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Who Is Afraid of the People? The Entanglement of Democracy, Populism and Stupidity

Yonathan Listik

So why address these issues through a discussion of populism? Because of the suspicion, which I have had for a long time, that in the dismissal of populism far more is involved than the relegation of a peripheral set of phenomena to the margins of social explanation. What is involved in such a disdainful rejection is, I think, the dismissal of politics *tout court*, and the assertion that the management of community is the concern of an administrative power whose source of legitimacy is a proper knowledge of what a “good” community is.

LACLAU, *On Populist Reason*

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Because “the people” does not exist. What exist are diverse or even antagonistic figures of the people, figures constructed by privileging certain modes of assembling, certain distinctive traits, certain capacities or incapacities: ... a democratic people putting to use the skills of those who have no particular skills; an ignorant people that the oligarchs keep at a distance; and so on. The notion of populism itself constructs a people characterized by the formidable alloy of a capacity – the brute force of great number – and an incapacity – the ignorance attributed to that same great number.

RANCIÈRE, *The Populism That Is Not to Be Found*

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1 Introduction

In his essay on stupidity, Robert Musil argues that in order to comment on stupidity, one must not be stupid:

the best place might be with the initial difficulty, which is that anyone who wants to talk about stupidity, or profitably participate in a conversation about it, must assume about himself that he is not stupid; and he also makes a show of considering himself clever, although doing so is generally considered a sign of stupidity!¹

Still, this account sets a challenge for any engagement with stupidity when considering that claiming to be intelligent is commonly taken to be a sign of its inverse. A situation emerges where only the intelligent can comment on stupidity but, in doing so, they turn themselves stupid hence invariably delegitimizing their account.

If one adopts this assessment, just as a working definition for now, it seems stupidity has two main features. First, it is always the category of some other who is a threat to us despite being inherently inferior to us. Second, it is impossible to comment on stupidity since this would require an unchecked *hubris* associated with stupidity; *hubris* being that improper grasp of reality that disavows one from being intelligent. This situation makes it an object that cannot be tampered with, despite its obvious inferiority. Stupidity seems to be a trap for intelligence (to outsmart it in some sense even!). In that sense, intelligence never occupies itself with stupidity or never seriously. It remains this ultimate unvanquishable challenge. Hence the question “who is afraid of stupidity?” can be easily answered: only the intelligent.

Moreover, rightly so since it seems only the intelligent are aware of stupidity’s destructive power. The stupid invariably believe themselves to be carriers of reason or else they would be aware that they are stupid. This is perhaps the distinction between stupidity and evil, where only in the latter we encounter the clear intention and motivation for destruction, whereas in the former it is a collateral effect or an unintentional consequence. Intelligence is presented as the exclusive power capable of assessing reality and acting accordingly: accessing the facts and foreseeing the appropriate set of responses to it. As a response to this assumption, this chapter will argue that any conception of intelligence

¹ Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 270.

is already a political notion. More specifically, it is one that exists exclusively as the placeholder for a conception of objective/reasonable knowledge, which operates on life in order to cleanse it of non-objective/unreasonable elements that interfere in the implementation of a naturalized harmonious order, and hence intelligence is a politically charged construction.

Intelligence here will refer to the totalizing form of knowledge and reason. Thus, it is invariably a project of naturalizing (social) order and hierarchy.² It is fundamental to highlight what is being implied here but will be explicitly stated further in the text: intelligence refers to a structure of self-evident authority that emerges from knowledge/rationality/reason. Intelligence is not *employed* for any means (good or bad); it is itself the logic of employment that determines both what is and what should/could be, hence creating an imperative determination (i.e., a must). In that sense, it is both descriptive and normative without being either, since it is self-evident.

In *For a Left Populism*, Chantal Mouffe makes the argument that recent undemocratic phenomena are not extraordinary events inconsistent with the current political configuration, but rather, to a great extent, continuations of its logic.³ This is perhaps an unconventional line to pursue but I will argue that her intuition is proven correct since even though recent undemocratic movements present themselves as protest movements, they are representatives of mainstream logic. I will show that despite what might seem to be the case, those are neither marginalized nor disruptive ideas. I will demonstrate that in fact they stand precisely on ideas of loyal and law-abiding citizenship that are consistent with the maintenance of the *status quo*, not its disruption.

For example, a central concept in Bolsonaro's campaign was the "good citizen" in the sense that his government would represent a return to legality rather than a break from it.⁴ In other words, only the "bad citizens" would be damaged from his government and logically they should be damaged, considering that they are bad citizens. Like Trump, as perhaps the emblematic figure of the problem, or other undemocratic governments, undemocratic waves oppose the idea of a degeneration caused by the masses. Even when they allegedly advocate against the establishment, it is on behalf of a liberal

2 That includes conceptualizations such "street smarts," "people smart," "moral intelligence," "emotional intelligence," etc., or any "intelligent" combination of them. For example, to argue that one should know when to be calculative and when to be emotional is already a structure on intelligence since it relies on a reasonable organization of life – "knowing" when and where to be as one should.

