroys all aspects of private life as well and “concerns human life as a whole.”⁶⁵ The widespread susceptibility to surrendering one’s individuality to a powerful group and becoming part of something bigger, to integrating into violent crowds and movements, is mirrored both in the antipluralistic, antidemocratic mob and the totalitarian masses alike. Short of the experience of extreme loneliness Arendt viewed as characteristic for the totalitarian mold, however, the authoritarian-populist crowds recruited from twenty-first-century mobs are also “isolated together”: still

Canovan herself concedes, “The People as she understands it is quite different from populist personifications of the People as a single being speaking with a single voice” (ibid., 415).

⁶⁰Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 317.

⁶¹Ibid., 316.

⁶²Ibid., 326.

⁶³Ibid., 47.

⁶⁴Ibid., 475. Later work on the breakdown of associational life and rising loneliness including prominently Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) confirmed Arendt’s observation.

⁶⁵Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 475.

operating within the horizon of a common world, albeit a dramatically fractured one, they long for despotic forms of leadership.

A newly accelerated experience of uprootedness, it can be argued, has been engendered by the creative destruction of global capitalism and neoliberal policies over the last decades. Such societal undercurrents presumably endanger individual and public freedom, which Arendt sees as intertwined.⁶⁶ These undercurrents help generate those disenfranchised groups that provide the fertile ground for authoritarian-populist crowds and movements—or resurgent organized mobs.

Lasting conditions also include, in Arendt's view, atomization and privatization trends in "laboring society" focused on economic reproduction. Societies surrendering the plural human relations to the dominant mode of labor and tending to adapt all facets of life to job demands or wealth generation are at risk of disintegrating into a society of "job holders"⁶⁷ in which ultimately communities of citizens become more likely to be replaced by organized mobs. Labor society sacrifices the experience of a shared public world to a rationality oriented toward bare functioning. It suffers from "world alienation," "the hallmark of the modern age,"⁶⁸ and enables a loss of worldliness, that is, the demise of a common world and a public realm in which humans disclose their individuality, speak with each other, and act together. In Arendt's account, political communities are most threatened by modern social erosion processes from the inside. Where social associations and the very conditions of a shared world enabling speech and action disintegrate, lies and violence can easily spread.⁶⁹ While neither new mobs nor the collapse of democratic institutions and the public realm are inevitable outcomes of political modernity, they remain an ever-present possibility. The crises of modernity can produce political vacuums, and even the complete breakdown of national political, public, and social structures.

"Sovereignty, Now!": The Populist Crowd's Illusions and the Tyranny of the Majority

Arendt's analysis of the organized mob points to another theoretical trajectory for the study of contemporary populist crowds. In addition to being recruited from disenfranchised groups and feeling—at least subjectively—excluded from effective political or societal representation, populist crowds feed the illusion that they embody the "authentic" people and claim to express the

⁶⁶Serena Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity: A Phenomenology of Human Rights* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁶⁷Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 322.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 254.

⁶⁹Zerilli, "Rethinking the Politics of Post-truth," 154.

sovereign will of the people, from the Capitol Hill insurgents to Bolsonaro supporters in Brazil. This illusion can be reinforced by an effective mob leader who appeals to their identity and morality, and who reclaims and organizes their allegedly suppressed sovereign will. "Sovereignty" is the marching call of most populist actors today. Arendt shows what is problematic about sovereignty as a political concept in general, and why it is doubly flawed—empirically and normatively—in respective populist appeals. She helps illuminate why delusional claims about a "true," predefined sovereign will that is independent from democratic debate are so appealing to populist crowds, and why they can enable a tyranny of the majority—which often turns out to be a tyranny of the minority. If effectively mobilized by a populist leader, Arendt's work suggests, such illusions of sovereignty may ultimately aim at eclipsing public freedom and its constitutional foundations, or making democracy in which citizens freely debate and participate in decision-making processes unsustainable.

