



Defying the Demos: Antidemocratic Thought in the United States, 1930–1950

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During the 1930s and 1940s, a group of right-wing intellectuals, sparked by the New Deal, mounted a sustained critique of American democracy and inherited democratic principles. Believing that the progressive democratization of the state had resulted in a decadent, inefficient and morally coarse society, they attacked democracy as the root cause of the nation's problems. Examining the reactionary conservative, libertarian and fascist critiques of democracy, this article suggests that each borrowed ideas from the other, and that their beliefs in autocratic rule or a broadly countermajoritarian politics have not been adequately studied by scholars.

On a freezing night in February 1940, as rain poured steadily through the night sky, the nationalist conservative propagandist Merwin K. Hart rose to address the members of the Nassau Club in Princeton. Nothing about Hart's appearance would have provoked surprise in his audience. Mild-mannered, impeccably attired and decidedly upper-crust, Hart, a *New Yorker*, was a paragon of the old northeastern elite. Yet his message that night was freighted with radical implications. “[W]e find,” he declared, “the word ‘democracy’ neither in the Declaration of Independence nor the federal Constitution.” Instead, the Constitutional Convention had explicitly “rejected” democracy, favouring in its place a representative system insulated from “mob” rule. Hart believed that the United States for most of its history had been chiefly a republic of limited powers, in which the state refrained from active intervention in the economic life of the people. Yet an insidious barrage of propaganda, promoted by the left and those inspired by “alien ideologies,” had convinced Americans that their nation was a democracy. It was simply common sense, he argued, that most citizens “had no desire to lead.” They wished, instead, to follow. “They prefer to avoid the task of thinking,” he maintained, “if only

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others will think for them.” Democracy, he believed, was a sham, a vehicle for the half-witted notions of the majority, and a smokescreen for the steady accretion of power by unelected bureaucrats. Democracy was simply another word for “socialism.” And socialism in Russia had led, ineluctably, to autocracy. “Unchecked,” he insisted, “it means despotism here.”¹

Hart traced the use of the word “democracy” in America to a meeting of the Soviet Comintern in 1935.² In his view, the communists had undermined the American republic by promoting, via a fifth column, the principles of unrestrained majority rule. Hart was an extremist; but in his views he was hardly alone. A cast of right-wing thinkers from 1930 to 1950 attacked democracy as a perversion of the American republic, an insidious force that progressively subverted the individual virtues and talents necessary for the flourishing of the social order. Although they hardly agreed on their preferred system of government, these individuals were united in their contempt for the democratic state and the reduction of all political phenomena to the whims of the common citizen. These thinkers did not regard democracy, like many of its defenders, as an imperfect but vital system of government. Instead, democracy, they argued, was the root cause of the social and political evils that plagued America.

This article examines right-wing antidemocratic thought in America from the Great Depression to the early years of the Cold War. Opposition to majority rule, it argues, was a constitutive element of the philosophy of an array of right-wing thinkers, who synthesized elitist, antidemocratic ideas with a lacerating critique of the burgeoning liberal administrative state. This period was, in many respects, an era of triumph for democracy in the United States. Battered by the Depression, the nation rallied under the leadership of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose administration revived a tottering economy and ultimately helped overcome the Axis powers in the Second World War. The great exception, though, remained the South. The brutal regime of racial segregation across Dixie ensured that almost no Blacks could exercise their rightful franchise. By the 1930s, the intellectual defense of American apartheid had shriv-

¹ Merwin K. Hart, “Did You Say Democracy? If This Be Democracy, Give Me Back the Republic,” speech before the Nassau Club, Princeton, NJ, 14 Feb. 1940, reproduced in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 1 March 1940, 305–8. On Hart see David Austin Walsh, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, forthcoming 2024); Alex McPhee-Browne, “The Menace of Globalism: Merwin K. Hart and Nationalist Conservatism, 1930–1960,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies*, forthcoming 2024.

² *Hearings before the House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, House of Representatives, Part Four*, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess. (1950), 99.

elled, though it achieved a brief resurgence in the late 1950s and the 1960s.³ And in the immediate postwar years, the nation witnessed the first stirrings of the civil rights movement, which would help propel changes that would dramatically reshape the American democratic state, destroying the edifice of racial apartheid, if not its roots. Yet the apparent triumphs of democracy did not mollify its critics. Instead, they saw evidence all around them that democratic reforms were leading to a crass, decadent and amoral society, a society in which all higher values were threatened with extinction.

From 1930 to 1950, it was primarily the reactionary, fascist and libertarian right that formulated distinct critiques of democracy. These thinkers believed, as Madison had written, that pure democracies “have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.”⁴ And they would have concurred with Charles Beard, who noted that the “fathers of the American Republic, notably Hamilton, Madison, and John Adams, were as voluminous and vehement [in opposing democracy] as any Fascist could desire.”⁵ America, these figures maintained, was a *republic*, not a democracy.⁶ For the libertarians, pure democracy threatened the delicate balance between individual and state that had sustained America’s astonishing economic expansion. In their view, the masses, granted full political power, had immediately begun to redistribute wealth, to rob the rich and subsidize the feckless and indolent. The libertarians were against democracy because they were against politics, *tout court*. They envisioned the market order – a pure conduit of the innumerable, infinitely various decisions of individuals – as the true manifestation of democracy, and regarded majoritarian politics, embodied in the reformist state, as the signal threat to the capitalist system. The reactionary conservatives

³ I. A. Newby, *Jim Crow’s Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America, 1900–1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), esp. 191–92. But see, for small-scale efforts, which generally explicitly praised “democracy,” Stuart Omer Landry, *The Cult of Equality: A Study of the Race Problem*, 2nd edn (New Orleans: Pelican, 1945), xix; Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 85–89.

⁴ James Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” in Michael A. Genovese, ed., *The Federalist Papers: Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 49–54, 52.

⁵ Quoted in John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 226.

⁶ The slogan “a republic not a democracy” was later taken up by the conspiratorial anti-communist John Birch Society, as well as white supremacists such as Roger Pearson. See Edward H. Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 72; Edward Langford (pseud. for Roger Pearson), *This Is a Republic, Not a Democracy! Let’s Keep It That Way* (Los Angeles: Noontide Press, 1965).

echoed some of these concerns, but they had no taste for the dislocating energies of industrial capitalism. They yearned for an aristocratic society governed by absolute truths, where the poor and inferior deferred to their betters, and where individual genius was given its due. Democracy was anathema to their vision of the good society. Like their early twentieth-century forebears, they looked to the Middle Ages, or the antebellum South, for their model of a just and harmonious social order. Critics further to the right decried democracy for still other reasons. They saw fascism, not democracy, as the “wave of the future.”⁷ The democratic system, these thinkers believed, was hopelessly ill-matched in its struggle to unify the people, overcome the Depression and secure peace. Only a dictatorship, purged of internecine political strife, could ensure lasting prosperity and social harmony.

The core of the libertarian, reactionary and native fascist critiques of democracy was a commitment to hierarchy as the basic organizing principal of social life. The fundamental postulate of democracy – grasped by thinkers since Plato – was the basic political equality of all individuals. Democracy, on these terms, undermined the natural, God-given hierarchy that was alternatively expressed through the market system or an aristocratic state; it apportioned a role in government on the basis of numbers, not individual achievement. “A democracy,” the fascist George Van Horn Moseley declared in 1936, “is a form of government wherein effort is made to pull every individual down to the level of the average.”⁸ Thus the American critics of democracy feared, as the libertarian businessman William Mullendore noted, “the access of the masses to complete social power.”⁹ The libertarian columnist Ruth Alexander expressed many of their beliefs in 1950, when she excoriated that “fool phrase that ‘all men are created free and equal.’” It was, she believed, “the cause of all the trouble in the world today.”¹⁰ Democracy, it followed, was a “levelling” force, one that robbed the elite of their rightful prerogatives, stunted the full development of the individual’s natural powers, and perversely elevated the racial or ideological other to a position of political parity. Democracy was by and for the “herd,” and the ascendancy of the masses to total political power portended the destruction of all higher values, and indeed of the republic itself.