3 Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York: Verso Books, 2018), 22.

4 It is also important to emphasize that "The Good Citizen" was the name of KKK publication.

capitalist imperative to enjoy and be free which does not in any way represent a break with the establishment.⁵ It is merely a reproduction of the neoliberal logic of opposing the scroungers and money-grabbing bureaucracy on behalf of the productive taxpaying citizen.

Based on this argument, this chapter will explore the extent to which the current political configuration is democratic via an investigation of the conditions for political legitimacy: the central axis will be the idea of “the people” and the conditions placed on the legitimacy of its political role. In this sense, the argument will explore the manner in which what is presented as democratic is in fact repressive and marginalizing. The central idea is that while political discourse presents itself as an open sphere of dispute, such logic is conditioned on a technocratic assumption that certain claims are politically reasonable while others are stupid. Even though the term “stupid” is not openly employed, one can collect several examples where politics is openly described as the activity of managing the “masses” who are unable to guide themselves. At this stage, I will limit myself to referring to the canonical figure of John Rawls who argues about unreasonable positions: “This gives us the practical task of containing them – like war and disease – so that they do not overturn political justice.”⁶ This is a clear statement of what Mouffe calls the “egalitarian precipice” to denote claims that democratic ideals are posing a threat to governability—that the democratic ideal of equality poses a threat to democracy itself. This underlying conditionality of democracy on governability is the object of the argument here. In this sense Jacques Rancière description of populism is relevant:

Populism is the convenient name under which is dissimulated the exacerbated contradiction between popular legitimacy and expert legitimacy, that is, the difficulty the government of science has in adapting itself to manifestations of democracy and even to the mixed form of representative system. This name at once masks and reveals the intense wish of the oligarch: to govern without people, in other words, without any dividing of the people; to govern without politics. And it enables the expert government to rid itself of the old aporia: how can science govern those who do not understand it?⁷

5 The idea of “theft of enjoyment” is pertinent here but it requires a careful investigation that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

6 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 64.

7 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (New York: Verso Trade, 2014), 62.

The argument here will show that this is not a new challenge to democracy but expressive of a repressive and undemocratic conception of politics that is fundamentally technocratic. This is evident considering the Greek conception assessed in Brown⁸ that the *polis* is the public realm of intelligence where those capable of making decisions grounded on reason are free while those lacking the capacity to participate (*idios*) should be subjugated to the private realm. More specifically, in Brown's account, the relationship between manhood and politics constructs womanhood as an uncontrolled element only to have politics dedicated to its control. A similar account is present in Federici's assessment of the role of women and witches in the transition to capitalism (where the term "good citizen" is employed against the "chaotic masses"). One finds that the *Demos* (the masses or the people) are presented as an impediment to democracy, not its sovereign. It is at best a contingent element that has its power conditioned on proper participation as in Rawls' quote.

The analysis here therefore shows that one should revisit the portrayal of totalitarian politics as a form of populist stupidity. Fascism emerges, in fact, from within this controlling impetuous: this attempt to administer stupidity as unproductive and incapacity. To a large extent, the fear of the "stupid masses" enables undemocratic interventions, so perhaps the conceptualization of the political role of stupidity can offer an alternative. Or in Rancière's words:

There is politics when this presupposition is broken by the affirmation that the power belongs to those who have no qualification to rule – which amounts to saying that there is no ground whatever for the exercise of power. There is politics when the boundary separating those who are born for politics from those who are born for the "bare" life of economic and social necessity is put into question.⁹

2 Aims and Limitations

In this chapter, I will provide a conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between intelligence, stupidity, and power. My contribution to the debate will be to provide a new account of the relation between intelligence and stupidity and develop the political implications of this relation. In

8 See Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1988).

9 Jacques Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics," in *Reading Rancière*, ed. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, 1–17 (New York: Continuum, 2011), 3.

understanding the administrative logic of intelligence my aim is twofold: first, I will demonstrate that what is portrayed as democratic is in fact largely undemocratic. Second, I will attempt to provide an account of what *could be* democratic, exploring the way stupidity's disruptive power is a form of democratic intervention.