For Arendt, the concept of sovereignty is phenomenologically contrasted with freedom. The former is tied to violence, and nurtures illusions about politics—especially, but by no means exclusively, an antipluralistic notion of national sovereignty.⁷⁰ While Arendt does not object to civic forms of political integration within territorially circumscribed nation-states, she suggests that especially claims about national sovereignty have the potential to become exclusivist and triumph over democratic claims, even if often initially by democratic means—as modern European history shows.⁷¹ Appeals to sovereignty are generally based on a misguided idea of freedom as independent will and as rule over others.⁷² By contrast, freedom for Arendt is always nonsovereign, indeed the opposite of sovereignty's "uncompromising self-sufficiency," which she views as "contradictory to the very concept of plurality."⁷³ Freedom as related to politics is not a phenomenon of the will or will power, which is "in and by itself . . . an essentially nonpolitical and even anti-political capacity."⁷⁴ Instead, freedom is interdependent; it coincides with the performing act in the public realm and is "experienced in association with others."⁷⁵ Unlike an individual or collective will, freedom calls "something into being which did not exist before, which was not given."⁷⁶

⁷⁰The emergence of stateless masses exposed the irreversible "bankruptcy of the nation-state and its concept of sovereignty." See Hannah Arendt, "On Violence," in *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1969), 108.

⁷¹Rensmann, "Rethinking European Democracy," 220.

⁷²See Guido Parietti, *On the Concept of Power: Possibility, Necessity, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁷³Arendt, *Human Condition*, 234.

⁷⁴Hannah Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 164.

⁷⁵Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," 153, 157; see also Dana R. Villa, *Public Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷⁶Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," 151.

The wrong but ubiquitous equation of freedom with sovereignty is reflected in modern conceptions of complete individual autonomy, in the modern international legal concept of state sovereignty, and in the notion of popular sovereignty, all of which are part of the normative foundations of modern liberal democracy. However, the primacy of sovereignty over democratic debate, participation, and decision-making is especially prevalent among populist crowds. In Arendt's view, the call for unrestrained sovereignty ultimately leads to either the outright denial of public freedom or to the conviction that

the freedom of one man, or a group, or a body politic, can be purchased only at the price of freedom, i.e., sovereignty of all others. . . . Where humans wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the "general will" of an organized group. If [they] wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.⁷⁷

The widespread conflation of an imagined, oppressive general will of an organized group with freedom is nowhere more radically pronounced than in Rousseau's notion of a *volonté générale*. It presupposes an illusionary, unified sovereign will "behind" and "above" the actual preferences, speeches, and actions of empirical subjects. Following the equation of freedom and will, Rousseau's theory of sovereignty construes the political freedom of an organized group "in the strict image of individual will-power."⁷⁸ This way, the Arendtian notion of a divided will becomes inconceivable. Whether we follow Arendt's conception of freedom and critique of sovereignty entirely or not, she is right to suggest that it is impossible to think of freedom as an identical sovereign will of an individual or a group.⁷⁹ Still, this misguided ideal of freedom "became sovereignty, the ideal of a free will, independent from others and eventually prevailing against them."⁸⁰

In Arendt's account this notion is both normatively flawed owing to its anti-pluralistic, apolitical conception of freedom as sovereign will but also, as Caroline Ashcroft aptly points out, unsustainable because it conflicts with the actual world in which we live. It is men who inhabit the earth, not one singular man alone; humans appear always in company. Sovereignty, then, "is possible only in imagination, paid for by the price of reality," and, Ashcroft

⁷⁷Ibid., 164–65.

⁷⁸Ibid., 163.

⁷⁹Three years before publishing "What Is Freedom?," Arendt hinted at the possibility of the "sovereignty of a body of people bound and kept together, not by an identical will . . . but by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding." Yet sovereignty is "always spurious if claimed by an isolated single entity, be it the entity of a person or the collective entity of a nation" (Arendt, *Human Condition*, 245).

⁸⁰Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," 163.

suggests, fails to account for two aspects that are central to Arendt's understanding of politics, namely "first, what she terms 'plurality,' the existence of discrete, distinct political actors in the plural; second, the possibility of freedom of choice, impossible where sovereignty is defined as unified will."⁸¹ The famous "sovereignty of political bodies," says Arendt, "has always been an illusion, which, moreover, can be maintained only by the instruments of violence, that is, with essentially nonpolitical means."⁸²