⁷ Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *The Wave of the Future: A Confession of Faith* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940).

⁸ “Extracts from the Remarks of General George Van Horn Moseley at Sentinels of the Republic Luncheon,” 4 March 1936, Harvard University, Schlesinger Library, Alexander Lincoln Papers, Box 6, 2.

⁹ Mullendore to Ralph Bradford, 19 March 1943, Stanford University, Hoover Institution Archives, Vervon Orval Watts Papers, Box 2.

¹⁰ Ruth Alexander to Alfred Kohlberg, 30 June 1950, Stanford University, Hoover Institution Archives, Alfred Kohlberg Papers, Box 3.

Three periods divide the antidemocratic thought of the years from 1930 to 1950. During the 1930s, the critics of democratic rule were bolstered by internal and external challenges to the American state. Their critiques were frank, undisguised in an era of global suspicion of the capacity of democracy to solve the problems of the Depression. Many of them were convinced, as the Catholic reactionary Ross J. S. Hoffman wrote in 1934, that the “moribund liberal-democratic order ... cannot last.”¹¹ The war years saw a decline in the most rabid criticism of the democratic state. With American forces fighting against Japan and the Continental dictatorships, native critics of majoritarian rule were regarded as disloyal or even seditious. In the years after the war, most critics of democracy, chastened by the Allies’ triumph, abandoned their principles. Yet there was a small minority, chiefly among the libertarians, who continued to propagate an antidemocratic critique of the existing social order.

Aside from their critique of equality, what did the differing ideologies of these groups share? All three regarded government by a propertied, educated elite – an aristocracy of the wise, rich and good – as the preferred mode of politics. “The fact is that democracy worked only while an aristocracy ruled,” insisted the fascist theorist Lawrence Dennis in 1940. “The world is getting back to aristocratic rule by new elites because one of the necessary accompaniments of maturity in a democracy is an increasingly unintelligent and incompetent direction of public affairs.” Others were similarly explicit. The United States, the architect and social critic Ralph Adams Cram noted in 1938, was at an impasse “because we lack a true aristocracy.” Some form of “aristocracy has always conditioned good living and a good society,” he insisted, “and I think it is the only possible corrective ... to ‘un-checked Democracy.’”¹²

All three modes of antidemocratic thought were cobbled together from sometimes differing sources, a characteristic of much political thinking during the 1930s. These thinkers, and their peers, were unsettled. The New Deal had put them on the back foot. In order to understand the convulsive changes that had gripped their society they reached for new concepts, sometimes without much consistency. Fundamentally, their critique of democracy rested on the premise that the people were incompetent to govern, yet they ignored the fact that in actual representative democracies the people elect and reject the rulers, and do not by themselves make the innumerable decisions that constitute political rule. Finally, these individuals, in varying degrees, feared social democracy, embodied in the nascent welfare state enacted by

¹¹ Ross J. S. Hoffman, “Liberty and Authority: A Political Essay,” *American Review*, Oct. 1934, 586–87.

¹² Ralph Adams Cram, “The Mass-Man Takes Over,” *American Mercury*, Oct. 1938, 174–75.

Roosevelt. Such schemes, they believed, rode counter to America's traditional reliance on individual effort, punished the unusually gifted, and created a dependent caste of citizens that would ultimately undermine the republic. These antidemocratic theorists harbored a scorn for those who had failed to compete and survive in the arena of capitalist competition, as well as a visceral opposition to measures that would relieve the distress of those who failed to heed the market's iron logic. Of course, the libertarians were most vocal in their critique of social democracy; yet much the same premises informed the reactionary, and in some cases fascist, attacks on majoritarian government.¹³

Although there is an enormous literature on democratic thought and practice in twentieth-century America,¹⁴ only a smattering of attention has been given to the antidemocratic attitudes of those who opposed democracy.¹⁵ Scholars such as Leo Ribuffo, Gregory Schneider, Allan Brinkley, Kevin Kruse and scores of others have examined in passing the conservative and

¹³ Cf. James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ For representative recent works on democracy see Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); George Reid Andrews and Herrick Chapman, eds., *The Social Construction of Democracy, 1870–1990* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995); Thomas Goebel, *A Government by the People: Direct Democracy in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005); Alan Wolfe, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ari Berman, *Give Us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); James T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); William J. Novak, *New Democracy: The Creation of the Modern American State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

¹⁵ On antidemocratic political thought in America, the only book-length monograph is David Spitz's *Patterns of Antidemocratic Thought: An Analysis and a Criticism, with Special Reference to the American Political Mind in Recent Times*, rev. edn (New York: Free Press, 1965). Spitz is useful on a number of figures, but his analysis is primarily critical and theoretical rather than historical. John Harrison, *The Reactionaries: Yeats, Lewis, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence: A Study of the Anti-democratic Intelligentsia* (New York: Schocken, 1967), is a study of literary intellectuals, with little bearing on this article. Antidemocratic thought is discussed in Alan Pendleton Grimes, *American Political Thought* (New York: Henry Holt, 1955), chapter 16, but curiously not in the revised edition of that book from 1983. David M. Levy, Sandra J. Peart and Margaret Albert's "Economic Liberals as Quasi-public Intellectuals: The Democratic Dimension," *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*, 30, 2 (2012), 1–19, esp. 1–4, briefly discusses the libertarian critique of democracy, but does not analyse most of the figures discussed in this article. Several earlier unpublished dissertations deal glancingly with antidemocratic thought. The most valuable is Linda K. Gerber, "Anti-democratic Movements in the United States since World War I," PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1964. Gerber's account, though, is a series of sociological case studies of antidemocratic movements rather than a history of antidemocratic thought as such.

right-wing movements' occasionally rocky relationship with democracy. None, however, have focussed on antidemocratic thought per se, nor have they offered a convincing picture of the central role that antidemocratic ideas played in right-wing political ideology between 1930 and 1950.¹⁶ George H. Nash, in his seminal account of the postwar conservative intellectual movement, notes briefly the antidemocratic propensities of some of the figures he surveys, but he does not situate their ideas in a broader paradigm of antidemocratic thought, or chart the evolution and impact of antidemocratic ideas in the United States. Nash's most sustained analysis of antidemocratic ideas – his discussion of Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's *Liberty or Equality* (1952) – is focussed on a European theorist and makes no comment on the antidemocratic attitudes of American figures that pre-dated Kuehnelt-Leddihn.¹⁷ Ribuffo, in his work on the Christian far right of 1930s and 1940s, fails to mention the antidemocratic views of the figures he analyzes. Glen Jeansonne, in his book on the far-right Mothers' Movement, briefly notes the antidemocratic propensities of some of the figures he examines but does not place these ideas at the heart of his account. In his encyclopedic discussion of the libertarian movement, *Radicals for Capitalism* (2007), Brian Doherty barely mentions the antidemocratic convictions of many of the figures he examines. The same is true of Kevin Kruse's study of Christian libertarianism. In his seminal *Voices of Protest* (1983), Brinkley argues that the movements led by Charles Coughlin (and senator Huey Long) were not "irrational, antidemocratic uprisings," and that their leaders eschewed antidemocratic ideology, yet he ignores Coughlin's antidemocratic tirades.¹⁸ D. J. Mulloy, in his recent work on "radical right" intellectuals and operatives,

¹⁶ For representative works see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, rev. edn (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006; first published 1976); Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression* (New York: Random House, 1983); Glen Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right: The Mothers' Movement and World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007); Allan J. Lichtman, *White Protestant Nation: The Rise of the American Conservative Movement* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008); Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Gregory Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); D. J. Mulloy, *Enemies of the State: The Radical Right in America from FDR to Trump* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

¹⁷ Nash, 97–99, also 91, *passim*.