In this context it is fundamental to circumscribe the argument advanced here as well as its limitations. I will wisely refrain from defining stupidity, but I want to nevertheless pose the following question: why are we so afraid of being stupid? Considering the evilness of intelligence and the innocuousness of stupidity, why is it stupidity that we are afraid of? Before exploring the contours of stupidity, one must affirm the possibility that it can be an alternative to our current regime. I will make this claim by showing that intelligence is leading us nowhere, so we should consider stupidity as an alternative. To be honest, it is not a robust argument. It can be summarized by two trivial statements: (1) intelligence is bad, and (2) stupidity is not intelligent – which obviously leaves miles in theoretical work to be done. Yet, I would like to believe, perhaps stupidly, that it is a small initial step, nevertheless. In other words, I do not aim to describe what stupidity is but rather what it is not, whilst making the case that because it refuses the current logic, it must be considered an alternative prospect. Thus, this chapter aims merely to open a debate, not close one. It barely even asks the question of stupidity, much less closes it. I merely propose that we consider it a question in the first place, to consider it a worthy issue and not a problem to be resolved by intelligence.

I will argue that the political category of stupidity *could be* useful in opposing contemporary political issues since it offers some resistance to dominant logic. Considering that domination is the defining characteristic of civilization, then maybe (and no more than maybe) it is time to be *non-civilized*, to truly bring “degeneration” to civilization. It might be a “stupid” argument, but this is precisely the point. We *should* not be afraid of being stupid, “barbaric,” or anarchic. To say it bluntly, I am not yet suggesting that we ought to be stupid, I am rather raising a question regarding the imperative to be intelligent. This text does not aim to convince nor provide any definite answers on the question. It is merely identifying what I believe is a serious question, one that is often overlooked or wrongly framed.

As stated previously, this text is merely an invitation to consider stupidity as a political category. Or in other words, to shift the essential political question from “who is the best?” or “what is the best way?”, to the question “why the best?” Thus, all that is being proposed is (1) this is an interesting question and (2) a criterion for what will constitute a valid answer to this question: avoiding intelligence. The aim of this paper is not to defend undemocratic political

interventions such as Trump and Bolsonaro by arguing that in their stupidity they are in fact enacting a democratic posture. Instead, the underlying thesis is that they still represent a continuation of hegemonic discourse (intelligence) so unless we revisit the political role of stupidity, we would not be able to face those challenges.

3 What Is Wrong with Intelligence?

When we reflect on some of the worst examples of extreme violence in our history such as colonialism and eugenics, can we say they were the result of stupid and outdated views? One is tempted to say “yes,” but the answer should not be so clear. Maybe in hindsight it seems that way, yet even a superficial historical investigation proves otherwise. Colonial and eugenic logic were not the superstitious beliefs of the uneducated masses; they were upheld by scientific and reasonable scrutiny.

The colonization of America and Africa were not “unfortunate” steps in the development of civilization, nor was social Darwinism an error in the otherwise progressive evolution of science. John Marion Sims, “The Father of Modern Gynecology,” legally experimented on enslaved black woman without anesthesia because it was believed they did not feel pain. In 1927, the United States Supreme Court ruled it was constitutional to perform sterilizations on its citizens, resulting in 70,000 women of “weak mind” being sterilized because they were “irresponsibly reproducing.”¹⁰ As recently as the 1990s, programs of mass enforced sterilization took place in Peru where women of native origins were vociferously targeted.¹¹ Looking at those cases, and the overarching history of civilization, violence is persistently an element of intelligence rather than stupidity.

A more sophisticated version of what was insinuated is Silvia Federici’s Marxist opposition to Marx.¹² Marx argues that the development of capitalism is a violent step towards communism (he uses the metaphor of birthing

10 Fresh Air, “*The Supreme Court Ruling That Led To 70,000 Forced Sterilizations.*” March 7, 2016 Retrieved from NPR: <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/03/07/469478098/the-supreme-court-ruling-that-led-to-70-000-forced-sterilizations>

11 Carranza Ko, N.. “Forcibly sterilized during Fujimori dictatorship, thousands of Peruvian women demand justice” March 3, 2021 Retrieved from *The Conversation*: <https://theconversation.com/forcibly-sterilized-during-fujimori-dictatorship-thousands-of-peruvian-women-demand-justice-155086>

12 See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2004).

as a violent event that creates something new). Federici argues against him, claiming that the development of capitalism was not a progressive event unfortunately embedded with the necessity of violence, but rather a counter-revolutionary event where struggles were repressed in order to impose domination i.e., pure dominating violence.¹³ In line with Federici, we can think of the whole of history as a regressive movement driven by intelligence and reason.