In today's populist crowds, which legitimize their activity by reference to a presupposed unified sovereign will of the people, the recourse to violence in order to realize their alleged sovereignty comes as no surprise from an Arendtian perspective. The populist crowd's presumed identical will, which is not interested in humans in the plural, does not require being tested by democratic elections. The members of the populist crowd as an organized mob believe themselves to "know" that they and their leader(s) constitute the general sovereign will of the authentic people. If reality deviates from this presupposed sovereign will, it must be denied or the nonbelievers excluded. Election results do not matter, are rejected, or must be manipulated if they contradict the fantasy of the sovereign will, even if there is no empirical evidence of any wrongdoing and nothing about the election is contentious. Moreover, the general sovereign will, which "somehow magically inspires them all,"⁸³ and which the populist crowd identifies with itself, can legitimize violent means to "save" the sovereign will from its perceived illegitimate suppression.

Arendt's critique of the illusions of sovereignty, which are currently invoked the world over, also reminds us that majoritarian claims are frequently packed in discourses of popular sovereignty. At times legitimized by successful referenda, they generally have the potential to justify a "tyranny of the majority"⁸⁴ that dismantles normative, institutional, and constitutional constraints, guardrails, and checks that pluralistic democracies need to survive. Democratic public freedom remains particularly precarious, Arendt suggests, if it is not embedded in a constitutional framework with divided powers and guaranteed rights and liberties: "A legally unrestricted majority rule, that is, a democracy without a constitution," as envisioned by those prioritizing popular sovereignty over everything else, "can be very formidable in the suppression of the rights of minorities and very effective in the suffocation of dissent without any use of violence."⁸⁵ In a pluralistic, functioning democratic republic, by contrast, power is controllable and accountable,⁸⁶ divisible and actually divided. Democratic republics do not just protect popular participation, accountability, or representation in

⁸¹ Ashcroft, *Violence and Power*, 26–27.

⁸² Arendt, "What Is Freedom?," 164.

⁸³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 245.

⁸⁴ Arendt, "On Violence," 103–98.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

elected governments; they also require multiple separations and diffusions of power and other institutional protections safeguarding rights, pluralism, and freedom. Democratic politics, in this sense, can never be the immediate expression of a sovereign will or collective identity—or entitle a majority to quell the right to dissent and abandon protections that defend dissenting minorities.⁸⁷ The organized systemic dispersion of power in a constitutional democracy stands in contrast to any fixed will and ensures that citizens can speak freely and act without fear of being subjected to violence.

Yet the populist crowd's claim to popular sovereignty treats the nation and the people as if they were just one individual. In Arendt's account, the triumph of unrestricted popular sovereignty ultimately always leads to the tyranny it justifies in the name of a sovereign will: all kinds of autocratic and totalitarian mobilizations can be identified as historical predecessors to this homogenizing logic in which, in the name of sovereignty, humans in the plural are turned into a single entity, as if all were just the expression of one unified identity. The organized mob that is converted into a unified sovereign body, too, is legitimized under this name to exercise anticonstitutional hostility. More often than not, this sovereign will is rooted in exclusionary tribal nationalism.⁸⁸ It is no coincidence that claims to sovereign will power have historically served as justifications for the destruction of rights-granting, democratic constitutional republics restraining unmediated sovereignty. They have also justified the expulsion of citizens from the "sovereign body"—just as the authoritarian populist goal of restoring the "sovereign will" of the "true people" often marches in step with open hostility to those othered as "aliens."

The Arendtian insights into illusions of sovereignty claims disclose the normative problems with these claims and their profoundly antidemocratic nature.⁸⁹ They also help explain their attraction for a disenfranchised mob: the shallowly democratic appeal to "sovereignty" against constitutional democracy, elections, representatives, and intermediary bodies serves as a justification to break with unwanted democratic rules and norms, if needed violently. Even if constituting a clear (electoral) minority, the illusion of being the embodiment of the identical sovereign will of the people as a general will allows participants of populist crowds to imagine themselves as the real, "authentic" majority. And even when their leader holds power in government, they feel victimized, oppressed, and mistreated.⁹⁰ No

⁸⁷Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," in *Crises of the Republic*, 92.

⁸⁸Ironically, according to Arendt it was the greatest achievement of the American Revolution to dissolve the claim to sovereignty in the body politic of the republic (Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* [London: Penguin Books, 1963])—a claim now resonating among self-declared "true patriots."