¹⁸ Brinkley, xi.

many of whom were antidemocratic, fails to mention, even in passing, that crucial element of their ideology. The same is true for John S. Huntington's *Far-Right Vanguard* (2021), which examines a similar array of figures but does not note their antidemocratic proclivities. A slightly older text, Schneider's *The Conservative Century* (2009), notes the antidemocratic character of some conservatives in the 1930s, but his treatment is schematic; he examines only one of the figures discussed in this article.

None of these works, then, have systematically examined antidemocratic thought among a section of the American right in the crucial years between 1930 and 1950 – the years in which a new conservatism, one that would come to dominate American politics, was beginning to be fashioned. To be sure, many of the figures examined by these scholars were not antidemocratic in any meaningful sense. But a countertradition, the subject of this article, attacked democracy precisely for fostering the changing political and cultural environment that their sometime allies on the broader right abhorred. Perhaps we can understand this partial scholarly lacuna as a product of the assumption that the US has been moving, over the past century, ever closer to a perfected democracy, in which all citizens possess an equal say in their government. Of course, this narrative has hardly been without its critics.¹⁹ But almost no scholars have examined the right-wing critique of democracy – even though much of what still impedes democracy in the United States was inspired by such thought. This article suggests, then, that we can see the persistence of antidemocratic thought, and its resurgence in our own time, as both cause and evidence of the fragility and imperfection of the democratic system. While antidemocratic thought has always remained on the margins of American society, it has not been without consequence. In times of crisis, such thought has seemed to offer a plausible way out for large swathes of the American people. In such a way, antidemocratic thought can be seen as the insistent underside of American political thinking – a persistent reminder that American democracy is not invulnerable, and that its continued expansion is far from secure.

¹⁹ The literature, too vast to survey here, includes a kaleidoscopic critique of the American democratic tradition. For representative recent works see Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Manisha Sinha and Penny von Eschen, eds., *Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race, and Power in American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry E. Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

The critique of equality and democracy in America stretches back to the Puritans. It can be found, as a minor or a major theme, in the works of John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, John C. Calhoun, E. L. Godkin and Henry Adams, as well as a host of lesser theorists. *The Federalist Papers* remain the *locus classicus* of antidemocratic thought in America, even as they have often been wilfully misread by antidemocratic theorists on the right. The authors of the *Federalist* regarded “pure” democracy as dangerous and a practical impossibility, but were quite willing to countenance “representative” democracy embedded in a republican form of government. The idea of democracy propounded by the writers of the *Federalist* rejected the notion that the function of majority rule was to legitimize the state and unshackle the actions of elected representatives. Instead, these thinkers regarded democracy as a brake on arbitrary government, allowing the populace to dislodge representatives that acted against the broader wishes of the community.²⁰

The institution of slavery, until its abolition, was the dominant force inspiring antidemocratic thought in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. Calhoun, an advocate of slavery and perhaps the most sophisticated antidemocratic theorist America has produced, constructed a theory of concurrent majority in which minority rights might survive the fluctuations of pure majority rule. According to Calhoun’s framework, the passing of a law necessitated dual majorities: one from the federal legislature and another from the legislatures of each state, acting concurrently. As early as 1828, he had come to the conclusion that majority rule operating within a centralized federal government was the greatest threat to republican liberty.²¹ Little invoked by later antidemocratic theorists – perhaps because of his zealous advocacy of slavery – Calhoun nonetheless anticipated many of their arguments. In 1842, he declared,

As the Government approaches nearer and nearer to the one absolute and single power, the will of the greater number, its actions will become more and more disturbed and irregular; faction, corruption, and anarchy, will more and more abound; patriotism will daily decay, and affection and reverence for the Government grow weaker and weaker, until the final shock occurs, when the system will rush to ruin, and the sword take the place of the law and Constitution.²²

²⁰ Jonathan R. Macey, “Representative Democracy,” *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy*, 16, 1 (Winter 1993), 49–54.

²¹ Lacy K. Ford, “Inventing the Concurrent Majority: Madison, Calhoun, and the Problem of Majoritarianism in American Political Thought,” *Journal of Southern History*, 60, 1 (1994), 19–58, 42–44.

²² Calhoun quoted in H. Lee Cheek Jr., *Calhoun and Popular Rule: The Political Theory of the Disquisition and Discourse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 156.

While the thinkers that followed emancipation feared unchecked majority rule, they made a place for some level of democracy for males. They were not authoritarians, but looked to a representative republic, one that restricted the vote for much of the population, as the *sine qua non* of the American experiment. Godkin, perhaps the most influential proponent of these ideas, began a believer in democracy, but in early middle age, amid the convulsions of Gilded Age America, he became one of its leading opponents. Godkin and his liberal allies, as Nancy Cohen has argued, played a crucial role in insulating the new mode of corporate capitalism from the whims of the demos.²³ Godkin castigated advocates of democracy for lusting after equality of outcome as much as equality of opportunity. “They want a new social order,” he wrote in 1869, “in which men shall not only be equal before the law, but shall be nearly equal in their style of living and means of enjoyment.”²⁴ For Godkin, the signs were everywhere abundant: democracy, in its essence, posed a threat to private property, which was the *fons et origo* of modern civilization.²⁵ Majoritarian politics and the further extension of the franchise, therefore, would have to be fought ruthlessly.²⁶

The reactionary and libertarian strands of antidemocratic thought of the two decades from 1930 each echoed the critique of democracy offered by these figures. The stark and unrelenting pessimism of Henry Adams, his conviction that human society had declined since the Middle Ages, his railing against “the degradation of the democratic dogma,” provided the basis for the reactionary critique of democracy. Even as a relatively young man, Adams was suspicious of universal suffrage. He agreed with European theorists – Tocqueville was one – who regarded government by an elite few as preferable to majoritarian politics. As Adams wrote in 1863, the “best government is not that in which all have share, but that which is directed by the class of the highest principle and intellectual ambition.”²⁷ His contempt for democracy and mass suffrage only hardened with age. Democracy, for Adams, was perhaps the lowest form of government, a product of the inexorable entropic energies that acted upon individuals and societies alike. Adams’s ancestors, Henry’s brother Brooks wrote, summarizing Henry’s views, laboured all their lives “to bring the democratic principle of equality into

²³ Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865–1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5.

²⁴ [E. L. Godkin], “The Social Future as Foreshadowed by the French Elections,” *Nation*, 17 June 1869, 469. ²⁵ Cohen, 55.

²⁶ Cf. William M. Armstrong, *E. L. Godkin: A Biography* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), 106.

²⁷ Adams quoted in David S. Brown, *The Last American Aristocrat: The Brilliant Life and Improbable Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Scribner, 2020), 148.

such a relation with science and education that it would yield itself into becoming ... an efficient instrument for collective administration. But this was striving after a contradiction in human nature.”²⁸ Democracy, therefore, tended in the long run only to chaos and rule by the worst.