Federici's argument is based on her demonstration that the notion of rationality and agency are not in any way objective but rather emerge exclusively within a disciplinary impetus in modernity and capitalism. Her main argument is that opposition to magic is not located in feudalism, but in the necessity of capitalism to root production in work, discipline, and obedience. To achieve that goal, capitalism had to eradicate the possibility of magic and inoperative production on behalf of a notion of agency that is mechanically constructed. In her understanding, this is the logic behind cartesian rationalism, as exemplary of a key moment in modernity with its division of body and soul. The parallel here being that in the same manner that spirit governs the mechanic body, the invisible hand governs, via the dominant class, the mechanic masses in the factories or the enslaved bodies, who themselves are purely mechanized. As the body does not think, it requires bourgeois intelligence and calculability: 'Like the land, the body had to be cultivated and first of all broken up ... It was not sufficient, then, to decide that in itself the body had no value. The body had to die so that labor-power could live.'¹⁴

This same conclusion regarding modern subjectivity and its conception of rational agency, as a mode of violent subjugation, is found in Esposito's¹⁵ and Brown's¹⁶ assessment of the subject. In Esposito, the account is constructed via the conceptual framework of immunity and privatization. According to him, the idea of selfhood is not an enclosed windowless monad, but rather results from the process of immunization, where the privatized subject must gain autonomy by enclosing itself against pathological otherness. The individual autonomous agent exists only as the constant rejection of its openness and dependency on otherness, or translating into the cartesian terms proposed by Federici, the spirit exists only as the administration of the body.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (London: Polity Press, 2002); Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁶ See Brown, *Manhood and Politics*.

¹⁷ Esposito, *Bios*, 85.

This dynamic is present in Brown's assessment of manhood's political construction.¹⁸ In her account, manhood is determined by its taming and domestication of womanhood. The irrational and untamable object exists as an already pacified object, "mechanized" in the cartesian vocabulary, or an object to be pacified by the reasonable autonomous agents, as in the pathological element one must immunize against in Esposito's account. Again, in the three theories one finds that ideas of order, rationality, agency, autonomy, and citizenship are not objective standards one can impartially hold and employ as measurements for actions. They are invariably and inherently tainted by their violent and repressive constructions along with the naturalization of those dynamics as factual or objectively true.¹⁹

It is important here to emphasize how this logic differs from previous critiques of modernity, i.e., the synthesis of Enlightenment and capitalism. Even though there are several possible places to find such critique, *The Black Jacobins* by C.L.R. James for example (a text that is often forgotten in this context), the focus here will be exclusively on Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, as it is a canonical text.²⁰ Against what Adorno and Horkheimer argue, the idea advanced here is that the Enlightenment has not forfeited its realization.²¹ Instead, one must realize that there is no other possible outcome to Enlightenment because there is no other possible outcome to intelligence.

As the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* explicitly argues, the totalization of Enlightenment does not concern its outcomes, but rather it involves the totality of control.²² Hence, it makes no sense to hold it to its own standards. That is, to argue that it does not deliver on its promise of reason and productiveness, i.e., to point at its contradiction, as it would be naïve to expect that its goals

18 Brown, *Manhood and Politics*, 24.

19 Ibid., 26–27.

20 In the following, I will provide a reading of Adorno and Horkheimer as it is presented in some of its canonical followers, such as Axel Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 200); Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory*. (London: Verso, 2007); Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). The critique of modernity is undoubtedly indebted to them, and I would argue that there is room for a reading of their texts that provides a more radical perspective than the one employed here. Still, this chapter does not aim to engage in a debate over this issue and it recognizes that the canonical interpretation is loyal to the original project.

21 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 33.

22 Ibid., 69–70.

could be separated from its totalitarian methods. In this manner, the dialectics is not found in the fact that intelligence invariably results in stupidity or that reason becomes madness, but in the fact that intelligence is inherently “stupid” in being intelligent.²³ In other words, we are not witnessing the self-destruction of reason but merely its upmost realization in its opposite. The Enlightenment does not “shift” or “transform” into irrationality, or in the terms proposed here, intelligence into stupidity. There is no dynamic of control or balance between those two elements. In fact, any belief in such a possibility would already entail the possibility of an “intelligent” administration of that relation, which would itself be the object of the critique here.²⁴

Reason is fully realized in its “stupid” domination of stupidity. In other words, in the fact that the unity/identity with itself is only possible via the constant sublimation of its opposite. So, one finds that reason is not undermined by the disastrous effects of its implementation, but rather, it is reaffirmed and reified as the objective truth of reality. As will be demonstrated in the sequence, despite what seems evident, the undemocratic movements that are portrayed as barbaric or unreasonable are never stupid since they are never the outcome of some improper otherness. They are consistent with hegemonic logic. Again, this chapter will not provide a positive definition of stupidity or the way it is a radical form of otherness. It will limit itself with the negative threshold that stupidity is ‘not being part of the hegemonic discourse’ and considering the argument that the hegemony is characterized by the totalitarian grasp of intelligence, anything that is consistent with intelligence/reason is automatically not stupid.