⁸⁹Arendt's critique of sovereignty claims and their confusion with freedom does not imply that it would not be important to protect constitutional democracies against imperial aggressions—such as Russia's war of aggression today.

⁹⁰Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 42.

matter how delusional, the appeal to the allegedly suppressed sovereign will self-legitimizes the advance of a uniform, exclusionary identity and fantasies of a minority that projects itself as the people in its entirety and believes itself to act for “the people” without actually relying on democratic procedures.

In so doing, the imagined sovereign will offers the illusion of collective strength, comfort, and meaning. The mob’s participants can feel they are part of something bigger, yet bear no individual responsibility. Moreover, the fantasized sovereignty justifies the lure of taking part in an uncivil society of those who feel “cheated” or overburdened by the complexities of the contemporary modern world which they nostalgically reject. Finally, Arendt’s analysis of these sovereign illusions among populist crowds lay bare their detachment from reality. They point to closed belief systems shielded from facts, such as the unfounded premise that if the believed sovereign will is not reflected in election results, they must be fraudulent.

Destabilized Truth: Relativism and Organized Lies as Catalysts of the Populist Crowd

The problem of evidence-free illusions of sovereignty, which populist crowds seem eager to believe and translate into violence if deemed necessary, can be further illuminated by another trajectory in Arendt’s work that contributes to understanding contemporary authoritarian populism in a post-truth age: her exploration of the destabilization and politicization of facts and her analysis of a progressing dissolution of boundaries between fact and fiction, which are hallmarks of an eroding common public world.

This analysis points, first, to the peculiar relationship between populist fantasies of popular sovereignty and the role of modern propaganda. Throughout her life, Arendt remained preoccupied with the nature of propaganda, its legacy, and its relationship to democracy. For her, modern propaganda not only lies but denies attributing any relevance to facts whatsoever; it seeks to create a world in which distinctions between facts and lies vanish. The difference between the traditional political lie and the modern lie, then, is the difference “between hiding and destroying”⁹¹ factual truth.

Modern propaganda aims at destroying the idea of truth altogether—and totalitarian propaganda totalized this dissolution of a common world. “Antisemitic propaganda,” writes Arendt, “had been a common device of demagogues ever since the end of the nineteenth century,” including notions of “Jewish world power” and “lies about a Jewish world conspiracy.”⁹² Not one slogan was new to the Nazi method, but the method itself was new. It created a system through which all lies turned into all-important

⁹¹Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” in *Between Past and Future*, 253.

⁹²Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 354–55.

“intimate concern[s] of every individual in his personal existence”⁹³ and all could appear as true: “The lies of totalitarian propaganda are distinguished from the normal lying of non-totalitarian regimes . . . by their consistent denial of the importance of facts in general: all facts can be exchanged and all lies can be made true. . . . What one is up against is not indoctrination but the incapacity or unwillingness to distinguish altogether between fact and opinion.”⁹⁴ The result is a society of citizens for whom the differences between facts and fiction (the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (the standards of thought) “no longer exist.”⁹⁵ Such propaganda succeeded totalitarianism’s demise. After the Holocaust, “average German[s]” tended to display a “nihilistic relativity about facts,” which they understood as the “essence of democracy” when it actually signified the opposite.⁹⁶

However, the destabilization of shared factual truths and the emergence of nihilistic relativism, even if at times cloaked in hypermoralistic language, are not just the effect of propaganda or totalitarian legacies. They are also part of broader trends in modern society. In Arendt’s account a general nihilism about factual truth progresses in political modernity, with far-reaching consequences for the relationship between truth and politics and the trust required to inhabit a shared world.⁹⁷ The resilience of contingent factual truth is a precondition for the very survival of a political community. Statements of factual truth are “beyond agreement, dispute, opinion or consent.”⁹⁸ All truths, including factual truths (as distinct from philosophical truth) are opposed to opinion, “in their *mode of assessing validity*.”⁹⁹ Despite the nonpolitical, “potentially, even anti-political nature”¹⁰⁰ of factual truth, preserving evidence through testimony is of utmost political importance to Arendt. The loss of factual truths, which “constitute the very texture of the political realm,”¹⁰¹ would deprive the world of its foundations.

⁹³Ibid., 356.

⁹⁴Hannah Arendt, “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 252.

⁹⁵Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 474.