Influenced by Adams, as well as by an array of European theorists, the reactionaries were by and large authoritarians, and they looked to monarchy or dictatorship, or in some cases a mixed monarchical republic, as the most desirable form of government. The libertarian critique was of another sort. Like all three strands of antidemocratic thought, the libertarians believed that America had progressively, and disastrously, embraced a more democratic form of government. The extension of the white male franchise, the emancipation of the slaves and women’s suffrage all seemed to them – explicitly or implicitly – as steps undermining the uniquely beneficent character of American institutions. But rather than any democratic reform in particular, it was the New Deal – understood as the extension of democracy to the economy and thence to the social order – that they feared and loathed most. The New Deal portended, for them, a state in which the base, mindless and avaricious proletariat would ascend to the highest echelons of government. Thus, by a republic, the libertarians and many reactionaries did not envision an abstract form of representational government, exercised through the will of the people. Instead, they favoured the historical form of the early American republic, in which the franchise was sharply limited, a select and worthy few governed all of the people, and the state was organized around counter-majoritarian institutions. Democracy, then, was a system of government in which the majority rule, but where the minority possesses both the right to criticize the ruling power and the potential thereby to become the majority. This is what the figures discussed in this article were against; and this difference from their prodemocratic opponents represented, at one level, profoundly different ideas of what the American experiment stood for.

Perhaps the foremost exponent of the libertarian antidemocratic creed was the journalist Isabel Paterson.²⁹ A critic whose formidable intellect and infamous temper earned her considerable fame, Paterson spent the 1930s formulating a novel, hardline libertarianism in her column for the *New York Herald*

²⁸ Henry Adams, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 77–78. Cf. James P. Young, *Henry Adams: The Historian as Political Theorist* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 5–6.

²⁹ Unless otherwise noted, the details of Paterson’s life are taken from Stephen Cox’s indispensable biography *The Woman and the Dynamo: Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2004). The other notable source on Paterson is Jennifer Burns, “The Three ‘Furies’ of Libertarianism: Rose Wilder Lane, Isabel Paterson, and Ayn Rand,” *Journal of American History*, 102, 3 (Dec. 2015), 746–74.

Tribune Books, and in her magnum opus of 1943, *The God of the Machine*, an audacious, if flawed, attempt to construct from the axioms of American experience a novel political philosophy. Paterson's thought was fired by a vision of the infinite variety and enduring richness of American experience. The story of American freedom, she declared, was a "great romance ... springing from a fresh apprehension of the relation of man to the universe."³⁰ Yet this vision, essentially literary in character, was tethered to an abstract, unyielding philosophy of laissez-faire, and a belief that the nation faced ruin as its leaders abandoned its republican past and embraced democracy. "Paterson," one businessman concluded after reading her book, "seems to have even a better idea of the fundamental differences between a republic and a democracy than did Madison, Hamilton and the other writers of the Constitution." In this appraisal, he was not alone.³¹

Born in 1886 on remote Manitoulin Island in Ontario, Canada, Isabel Paterson's early years were marked by the unceasing pressures of frontier life. In 1924, having travelled east to America, Paterson secured herself a plum spot as a columnist for the Sunday supplement of the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Herald Tribune Books*.³² "Turns with a Bookworm," Paterson's column, mixed criticism, gossip and, later, political pronouncements in a singular style, by turns conversational and gently, sometimes bitingly, satiric. The column, a beguiling mélange of fact and opinion, would become the chief forum for Paterson's views for nearly three decades. It served as a barometer of her evolving political views, which throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s came gradually into focus. Whether it was the hardships of her pioneer upbringing, or her striking, self-willed ascent to literary prominence, Paterson nurtured a reflexive and fervent libertarianism. In the first years of the Depression, she embraced the concept of democracy in wholly positive terms. She believed that the Depression and the New Deal presaged the extinction of majoritarian government in America. "It was neither individualism nor industrialism nor democracy that got us into the present trouble," she wrote in May 1933. Rather, "it was the abandonment of all three."³³

By the middle of the decade, however, Paterson's views had altered. Fortified by her reading of *The Federalist Papers*, which she seems to have

³⁰ Quoted in Stephen Cox, "Introduction," in Isabel Paterson, *Culture and Liberty: Writings of Isabel Paterson*, ed. Stephen Cox (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2015), ix–xxxi, xxi.

³¹ T. W. Phillips Jr. to *Reader's Digest*, 12 Dec. 1945, University of Oregon, Special Collections and University Archives, Lucille Cardin Crain Papers, Box 4.

³² The *Books* supplement, which was the primary venue of Paterson's work, was sold separately, and reached 500,000 subscribers by 1937. Richard Kluger, *The Paper: The Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 262.

³³ Isabel Paterson, "Turns with a Bookworm," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 28 May 1933.

begun studying in earnest in 1936, Paterson began to articulate a theory of representative republican government that she distinguished, crucially, from democracy. As she wrote at the tail end of her evolution in 1940, “democracy is in accord with Marxist materialism. Democracy is the totalitarian state, as it is also the shortest cut to an avowed dictatorship.”³⁴ The Founders had decisively broken with democratic government, she argued, erecting a representative republic that was largely safeguarded from the whims of the majority. Instead, the American form of government was anchored by its protection of inalienable, individual rights, rights properly immune from government sanction. Property rights, especially, were the key to the stability and productivity of the social and economic order, and democracy, above all by redistributing wealth, precisely threatened those rights and the maintenance of the market system. Pure democracy, then, for Paterson, was the path to tyranny, no different in the end from the authoritarian regimes that had sprouted up across Europe. The point was to limit government. Yet democracy, unleavened by non-majoritarian forces, tended only to the expansion and, in time, the omnipotence of state power.

In *The God of the Machine* and a series of articles after the war, Paterson further developed her critique of majority rule. “Liberty and democracy” were wholly “incompatible,” she wrote in *God*, for pure democracy inevitably lapsed into despotism, consuming individual rights.³⁵ Democracy, she insisted, assumed that the preferences of the majority were a substantive “moral principle” – but such was not the case. By granting political authority to those who possessed numerical superiority, democracy disregarded any ethical criteria for governance beyond the fact of sheer majority force. More than that, in practice the majority ruled blindly and wantonly, happy to trample on the individual rights that lay at the productive core of American society. The Founders, Paterson insisted, had valorized the “limitation” of political power, the preservation of a private sphere and a civil society protected from government. Democracy, though, for her, entailed the complete subjection of all social phenomena to the power of the state – a condition that she believed had evolved from the mid-nineteenth century, through the Progressive Era, to find its final consummation in the New Deal. The rule of law, for instance, fundamental to any functioning society, was thoroughly incompatible with the “arbitrary” authority of democracy, in which the masses could vote at will to alter basic legal principles. Democracy, indeed, was a brute form of “materialism” – a conception of society as an atomistic mass – which intrinsically ignored

³⁴ Isabel Paterson “Books and Things,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 19 July 1940, 15A.

³⁵ Isabel Paterson, *The God of the Machine* (New York: Putnam, 1943), 120, emphasis removed.

the spiritual unity of each individual and the natural hierarchy of human ability.