In this manner, the Enlightenment is undesirable precisely because it delivers on its promises.²⁵ In other words, the problem is not the triumphalism of reason but that it did in fact win. It has managed to liquidate any alternative and thus, it has ended history. It no longer has any alternative. As in Adorno and Horkheimer’s example of the bank with glass walls, which exposes the reality of capitalism in a literal sense, the issue today is this domination of transparency.²⁶ Everything is public and accessible. We are permeated by intelligence and any possible conflicts can be solved or reconciled via reason. This totalitarian regime is problematic not because it is unable to eliminate the

23 Ibid., 169.

24 See Yonathan Listik, “A Biopolitical Account of Social Pathology: Viewing Pathology as a Political-Ontological Issue,” in *Pathology Diagnosis and Social Research: New Applications and Explorations*, ed. Neal Harris, 163–189 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

25 This is perhaps in friction with some of the traditional reading of Adorno and Horkheimer.

26 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 183.

place of stupidity, but because it manages to fully control it. As they recognize, the idea of Enlightenment is not problematic just because it is repressive, but rather because it is an absolutization of self-government and autonomy.²⁷ Any lamentation of capitalist selfhood as a form of pseudo-individuality is equivalent to believing in the enlighten promise that autonomy would be harmonious.²⁸ Instead, one must face the fact that what the authors are describing is not the loss of individuality but its very concretization. Put bluntly, there is no conception of individuality that is not inherently a form of enlighten agency.²⁹

As mentioned earlier, the dynamic between intelligence and stupidity will not be elaborated upon here, but nevertheless it is fundamental to propose the question regarding this binary dynamic and the moral blackmail it entails. Regarding the first issue: is irrationality really the negative of rationality? As evidenced in Adorno and Horkheimer's argument about the cyclops, the Enlightenment is not threatened by the unjust repercussions of its productive force (i.e., irrationality), the real opposition to enlightenment lies in unproductiveness and incivility.³⁰ As unreasonable as it might be, the social hierarchy and order represented in the figure of Odysseus as a Robinsonian self-made agent are not problematic for capitalism. It is the cyclops' anarchic society, where satisfaction is not conditioned on discipline, that is treated as problematic within Enlightenment.

In this sense, the figure of the Cyclops hints at a possibility of a third option that is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, it is stupidly banal. Returning to the issue of moral blackmail, the imperative to adopt reason since its opposite is invariably worst, is precisely the self-evident normative power of intelligence, which this chapter aims to challenge. The fear that any abdication of reason will be a return to barbarism erases the fact that it is civilization that is violent.³¹ The barbarian never came, it was civilization who came to them and imposed not barbarism, but rather civilization, rationality, and intelligence. In simple terms, I fear the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* remains a text that speaks on behalf of civilization against barbarism. The question that I propose is whether it has to? Whether or not this is the only way to deter destruction? The question is obviously hinting at a negative answer, since even if it does not provide

27 Ibid., 90.

28 Ibid., 125.

29 As it was hopefully established via Federici, Esposito, and Brown in the previous section.

30 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 50–51.

31 See Dews' reading of Adorno's "Subject and Object," in Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 2007).

a *definite* answer, in suggesting that the barbaric option, i.e., adopting stupidity and refusing civilization, should be at least considered, the argument here is at least implicitly stating that one does not have to be civilized.

4 Marginalizing Stupidity

This section will focus on the way the realistic and reasonable posture that emerges from the previous account of the Enlightenment reifies the elimination of politics via a self-evident logic where stupidity has no place in politics and should be prevented from taking any political role. In other words, this section explores the actual political ramification of upholding the Enlightenment. This section, along with the previous one, will be combined into an assessment of contemporary issues in the following section.

In the context established previously, one finds that the notion of democracy within mainstream theory is conditioned on a hermeneutic imperative where understanding (or any other instance of intelligence) conditions political participation. Besides the already mentioned Rawls, one could comment on David Estlund,³² Joseph Raz,³³ or Ronald Dworkin,³⁴ but perhaps it is Jason Brennan's open opposition to democracy on behalf of epistocracy that is most revealing regarding this inherent condition. He states that politics is too important to allow it to be dangerous. If the requirement for a driver's license is grounded on the fact that driving creates life-threatening circumstances, the same logic should be extended to political participation as it has the same (if not greater) life-determining consequences. One might oppose the conclusions or the ethics of its applications, as most of the other authors referred to in this paragraph do, but his presupposition that stupidity should not be in charge remains self-evident. In a similar manner, most authors avoid directly opposing stupidity or

32 Even though he initially denies epistemic authority, he implicitly builds on it later via the concept of "democratic muster." See David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3.