⁹⁶Arendt, “Aftermath,” 252. Challenging facts about Nazi crimes or other big lies makes democratic debate impossible, Arendt suggests. The doubling down on fictional beliefs denying evident historical facts implies that there is no shared space left for talking about politics.

⁹⁷Arendt’s approach has often been mischaracterized as relativistic; e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action: A Critique of Functionalist Reasoning* (Boston: Beacon, 1987). However, although she opposes the idea that politics itself is the quest for truth, she is worried about the fate of contingent factual truths as the basis of a shared world, as shown by Zerilli, “Rethinking the Politics of Post-truth,” 154.

⁹⁸Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 240.

⁹⁹Ibid., 239. Emphasis original.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 260.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 231.

Factual truth, in this understanding, is political only insofar as it forms the shared condition for all politics but should not be politicized itself. Factual truth

is always related to other people: it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved. . . . Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm. Facts inform opinions, and opinions, inspired by different interests and passions, can differ widely and still be legitimate as long as they respect factual truth. Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute.¹⁰²

Yet it is precisely the “facts themselves,” referring to a shared reality behind our judgments and opinions, which are nowadays frequently subject to full-blown denial. Even in constitutional democracies, agents and institutions committed to truth-seeking are often defamed as “enemies of the people” and subjected to scorn—from the scientist to the “historian and the judge” and the “fact-finder, the witness, and the reporter.”¹⁰³ They may not be impartial, but “the chances for truth to prevail in public are . . . greatly improved by the mere existence of such places [i.e., free media and universities] and by the organization of independent, supposedly disinterested scholars associated with them.”¹⁰⁴

In her time, Arendt recognized alarming trends towards the politicization of factual truth even in institutions key to safeguarding such truth. Partisan “opinion-holders” ever more easily managed to discredit facts as just another opinion, while the feeling of belonging to a majority “may even encourage false testimony.”¹⁰⁵ Such relativistic “reframing” of facts, events, or science had already gained popularity across different camps and strata. Arendt also noted the corrosive effects of the constant exposure to lies. Further destabilizing an already damaged common world, they reinforce subjectivism and nihilist cynicism, “an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established.” The result is “that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world . . . is being destroyed.”¹⁰⁶

With Arendt, the populist relationship to the factual world can be conceived as an amplified expression of the destabilized relationship between truth and lies, opinion and facts. Populist leaders tend to prioritize the opinion of the uncivil crowd of followers and sow open distrust of facts and their sources. This contributes to eroding the common world and engendering a political vacuum in which lies, disinformation, and conspiracy myths

¹⁰²Ibid., 238.

¹⁰³Ibid., 260.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 261.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 243.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 257.

can flourish while “post-truth demagogues themselves become the sources and purveyors of knowledge/truth for their followers.”¹⁰⁷

Adding to destabilized conditions for factual truth, “consistent lying . . . pulls the ground from under our feet and provides no other ground on which to stand.”¹⁰⁸ The habitual liar, who may believe “his own lies,”¹⁰⁹ exploits the fragility of factual truths. Political lying may only be able to destroy but not to “replace” factual truth.¹¹⁰ Yet the latter is often “powerless against image-making,”¹¹¹ a new form of lying, in which facts are dismissed when they do not fit the projected image, while an “appealing fictional story can be foolproof against factual truth, reality, or argument.”¹¹² Today’s populist crowds seem to thrive precisely on this new form of lying, shielding them against factuality and the “uncomfortable complexity of reality itself”¹¹³—especially in a digitally restructured public sphere still lacking accountability mechanisms to safeguard against organized disinformation.

Autocracies are often based on such disinformation and destabilization of truth because truth is “hated by tyrants.”¹¹⁴ Factual truth is a danger to autocratic regimes and the propaganda they employ to survive. Shining light on the fractured relationship between truth and facts in modern societies, however, Arendt alerts us that constitutional democracies are also endangered by the loss of shared facts. “Alternative facts” undermine political pluralism and the very possibility of opinion formation while creating space for the lies of aspiring autocrats. Democracies face their downfall if large parts of the citizenry are enmeshed in “Big Lies” and no longer have the capability or willingness to distinguish facts from fiction but feel entitled to “their own” subjective facts. While lies are part of political life, the scope in which the very idea of truth is attacked within democracies seems to have reached new levels and experienced significantly broadened resonance in the context of highly polarized, digitally restructured and profoundly transformed public spheres.¹¹⁵ Organized disinformation is not a new phenomenon, but the high circulation of junk news within democracies seems to have attained a magnitude that is quantitatively and qualitatively different from what Arendt could foresee, and the psychological science (and big data) that informs algorithms in the service of organized disinformation is

¹⁰⁷Homayun Sidky, *Science and Anthropology in a Post-truth World: A Critique of Unreason and Academic Nonsense* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 4.