For Paterson, democracy was faulty in both theory and practice. “It is falsely assumed,” she wrote, “that when the claim of the few to command the many is refuted, the converse claim of the many to command the individual is proved.” Democracy enthroned the masses, only to arrive at a government of chaotic ineptitude. Once accepted as the principle of government, democracy necessitated an almost impossible attempt to excise the “stranglehold” of the political apparatus over the life of the individual.³⁶ The true basis for political power and the right to vote should be “real property,” she insisted in 1949, “and the voter must qualify himself.” When the individual of means paid taxes, and another – propertyless – individual voted for state benefits for themselves, the true essence of democracy was revealed. Democratic government, on these terms, was a vehicle of “extortion” in which the wealthy few were subsumed under a system of “partial slavery.” Forced to work, save and develop the productive powers of the economy, these individuals of means became vassals of the improvident masses.³⁷

A close friend of Paterson’s, before a wrenching break in the mid-1940s, the author Rose Wilder Lane offered a similar, if less sophisticated, diagnosis of the perils of democracy. A child of the Midwest, raised in relative poverty on a farm in Missouri, she was a convinced progressive until the late 1920s.³⁸ Celebrated for her novels and journalism, Lane experienced a political awakening at age forty-six with the election of Franklin Roosevelt, whom she feared and derided as an autocrat. “I hoped that Roosevelt would be killed in 1933,” she wrote to her literary agent later in the decade. “If there were any genuine adherence to American political principles in this country ... I would make a try at killing FDR now.”³⁹ Earlier in the decade, Lane had evinced sympathy for majority rule, but by the late 1930s her aversion to democracy, perhaps under the influence of Paterson, had fully flowered. “I am of course,” she wrote to an acquaintance in 1938, “opposed to any extension of ‘democracy.’”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 120, 24, 119, 121, 139, 258.

³⁷ Isabel Paterson, “The Riddle of Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott Decision,” *Georgia Review*, 3, 2 (Summer 1949), 192–203, 203.

³⁸ On Lane, the best sources are William Holtz, *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993); Burns, “The Three ‘Furies’ of Libertarianism.” Caroline Fraser’s recent biography of Lane’s mother, the celebrated children’s author Laura Ingalls Wilder, offers an engaging account of the pair’s evolving collaboration on the *Little House* series. Unfortunately, Fraser’s lengthy description of Lane’s political views is highly misleading and contains many errors. Caroline Fraser, *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (New York: Metropolitan, 2017).

³⁹ Lane to George Bye, 31 Jan. 1937, Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, James Oliver Brown Associates Records, Box 223.

I would like to see all the ‘democratic’ measures since 1900 repealed. I think them dangerous, perhaps disastrous, to the Republic.”⁴⁰ These measures, she believed, punished the hardworking and the affluent, while subverting the checks and balances that safeguarded the political system. Her antipathy to democracy by the end of the decade was ironclad, born of the conviction that American society had prospered for most of its history as a result of its insulation from the insistent vagaries of pure majority rule. “To me,” she wrote to a friend,

democracy means a State “of the people by the people for the people,” as Lincoln put it; that is, control of the State by a majority of persons outside the State but subject to its use of physical force upon them ... To me, this is the democratic process, as it was to Madison. I am not for it.⁴¹

Democracy, she insisted, like Hart, was indistinguishable from socialism in both theory and practice. Instead, she valorized property rights and economic liberty – the freedom to buy, sell and compete in the market – as the true foundations of the American social order. “Nobody,” she later wrote to a friend, echoing Paterson, “should have any voice whatever in American political affairs, not even a vote, who does not own property in these States.”⁴² While she revered the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises as the greatest living exponent of free-market philosophy, she pilloried his views on democracy. “Mises is a great economist,” Lane wrote to the libertarian scholar Orval Watts, but “he is an utter idiot in politics, inconsistent even with himself.”⁴³ Mises’s political idiocy, such as it was, consisted of his faith – always attenuated – in democratic politics.

Strikingly, Lane’s aversion to majoritarian politics extended to the most notable democratic reform of the early twentieth century. “American women did not want to vote,” she wrote in 1946. “Miss Alice Paul forced woman’s suffrage through Congress and the State legislatures.” The product of a clique of reformers, such extensions of the franchise, Lane argued, had undercut representative government and led to vote buying and other corruptions of American political life. These reforms were “unquestionably” dangerous to individual liberties, because by amending the Constitution they increased the peril of democracy, “which always creates an irresponsible tyrant.” Lane believed that the right to vote was a mere “superstition.” “No

⁴⁰ Lane to Mark Sullivan, 11 Oct. 1938, Stanford University, Hoover Institution Archives, Mark Sullivan Papers, Box 11.

⁴¹ Lane to Isaac Don Levine, 5 June 1948, Emory University, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Isaac Don Levine Papers, Box 133.

⁴² Lane to Jasper Crane, 6 March 1952, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Box 3.

⁴³ Lane to Watts, n.d. (c.1950), Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Box 27.

one has a natural right to vote,” she argued in 1943. “Everyone is born with inalienable liberty, but nobody is born with an inalienable ballot.” Democracy, on these terms, was a social cancer that was progressively infecting the American body politic. “Of all the lies that corrupt American thinking, weaken the Constitutions and threaten to destroy this government of Law protecting human rights,” she wrote in 1947, “the most insidiously corrupting and destructive is the approving use of the word ‘democracy.’”⁴⁴

Although they were not anarchists, by and large, the libertarians decried the state as a malignant force, and did not accept its constitutive role in constructing the legal and social framework that allows for the orderly functioning of the market order. The libertarians inherited from Paine, Jefferson and the nineteenth-century utilitarians the cardinal principle that the only justification for the restriction of an individual’s liberty was the protection of the rights of another.⁴⁵ Such a concept was inherently radical, even revolutionary, for it entailed that any state intervention beyond the protection of individual rights – and this meant the entire edifice of redistributionist democracy – was a priori unjust. Instead, they celebrated market capitalism, a “natural” system – a true democracy, they claimed – that solved the central problems of society, the harmonizing of competing interests and the allocation of scarce resources, without effacing the differences that were essential to human flourishing.

The reactionary critique of democracy, enunciated by Seward Collins, Ralph Adams Cram and a variety of reactionary conservatives, regarded the system of American society as a “plutocracy” that effaced individual and cultural differences under the unyielding pressure of capitalist consolidation.⁴⁶ These figures looked for a way out – from democracy, from modernity and from the whims of mass consumption. Although they possessed no detailed plan for how to overcome democracy, their pointed critique of majority rule

⁴⁴ Rose Wilder Lane, *The Discovery of Freedom: Man’s Struggle against Authority* (New York: John Day, 1943), 210, 203, 208; Lane to Jasper Crane, 6 March 1952, Lane Papers, Box 3; Rose Wilder Lane in *Economic Council Review of Books*, 4, 2 (Feb. 1947), 1–4, 2.

⁴⁵ Above all, John Stuart Mill. See the classic discussion in Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in John Stuart Mill, *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–72, esp. 127; John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. David Bromwich and George Kateb (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 80. As Jefferson wrote, “a wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government.” Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801,” in Stephen H. Browne, *Jefferson’s Call for Nationhood: The First Inaugural Address* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2003), xiii–xvii, xv.

⁴⁶ Herbert Agar, “The Task for Conservatism,” *American Review*, April 1934, 1–22; Seward Collins, “The Revival of Monarchy,” *American Review*, May 1933, 243–56, esp. 244–45.

rested on a conception of agrarian life, a distributist economy, and an aristocracy of talent as the chief guardians of a well-ordered society. They believed, contra the liberals, that the true struggle between justice and evil lay in the heart of the individual, and were contemptuous of the theory that sin was a product of society, of individuals malformed by the structures of state and market.