33 See Joseph Raz' elaboration on mandatory norms and reasons for action. The basic idea is that one should not only be able to construct a normative framework but also a second-order normativity that would provide the reasons to prefer one set of values over another. Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

34 This is not a surprising accusation considering his book is entitled *Laws's Empire* and supports its arguments on idealized versions of judges based on Greek gods, such as Hercules and Hermes, who possess hermeneutic superpowers. For a more detailed criticism of Dworkin, see Paul Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

even using the term, but I want to argue that it remains the underling logic of their arguments.

If one considers the idea of democracy under its classic formulation as ‘the government of the people, by the people, for the people,’ the central idea is that democracy is essentially the possibility of the people’s self-government. In the theories highlighted, this conception of “self-government” is conditioned on the possibility of proper agency: on determining proper political rationality and more importantly on avoiding the improper ones. On the one hand, democracy refers to the people’s unconditional autonomy; on the other, the notion of autonomy and its constructions, as demonstrated in the previous section, restricts the unconditionality of democracy and imposes a control over possible political claims. This is emblematically illustrated by the way those theories attempt to frame the conditions for legitimate authority.³⁵

In this manner, in mainstream political theories, the unconditionality of democracy is constantly permeated by the fear of ungovernability. For instance, the fear of the uncontrolled masses equipped with new technological avenues. This fear seems to be the common ground between the conspiracy theorist of the deep web, who believe society is overtaken by secret technological mechanisms of control, and those who point precisely at those deep web groups as secret mechanisms of control. In this way, the unconditionality that is proposed appears to be deeply rooted in the possibility of governing the uncontrolled element: on conditioning self-government. As much as self-government is good, it appears to be damaged precisely by the autonomy of the object whose autonomy we advocate for.

In this way, democracy is fundamentally challenged since it is not the people who govern but whatever authority is deemed legitimate on behalf of the people. This technocratic administration relies on the guise of democracy and supports itself precisely on the transparent violence of the self-evidence of intelligence. In simple words, the theory engenders the logic that even if it is not what the people want, it is what they *should* want, and the fact that they are not currently in that stance is just further proof that authority is required. The idea of “people” appears exclusively as the mass that must be shaped into citizens. Left to their own devices, they are a mass of individualistic whimsical consumers who recognize no order or authority.³⁶ The notion of “the people” is employed as a depository of energy always ranging from passivity to wild

35 See for example the argument about the creation of involuntary reasonable obligations in Ronald Dworkin, *Law’s Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

36 The clear reference to the idea of technological devices and the fear-mongering roles it plays in contemporary political discourses is purposeful.

spontaneity that must be handled with care. Against this amorphous “people,” the category of proper citizenship emerges. It is important to highlight that this category of proper citizenship that permeates authoritarian regimes is also present in the humanitarian and paternalistic attempt to educate the masses towards tolerance. Even if in a more inclusive project, it too demands intelligence as a condition for democratic participation.

In this way, the epitome of this logic is found in Brennan’s argument that only White middle-class males should participate since that is the population that is most suited for making decisions.³⁷ Such an argument does not dignify a response since any engagement would already presuppose a level of legitimacy that it does not have.³⁸ Still, it illustrates a dynamic that is relevant to highlight as it already appeared and will appear in other parts of the essay: the non-radicality of conservative politics. In a sense, his proposal could be achieved by not writing it. The problem with his theory is not that it presents an alternative that is repulsive or unacceptable, but rather that it does not in any way do that while still being treated as doing so. Again, the presupposition that stupidity is the fundamental issue of democracy, and one should provide a theory of legitimate means to oppose it, is already present in Rawls and permeates traditional accounts of politics even if Brennan’s solution is not supported.

This is a common feature of right-wing claim where they seem to fail precisely because they are already winning.³⁹ Moreover, this spectacular presentation of its radicality is not innocent. It serves a twofold normalization purpose of emptying politics of dispute on behalf of a moderate/intelligent position, by: (1) excluding actual radical alternatives by drawing a supposed equivalence between the so-called extremes, and (2) dismissing the continuity between capitalism (intelligence) and those undemocratic postures, and in that same movement normalizing them since they remain palatable/reasonable within the governing logic.⁴⁰ Or, as Rancière puts it:

37 Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 119, 193–194.

38 Yet, it does reinforce a dynamic that is being highlighted here: the way the discrimination against stupidity covers for more “traditional” structures of discrimination that are (supposedly) no longer tolerable but remain in place under its guise. In other words, since open discrimination (racism, homophobia, chauvinism, classism, etc.) is no longer tolerable, epistocracy is its acceptable version. This would be a way to explain how it has become so “fashionable” (the duality between high-end/prestigious/exclusive and common/acceptable in the term “fashion” is purposely invoked here).