¹⁰⁸Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 253.

¹⁰⁹Bernstein, *Why Read Arendt Now*, 75.

¹¹⁰Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 259.

¹¹¹Bernstein, *Why Read Arendt Now*, 77.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹³Erica Antonini, “For Love of the World: Hannah Arendt’s Political Legacy in an Age of Populism,” *Open Journal of Humanities* 4 (2020): 148.

¹¹⁴Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 241.

¹¹⁵Rune Karlsen et al., “Echo Chamber and Trench Warfare Dynamics in Online Debates,” *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 3 (2017): 257–73.

new as well.¹¹⁶ The constant inversion of truth and lies affecting individuals even in intimate personal relations, once typical for totalitarian regimes, now seems to have also seeped into the fabric of modern democracies.¹¹⁷

For Arendt, the proliferating inability to distinguish facts from opinion and fiction (including the widely accepted manipulation of facts) constitute symptoms of a profoundly damaged public realm. The broad erosion of a shared horizon of factual truth opens the door to the legitimation of free-floating disinformation and conspiracism. The mobilization of populist crowds may especially flourish in this environment,¹¹⁸ just as authoritarian populists advance the destabilization of factual truth which Arendt anticipated to be one of the biggest threats to democratic republics.

When Trump started to spread the “Big Lie” that the 2020 presidential election was “rigged,” he did not require facts but encouraged his followers to dismiss anything that conflicts with his own image—of someone who always wins—as “fake news” and “the conspiracy of elites who want to fool them.”¹¹⁹ His election denialism employed free-floating conspiracy myths, violating all commitments to factual truth and rendering distinctions between facts and fiction irrelevant. Demonstrating the importance of populist actors in advancing post-factual claims and galvanizing mobs, Trump’s agency “catapulted false claims of widespread voter fraud from the political fringes to the conservative mainstream.”¹²⁰ Yet in a climate in which factual truth is already profoundly destabilized, the vast majority of his Republican supporters and voters believed either that the election was manipulated or that the election results did not matter. The belief that the declaration of truth *is* the truth suffices to them, while it helps advance the possible destruction of the political community in its entirety.

Conclusion

This article has made a twofold contribution to political theory and political science. First, by reconstructing Arendt’s theoretical arguments in relation to the problem of populist crowds and the conditions for their emergence, it offered a comprehensive account of dimensions which so far have only been examined separately or in isolation. Second, by unpacking and

¹¹⁶Roger Berkowitz, “Disinformation and Democracy,” *Amor Mundi*, June 8, 2020, <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/disinformation-and-democracy-2020-08-06>.

¹¹⁷See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

¹¹⁸Eiríkur Bergmann, “Populism and the Politics of Misinformation,” *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 21, no. 3 (2020): 251–65.

¹¹⁹Bernstein, *Why Read Arendt Now*, 78.

¹²⁰Tiffany Hsu and Stuart A. Thompson, “Hunting for Voter Fraud, Conspiracy Theorists Organize ‘Stakeouts,’” *New York Times*, August 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/10/technology/voter-drop-box-conspiracy-theory.html>.

reconstructing these interrelated theoretical trajectories, which can be extrapolated from Arendt's work, the article prepared an Arendtian theoretical framework for the study of contemporary populism. The reconstruction of Arendt's work in view of the rise of authoritarian-populist crowds the world over—a force to be reckoned with in, but far from being restricted to, liberal democracies—adds theoretical perspectives on their origins in the persistent context of political modernity. This contribution extends the debate on populism, which is often still limited to aspects of the relationship between liberal democracy and populism, conceiving the latter as a response to, or byproduct of, problems of the former.