Collins himself is a curious case. A member of the eastern elite, wealthy and unfailingly genteel, he devoted much of his life to the promotion of literary criticism but would become infamous for his eccentric politics.⁴⁷ A self-professed fascist, Collins strangely – although perhaps understandably, given fascism’s theoretical heterogeneity – equated that ideology with the renewal of guild socialism, organic community ties and an agrarian economy.⁴⁸ This, of course, was not really fascism at all, but simply ultra-reactionary conservatism. The journal he founded and edited in the 1930s, the *American Review*, played host to many of the luminaries of Anglo-American conservatism, and it was in its pages that Collins launched a strident attack on democracy and “parliamentarism” that earned him broad notoriety. He openly praised monarchy as the ideal form of government and viewed fascism as its necessary successor. “The question of politics,” he argued in 1934, “resolves itself, broadly, into a discussion of the succession of Fascism to parliamentarianism; or at least some form of authoritarian government supplanting pluto-democracy, and Fascism seems the most convenient word, in spite of ambiguities.” The urgent task of the day, he believed in 1934, was that of expunging the powers of “the plutocratic régime” – liberal capitalism – which had engendered civilizational chaos and opened the way to a retreat into “orderly” collectivism.⁴⁹

Yet Collins was above all a traditionalist. As he told an undercover reporter, “I just want to see the end of Communism and capitalism and a return to the life of the Middle Ages.”⁵⁰ This was a world away from the fascism of interwar Europe, but Collins happily grouped himself with the European dictatorships. He was content, he wrote to Walter Lippmann, to be considered “fanatical and extreme.”⁵¹ He praised the European nations, in 1933, for returning to

⁴⁷ On Collins see Albert E. Stone, “Seward Collins and the *American Review*: Experiment in Pro-fascism, 1933–37,” *American Quarterly*, 12, 1 (1960), 3–19; Michael Jay Tucker, *And Then They Loved Him: Seward Collins & the Chimera of an American Fascism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

⁴⁸ To make matters more confusing, Collins described himself as an “old fossil of a conservative” in the early 1930s. Collins to Upton Sinclair, 22 Aug. 1931, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Seward Collins Papers, Box 11.

⁴⁹ Seward Collins, “The *American Review*’s First Year,” *American Review*, April 1934, 118–28, 124, 119.

⁵⁰ Collins quoted in John Roy Carlson, *Under Cover* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1943), 202.

⁵¹ Collins to Lippmann, 11 May 1933, Seward Collins Papers, Box 7.

their “ancestral,” autocratic forms of government. Mussolini, he insisted, was the “most constructive statesman of our age.” Not only had Il Duce grasped the need for dictatorship, but he fused it with a healthy moral system based on Catholic social teachings. Collins even had praise for Lenin – “a commander of supreme genius” – who had established a basically constructive, if ideologically risible, form of one-man rule. For the dictator, Collins believed, “governs in the interest of the whole State, and in secular matters stands above all individuals and groups in the State. The ultimate sovereignty of the people is symbolized in him and is by him realized in action.”⁵²

Elsewhere in the *American Review*, authors of different ideological hues attacked majoritarian government in similar terms. Such a system, they argued, was anathema to the reactionary belief in hierarchy, order and authority. In one article, the historian Stebelton H. Nulle prophesized a coming society in which democracy would cease to exist. By 1936, it was manifest to the intelligent that the democratic state was “drawing near its end,” he wrote. The masses, he believed, swiftly enfranchised without sufficient “safeguards,” were wholly incompetent to govern. What was needed was a new stress on hierarchy and discipline, embodied in an autocratic government. The “totalitarian state,” he insisted, “actually represents a new and more faithful interpretation of democracy and carries its principles to loftier heights.” Government, under authoritarianism, would be revitalized, the connections between citizen and state renewed. All this was a far cry from the desiccated husk of democratic government and its “paltry reforming preoccupations.”⁵³

Other contributors to the magazine sounded similar themes. Ross J. S. Hoffman, a self-professed extremist, called for a “strong authoritarian government,” and decried the fact that the principle of popular sovereignty had destroyed the monarchies of Europe. The result had been a “degraded” politics in which social conflict was endemic to the political order. The democratic system, he insisted, had led only to waste, corruption, incompetence and rank hypocrisy. And the efforts of Franklin Roosevelt would inevitably “founder on the rocks of corrupt democratic politics.”⁵⁴ Hoffman pleaded for an authoritarian state that would protect intellectual liberty but enshrine autocratic rule, a government of absolute authority that could freely act “against the will of the people.” Plainly, he wrote in 1934, “there is no solution but a revolutionary solution, for the tottering American political system of today is perhaps the best demonstration of those anti-authoritarian principles

⁵² Collins, “Revival of Monarchy,” 252–53, 246, 248; Collins quoted in Stone, 15. By monarchy Collins did not mean the hereditary form of the European past, but simply autocratic rule.

⁵³ Stebelton H. Nulle, “America and the Coming Order,” *American Review*, June 1936, 272–86, 272–73, 276, 284–85.

⁵⁴ Hoffman, “Liberty and Authority,” 588, 571, 590.

which have brought about the wreckage of modern society.” America must pass through a revolution, one tied to the principles of order, authority, and justice, and there could be no escaping that fact.⁵⁵

The reactionaries’ fascination with the European dictatorships suggests that, for the most part, they had little real knowledge of the raw violence that kept Mussolini, Franco and Hitler in power. The idea that the annulment of parliamentary democracy would result in a higher “democracy” – a frequent claim, too, of certain European and American fascists – obfuscated the real relationship between the people and their Führer.⁵⁶ The projected dictator, Collins believed, was the ultimate repository of the “sovereignty of the people,” but such language elided the reality of autocracy, a system in which the ruler was outside the influence of the people and responsible in turn only to a tiny clique.

The arch-reactionary architect and social critic Ralph Adams Cram offered, like his allies on the right, a similarly jaundiced view of democracy, and no figure better illustrated the persistent tensions that ran through reactionary thought.⁵⁷ Born in New Hampshire in 1863, Cram was a gifted architect and unrepentant aristocrat. The principles expounded in the pages of the *American Review*, Cram insisted in a letter, were “wholly my own.” Cram praised Collins’s essay on “monarchy” or autocracy as the mirror of his own thinking. He believed unalterably, as he confessed to an acquaintance, in “the desirability of monarchy instead of democracy.”⁵⁸ In his published works he was similarly explicit. “If we are to retain any sort of free, representative government,” he wrote in 1936, “universal suffrage will have to be abandoned in favor of some restricted, selective scheme such as was in force and held to be a desideratum by the statesmen of 1787.” The Founders had feared “the people” quite as much as they had monarchy, and had deliberately safeguarded the Constitution from the corrosion of democracy. Only under protest, Cram wrote, had they allowed the people “a small share” in political life.⁵⁹ Cram admired an idealized notion of an “aristocratic” early American

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 574–75, 587.

⁵⁶ As Gordon has noted of the Nazi-aligned German American Bund, its leader Fritz Kuhn “thought that ‘the overpowering decision of the German *Volk*’ was an ‘expression of ... the most sublime form of true democracy.’” Linda Gordon, “The American Fascists,” in Gaviel D. Rosenfeld and Janet Ward, eds., *Fascism in America: Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 141–69, 149.

⁵⁷ On Cram’s social thought see Robert Muccigrosso, *American Gothic: The Mind and Art of Ralph Adams Cram* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980); Douglass Shand-Tucci, *Ralph Adams Cram, An Architects Four Quests: Medieval, Modernist, American, Ecumenical* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

⁵⁸ Cram to Marvin Lowes, 15 May 1935, 10 June 1935, and 22 July 1935, Seward Collins Papers, Box 4.