39 As in the example of the January 6th, 2021, Capitol invasion that will be used in the following section.

40 For an account of how the term populism is employed in this process, see Jason Glynos and Aurelien Mondon, “The Political Logic of Populist Hype: The Case of Right-Wing

Beyond the polemics on immigrants, communitarianism, or Islam, their essential goal is to merge the very idea of a democratic people with the image of the dangerous masses. It is to draw the conclusion that we must leave matters up to those who govern us and that any contestation of their legitimacy and their integrity is the open door to totalitarianism. ... The current campaign on the mortal dangers of populism aims to justify in theory the idea that we have no other choice.⁴¹

Mouffe denotes this moral blackmail of adhering to normality, realism, and common-sense, as the imposition of a “radical center” position. It refers to a political scenario that erases the political dispute by claiming to no longer be ideological. Politics becomes a matter of technocratic and intelligent implementation of administration: capitalism is not optional as Thatcher argued. In this context, Rancière points to the irony of simultaneously reprehending the masses for their capitalist behavior while defending precisely the capitalist values of free market and interaction. This demonization, as Adam Kotsko calls it, of the people is characterized by this scheme where the people must fall in error only to have their behavior used to legitimate their repression.⁴²

As Rancière argues, democracy in its actual implementation continuously appears as a mechanism of controlling the part that has no part, or in other words, the part that is unable to take part in *polis* must be under constant supervision of the *polis*. In this sense, he refers to this element that has no part as belonging twice: first, as being an integral part of the system, and second as being that part that must constantly have no part in the system.⁴³ Government exists exclusively as the administration of those who are unable to govern themselves by those who are self-governing and require no government. This administration is simultaneously overabundant, since the intelligent do not require it and it only restrains their self-sufficiency, yet is never sufficient, since it never manages to fully control stupidity as the masses insist on making themselves present, hence endangering the *status quo*.

Populism's 'Meteoric Rise' and Its Relation to the Status Quo.” *POPULISMUS Working Paper Series*, 2016.

41 Jacques Rancière, “The Populism That Is Not to Be Found,” in *What is a People?* Translated by Jody Gladding, 101–106 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 105.

42 See Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

43 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 137.

As Rancière concludes his *Hatred of Democracy*, intelligence is always dominating. One can read it as a change in dynamic; it is not a fascist *must*, but a neoliberal *should* as a variation of the same disciplinary imperative of control. In this context, intelligence becomes equivalent to passivity and subjugation, to the innocuous preservation of the *status quo*. Intelligence is this dictatorship of devotion:

This is most admirably consonant with the way cleverness easily “harnesses” the strong person. Cleverness in the submissive person is esteemed, but only so long as it is connected with unconditional devotion. The instant devotion lacks this certificate of good character and is no longer clearly serving the advantage of the dominant person, it is less often called clever than immodest, insolent, or malicious; and a relationship often arises that looks as if this devotion were at least opposing the dominating party’s honor and authority, even if it poses no real threat to the latter’s security.⁴⁴

Musil’s phrase resonates with the Rancierian assessment of the rhetorical question “do you understand?” According to Rancière, this is a void question since it presupposes common understanding only to draw a distinction between the speaker and the listener. The speaker invariably knows and can reason while the listener’s ability is under question. Still, Rancière points to the fact that in drawing the asymmetry of inequality between the elements, one must assume equality: one must assume that the subject understands what is being asked only to impose the obedience of not-fully understanding. In this sense, there are two levels to this understanding: first, a literal understanding, which is accompanied by the second: an understanding of what one is expected to understand, which one must not understand since one must be unable to fully grasp the larger picture (even though one just did to some extents even better than the enunciators to whom the reality is often given to the point of invisibility). To these two levels, stupidity opens the possibility of a third response: of not understanding. This is the possibility of being unable to see the larger picture and make sense of it. If it is only through intelligence, through the understanding of the “do you understand?” interpellation, that a political structure is reified, stupidity might be a form of breaking with this logic.

In this regard, the concept of populism plays a central role as it refers to some form of surpassing the conditionality imposed on the people’s participation.

44 Musil, *Precision and Soul*, 271.

Still, even though this chapter is suspicious of the manner that the concept is often employed – as a placeholder for the corruption of politics – populism does not automatically represent a model to be adopted. For instance, one finds that Mouffe's⁴⁵ and Laclau's⁴⁶ account remains limited to challenging the hegemonic account of intelligence rather than breaking with the presupposition that the intelligent should govern the stupid. In other words, their defense of populism, remains one that aims to alternatively organize the people rather than allow its unconditional disruptive power to emerge.