Arendt's work, I have argued here, can also contribute to general theoretical frameworks for studying authoritarian-populist crowds and the conditions of their emergence. Important historical differences notwithstanding, these crowds can be understood as organized mobs of the twenty-first century. Contrary to some commentators, I have suggested here that Arendt's analyses of the organized mob and autocracy are more useful to illuminate the current authoritarian moment than her analysis of totalitarianism and the totalitarian mass. Like their predecessors, today's organized mobs seem driven by tribal nationalism, antisemitism, and the idolization of authoritarian leaders nurtured by a massively eroded common world. Recruited from all classes, members of the mob have been disintegrated through capitalism's economic crises and feel disenfranchised by sociocultural transformations and social value change. Arendt illuminates what drives rebellious nihilists who display a norm-breaking and destructive mob morality. They falsely believe that they represent "the authentic people" as a whole and feel legitimized to pursue a politics of retribution against supposed "elites" who allegedly excluded them. Departing from an already fractured common world which they are ultimately ready to destroy, they are galvanized by fantasies of restored sovereignty and conspiracist disinformation—while the populist crowds hardly recognize the latter as such—as well as susceptible to autocratic rule.

Even if the mob initially appears politically marginal, it can easily turn into something bigger; if societal and political conditions are favorable, a violent mob can move from the margins to the center of politics. Driving its success are in no small part alluring nostalgic narratives about national pride and greatness, as well as collectively elevating but antipluralistic and exclusionary fantasies about the restoration of (true) sovereignty of "the people." They are based in illusions of an identical "sovereign will" with which the crowd is identified, and which is allegedly expressed by the populist crowd's leaders as the embodied voice of the people. These illusions, which point towards a tyranny of the majority or even of a minority, are nurtured by broader trends in modern society eroding the differences between facts and opinion, between truth and lies. In an environment already suffering from nihilistic relativism and destabilized factual truth (on which any political community needs to be grounded to be free), notorious liars, big

lies, and authoritarian-populist delusions can flourish. They can lead populist crowds, no matter what their underlying grievances, to either prevent democratic movements from succeeding against autocratic regimes, or to destroy already endangered democratic institutions, constitutional frameworks, and the shared factual world that make democracy possible and lasting. Populist crowds and their leaders do so by means of constant assaults aimed at eroding these democratic foundations.¹²¹

Arendt's work elucidates conditions of political modernity, which have helped enable the evolution of modern democracies alongside the protection and exercise of public freedom. Yet Arendt is acutely aware that political modernity has also engendered processes of political and economic disintegration that create political opportunities for totalitarian movements and ever new organized mobs. Such mobs always aim at autocratization: the destruction of constitutional, rights-granting democracies. Today's authoritarian-populist crowds are by no means limited to democratic contexts. They can also, Arendt reminds us, originate within and shield autocratic regimes. Think of the dynamics in Russia's electoral autocracy under Putin since the 2000s. Here a criminal mob from all classes, driven by a mob morality worshipping the ruthless leader as well as nationalistic sentiments, supported the reigning autocrat and his power in the name of restored sovereignty—with the help of organized lies.

On January 6, 2021, in Washington, DC, an organized mob from the twenty-first century operated in full force within the United States, the world's most significant and powerful democratic republic. Instigated by then president Trump, who denied the results of the 2020 election and the legitimacy of the procedures enabling it, a violent populist crowd—a bare fraction of American society—stormed the US Capitol. Believing that they represented a sovereign will that had been “betrayed,” they displayed mob morality, in Arendt's framing, by damaging the Capitol and, most importantly, calling for the killing of democratically elected representatives, including the Speaker of the House and the Vice President of the United States. In a political environment dominated by a plethora of organized lies and uninterested in actual democratic debate over policy, they imagined themselves giving life to a sovereign will by “taking back” Congress from an allegedly illegitimate elite that had stolen “the people's house”—just as “the elite” presumably conspired to “steal” elections in which “the true patriots” had won, in the words of Trump, by “a landslide.” In so doing, the violent crowd foreshadowed the potential of even darker days for democracies and the world to come, against which Arendt's reflections offer a sober yet powerful diagnosis and warning.

¹²¹Sliding autocratization processes, rather than coups, are turning into the most common way through which societies become autocracies. See Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New about It?,” *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095–113; Eric Frantz, *Authoritarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 90–91.