⁵⁹ Ralph Adams Cram, “The Nemesis of Democracy,” *American Review*, Dec. 1936, 129–41, 133, 129.

republic, but under the democracy of the twentieth century the aristocrats, he lamented, had been divested of their essential prerogatives.⁶⁰ The mass of women and men, the ignorant and savage mob, were simply a reversion to a primitive species, a “Neolithic mass” who were not human beings at all. Democracy, universal suffrage and compulsory education had elevated this mass, clothing them with the illusory garments of equality, but underneath they were unalterably the same—superstitious, limited and possessed of “second-rate proletarian” minds.⁶¹ They were not capable, Cram emphatically believed, of creating a just and viable society, nor of democratic self-government based on a system of universal suffrage. Democracy, therefore, was not a virtue “but a menace.”⁶²

In *The End of Democracy* (1937), which he published at the age of seventy-four, Cram unspooled the fundamental elements of his position. “The first law in the Book of Man is inequality,” he declared. Society must be “hierarchical,” not “egalitarian.” And this inequality—fundamentally incompatible with democracy—was the root of all that was exemplary in the social world. The rise of the masses to political power had led to an insidious levelling of the individual, a stunted social life that contained within it the seeds of its own destruction. Through the expansion of voting rights, Cram believed, the proletariat had ultimately attained political dominance within the democratic state. Cram called for a “higher democracy,” one fundamentally aristocratic in spirit, that would check the power of the masses and revitalize social life. Unconditional liberty, he cautioned, “runs amok and destroys itself.” Only a feudal system—a higher democracy—combined the necessary level of liberty with the principle of political control. “Democracy is possible,” he noted perversely but sincerely, “only where there is a king on his throne.” Cram, though, was profoundly pessimistic about the prospects of establishing such a polity. Only an elite, those who were “not what man *is*,” but what he could be, might faithfully fulfil the promise of a higher democracy. And America, in the previous seventy years, had been the “antithesis” of such a democracy. Instead it had arrived, inexorably, at the “the reign of mediocrity,” at a final and destructive demagogic state.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ralph Adams Cram, “Fulfillment,” *American Mercury*, March 1935, 513–28, 515; Cram, “Invitation to Monarchy,” *American Mercury*, April 1936, 479–86, 479.

⁶¹ Ralph Adams Cram, “Why We Do Not Behave Like Human Beings,” *American Mercury*, Sept. 1932, 46–47; “second-rate” quoted in Spitz, *Patterns of Antidemocratic Thought*, 133.

⁶² Quoted in Spitz, 134.

⁶³ Ralph Adams Cram, *The End of Democracy* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1937), 35, 28, 87, 56, 31, emphasis in original; Cram, *Convictions and Controversies* (Boston, MA: Marshall Jones, 1935), 148–50, 184; Cram, “My Life in Architecture,” in Robert M. Crunden, ed., *The Superfluous Men: Conservative Critics of American Culture*, 2nd edn (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 27–38, 32; “mediocrity” quoted in Spitz, 134.

The fascist critique of democracy borrowed elements from the libertarian and reactionary, but anchored it to a theory of the corporate state that the fascists claimed would offer a more faithful, “organic” democracy, a democracy premised on a universal bond with a charismatic leader as an alternative to the corrupt machinations of party politics. The fascist state, these figures maintained, would combat the Depression with vigorous action, rallying the people or *Volk* with a singularity of purpose. Never as potent, or as numerous, as the libertarians or the reactionaries, the fascists nevertheless offered the most thoroughgoing critique of the democratic order.

The most intellectually sophisticated critique of democracy of the 1930s and 1940s came from the pen of Lawrence Dennis, an avowed fascist who regarded majoritarian government as a passing phase, an embryo of a future authoritarian society.⁶⁴ Born in segregated Atlanta in December 1893, Dennis was mixed-race and “passed” as a white man. This might help to explain, in part, the curious detachment with which he viewed politics. Dennis believed that only the “naked power” of the state underwrote the rights of the people; he was utterly contemptuous of theorists who regarded these rights as a product of natural law.⁶⁵ Politics was always a ceaseless “conspiracy of power,” and law was not a shield against this power but the very mode whereby “contests of sheer force or might” were enacted.⁶⁶ The ideology of democracy supposed that the consent of the majority was synonymous with liberty for all and the absence of coercion in political life – but such, he believed, was a risible fallacy.⁶⁷ A trip to Italy and Germany in 1936, to witness the fascist experiment firsthand, convinced Dennis that the corporate and racial state were the harbingers of a fascist revolution that would encircle the globe.⁶⁸ This new revolution, which was “world wide,” he noted, was just beginning in the United States.⁶⁹ The fate of democracy as a system was sealed by the inexorable sway of evolving social forces. “Why,” he wondered, “fight for it?”⁷⁰

⁶⁴ On Dennis see most recently Gerald Horne, *The Color of Fascism: Lawrence Dennis, Racial Passing, and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler's American Friends: The Third Reich's Supporters in the United States* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), chapter 6.

⁶⁵ Lawrence Dennis, *The Dynamics of War and Revolution* (New York: Weekly Foreign Letter, 1940), 183–84. Cf. Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism* (New York: Harper, 1936), 105.

⁶⁶ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, 116, 140.

⁶⁷ Dennis, *The Dynamics of War and Revolution*, 184.

⁶⁸ “The Reminiscences of Lawrence Dennis,” Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1967, 46–47; Horne, chapter 5.

⁶⁹ Dennis, *The Dynamics of War and Revolution*, vii.

⁷⁰ Lawrence Dennis, “Fascism for America,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 180 (July 1935), 62–73, 63.

In analysing the prospects of authoritarianism, Dennis came to regard the middle classes as the proper social basis for fascism in America. The bourgeoisie were quite ready to employ the predatory methods of the captains of industry in their search for a workable social order. Fascism seemed to Dennis to offer the prospect of a harmonious, organic framework of government, a “rational and workable social scheme” freed from the fractious infighting of parliamentary democracy. Democracy, in turn, was a “pious dogma” to whose blind adherence in the face of crisis would result in national ruin.⁷¹ “To make the task of my critics as simple as possible,” he wrote in 1940, “let me say categorically that I do not believe in democracy or the intelligence of the masses.” If the people had the requisite intellect to which a reasoned appeal could be made, he argued in the same year, the fascist revolution in America could be effected without intervening in the European war.⁷² But such was not the case. Fascism, thus, had to be imposed from above by an elite cadre of intellectuals and politicians, not through democratic elections. As he declared elsewhere, “I believe in palace revolutions.”⁷³

History and present experience, Dennis wrote in 1936, were bulging with proofs that the more there was economic liberty and democracy, the more disastrous would be the economic fluctuations of the capitalist order. Liberal democracy, he believed, had failed to rescue American society from profound economic dislocation, and was fated to fail again. Fascism, by abrogating the wilful impulses of the majority, would offer a vigorous, pragmatic and centralized response to the crisis of the free market, a “strong nationalism” that would punish or expunge the individuals and institutions that had created the Depression.⁷⁴ Fascism would also offer a revitalized religious impulse – a religion of the state – wholly absent from liberalism.⁷⁵ This required, he believed, an absolute centralized authority. Democracy, on these terms, was a “delusion,” a product of the eighteenth century, and a “farcical” and singularly ill-disposed system of government in the twentieth.⁷⁶ The “anarchy” of democracy and the free play of market forces encouraged a scramble for material gains in which powerful interests inevitably held sway. “The people can rule with rationality and success only through a single leader, party and governing agency,” he argued. “Public order and welfare require administration not

⁷¹ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, 49, ix, 6.

⁷² Dennis, *The Dynamics of War and Revolution*, viii.

⁷³ Dennis quoted in Victor Ferkiss, “The Political and Economic Philosophy of American Fascism,” PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 1954, 44.

⁷⁴ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, 94, 96, 133.

⁷⁵ Lawrence Dennis, *Is Capitalism Doomed?* (New York: Harper, 1932), 85–86.

⁷⁶ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, 123, 125.

conflict; the imposition and performance of duties, not the playing of a competitive game.”⁷⁷

Dennis based his analysis on his familiarity with the fascist dictatorships, but he failed to note that his proposed corporate system of governance was simply a facade for rigid dictatorship, even in Italy. Like the other critics of democracy, Dennis believed that an inflexible hierarchy should structure the social world, and that inequality was the source of the productive tension that sustained the economic and social order. Yet his loathing of the egalitarian promise of democracy was nowhere rationally justified. Disregarding the flexibility of the democratic system and the capacity of elected leaders to enact economic reforms and mitigate the risk of catastrophe, he stubbornly clung to the notion that the democracies would fail to manage their economies without descending into crisis.⁷⁸

Fascism, he believed, placed supreme importance on the benefits that could be achieved through enhanced efficiency in governance, primarily through the improved coordination of the governing bodies of the economic order. This, Dennis argued, required a vast undertaking in economic planning. He was convinced, too, that the social order would function more smoothly as an integrated system of corporations or cartels, yet nowhere did he convincingly argue why this would be so, reverting instead to a personal belief that it was predestined. A technocrat, Dennis believed in government by a “minority of technicians,” a self-selected elite.⁷⁹ A strong state, he wrote, “guided by a capable elite loyal to some scheme of national interest is far more expressive of the popular will than a weak liberal State.”⁸⁰ Yet was this true? In fact, the “capable elite” in a fascist regime was insulated from popular rule and under no real onus to enact a “scheme of national interest” reliably and competently. Dennis’s fixation on the defects of democratic rule led him to vastly overstate the unity and coherence of the fascist regimes. While not personally a bigot or a militarist, Dennis failed to grasp that intense xenophobia and imperial expansion was the essence of fascist regimes, the glue that ultimately made the system of exploitation and one-man rule possible in the medium term.

Other less sophisticated fascist critics of democracy attacked the system, like Dennis, for failing to rescue the United States from thoroughgoing economic disorder. The radio priest Father Charles Coughlin, who preached to an immense public throughout the Depression decade, had embraced a renewed democracy in the early 1930s as an antidote to the machinations of

⁷⁷ Dennis, *The Dynamics of War and Revolution*, 125

⁷⁸ Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, 239.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 241.

finance capital.⁸¹ By the late 1930s, though, he had begun to advocate a “corporate” state, peppering his remarks with praise for Mussolini and Franco. Coughlin, at this point, embraced democracy in the abstract, but was inclined to believe that a majoritarian state in which undesirable figures were elevated was the worst form of government. Such a state of affairs, he argued, was not true democracy but “mobocracy,” government by the unrestrained passions of the mob.⁸² Democracy in America could not and should not persist, he insisted, unless it was purged of “partyism,” of Jewish-controlled capitalism, and “of its theory of majorityism.”⁸³ Coughlin, by the early 1940s, was an open fascist – much as he denied the label – an eager advocate of the totalitarian corporatism of Mussolini. Coughlin’s philosophy blended Catholic social teachings, fascist theories of an “organic” society and a fervent anti-Semitism.⁸⁴ In 1939, he found that “a surprisingly great number of persons are in favor of abolishing this two-party system and substituting for it a corporative democracy ... [with] a one-party system of politics.”⁸⁵ Here, clearly, he was thinking of himself. Yet his oblique call for “one-party” government was a recipe for dictatorship, and the tension between his residual belief in democracy and his desire for one-man rule was never fully resolved. The nation, he concluded in 1940, had never been a true democracy, “but always a republic.”⁸⁶ For untrammelled mass rule, he believed, was synonymous with atheism, finance capitalism and the nefarious designs of the Jewish world conspiracy. As he wrote, much later, “Probably the most disastrous doctrine Satan has disseminated through his earthly leaders was ‘government by the people.’”⁸⁷

⁸¹ On Coughlin see, among others, Sheldon B. Marcus, *Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1973); Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*; Donald I. Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: Free Press, 1996). Interestingly, Dennis regarded the early phases of Coughlin’s political activities as “humane and helpful.” *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸² “Father Coughlin Replies,” *Social Justice*, 4 April 1938, 2.

⁸³ Coughlin quoted in Morris Schonbach, *Native American Fascism during the 1930s and 1940s: A Study of Its Roots, Its Growth and Its Decline* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 295.

⁸⁴ “Christian Social Justice,” *Social Justice*, 25 July 1938, 19. Earlier scholarship on Coughlin almost universally regarded him as a fascist. Alan Brinkley, in his influential account, argued for the opposite conclusion. Coughlin, on Brinkley’s terms, displayed fascist tendencies “unwittingly”; he neither “approved of fascism or maintained any meaningful connection with fascist movements or thinkers.” The evidence, however, such as Coughlin’s open praise of Mussolini and his fostering of the paramilitary Christian Front, strongly suggests that Coughlin was a fascist. Brinkley, 274, 276. On the Front see the superb account by Charles R. Gallagher, *Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

⁸⁵ “A Publisher’s Plain Talk,” *Social Justice*, 30 Jan. 1939, 7.

⁸⁶ “America: Democracy or Republic?,” *Social Justice*, 22 April 1940, 10.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Warren, 300.

The fate of majority rule in America ultimately eluded the carping of its critics. American democracy proved extraordinarily resilient, and the prophecies of tyranny so common among the right in the 1930s and 1940s did not come to pass. Democracy in America, however, remained imperfect, and it was this imperfection that later theorists and political operatives would exploit for their own purposes. Did this mean that democracy must revert, in the final analysis, to “mob” rule? Perhaps. But also perhaps not. For the fascist, libertarian and reactionary critiques of democracy barely comprehended the richness, variety, and flexibility of democratic politics, the capacity of the majoritarian state to face and overcome existential danger. The critiques of democracy outlined in this article were for the most part – with a few key exceptions – facile projections of their authors’ alienation from modern liberalism, an estrangement that led them to never fully reckon with the ideological underpinnings of democracy as such.

The fascist critique of the American democratic order died, like much else, with the victory of the Allies in 1945. Discredited by its association with the European dictatorships, it became, in America, the doctrine only of tiny sects and isolated extremists. Liberal democracy, instead, seemed the “wave of the future,” and the surviving proponents of the native fascism of the prewar years largely abandoned their convictions, refashioning themselves in many cases as anticommunist ultras. Reactionary thought of the *American Review* variety experienced a similar fate. Many of its proponents adjusted readily to the realities of postwar American life, and with the economic abundance and renewal of democratic ideals in the postwar world these figures largely abandoned – or simply stopped expressing – their critique of democracy. The libertarians’ contempt for democracy was another matter. Their views must be seen as a product, at least in part, of the distance that separated them from political power. The triumph of New Deal liberalism at the voting booth, on these terms, reinforced the suspicion of democracy that they inherited from a number of the Founding Fathers. For all the libertarians’ antipathy towards democracy, though, they did not embrace a form of political authoritarianism; they yearned instead for the abolition of politics itself, or at least its radical limitation. And by the early 1960s, their suspicion of democracy had largely faded, as much of the libertarian right was subsumed by a nascent conservatism, a new faith which increasingly looked to the Republican Party to fulfil its own dreams of political power.

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