In Mouffe this comes about via her defense of an agonistic political dispute, that despite its heteronomy and heterogeneity, ultimately relies on a political consensus.⁴⁷ In other words, her project is aimed at disputing power with the hegemonic discourse to reclaim an alternative hegemonic construction. For Laclau, the notion of “empty signifier” operates as a regulative idea that organizes political disruption.⁴⁸ In his account, despite the contingency and even ephemeral nature of any political “name,” it still plays a role in managing and directing the dispute. For both, political categories are ontologically empty but can be filled with meaning as a mechanism of political engagement. This dynamic relies on the possibility of political signification and understanding in order to claim a name for the un-nameable, or to employ the framework advanced by Rancière, to claim the acknowledgement of a new set of conditions.⁴⁹

In one sense, our analysis keeps within the field of Marxism and attempts to reinforce what has been one of its virtues: the acceptance of the transformations entailed by capitalism and the construction of an alternative project that is based on the ground created by those transformations and not on opposition to them. Commodification, bureaucratization, and the increasing dominance of scientific and technological planning over the division of labour should not necessarily be resisted. Rather, one should work within these processes so as to develop the prospects they create for a non-capitalist alternative.⁵⁰

45 See Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*.

46 See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005).

47 Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, 93.

48 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 66–68.

49 Rather than a politics of the unconditional as Rancière defends.

50 Laclau, Ernesto, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (New York: Verso, 1990), 55–56. The text here diverges from his reading of Marx, but this falls outside the scope of the discussion proposed here.

An agonistic account argues that capitalism replaces political life with marketable ideas. The end of politics is symbolized by the end of political disputes. Still, as much as it opposes capitalism, the dispute for hegemony remains one over the interaction and exchanges between autonomous individual agents and the possibility of organizing them into a common political movement. In other words, it still respects the logic of the marketplace of ideas since it aims at being the hegemonic product.

A challenge to “radical centrism” must offer a response of a different nature all together: one that does not present a competing strategy or policy. Considering the description of the issues raised previously, the argument proposed here is that it is not enough to challenge political consensus without challenging the idea of dispute itself. For example, the neo-liberal conception of competition and unregulated circulation is largely a form of agonism. In that way, a dispute over political logic cannot be a form of competition if it aims at disrupting the existing logic.

Stupidity in that manner could offer us such an “unmarketable idea” since it does not compete with intelligence. It merely has the empty unsustained courage to claim power against order. As will be further elaborate in the following section, stupidity should not be framed as a set of alternative facts or as the belief in incorrect conceptions of reality. Those would still constitute iterations of an intelligent account of politics, even if factually incorrect ones. The strength of the stupid masses would come precisely from their unsustained and unconditional democratic claim in the sense proposed by Rancière. Or in other words, one that does not rely on a factual or correct account.⁵¹ The actual construction of this claim requires further investigation that is beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, within the criterion offered here, one is able to formulate at least two ideas: (1) by its own definition this claim will prove to be unsustainable and require the construction of a hegemonic formation as a consequence. That is, it cannot be limited to a negative account. Still, (2) the positive cannot be constructed as a legitimate claim to hegemony within the hegemonic discourse. That is, as it is an unfounded political claim, it will be largely a “bad idea” or better yet, a stupid idea.

51 It is fundamental to emphasize here that the argument that the political claims should not rely on the factual precision does not entail that there is no such thing. In more concrete terms, the argument is that the strength of a political claim should not emerge from, or be conditioned by, the capacity the explored have regarding framing the injustice of their situation in a precise manner. The accuracy or inaccuracy of their awareness could be relevant but in a contingent rather than a determining or fatalistic manner.

5 The Issue Today

To translate this theoretical construction into concrete examples, it is comfortable to reflect on John Marion Sims and others “progressive” agents of violence like him as historical missteps we moved past, but it is vital to take full account of those events. Those were not foolish hang-ups we overcame as a civilization; those were the implementations of utmost rigor, determination, and assurance. In other words, it is important to take full account that intelligence would not have prevented those events. In fact, intelligence was *the* central motor driving those events. Thus, once again it appears that intelligence, order, morals, and so forth are in fact the causes for all that which is blamed on stupidity and evilness.

Beyond Musil’s account where intelligence turns into stupidity, here the evilness of intelligence cannot be dismissed as merely accidental, i.e., as a form of stupidity. Dispossession, genocide, chattel slavery, ICE detention centers and the destruction of indigenous forms of knowledge and kinship relations (to name but a few) are *not* collateral damages but *the very aim* of the colonial, neocolonial, and eugenicist projects. In other words, those are not deviances in the overarching advancement of civilization, they are the very meaning of civilization. So, even though no one is purposely evil, evilness is *intentionally* enacted on behalf of intelligence (which is perhaps much worse).⁵²

Consider briefly the logics of racism, homophobia, and even conspiracy theories. They are undoubtedly wrong. Yet these accounts are more consistent with approaches of intelligence than with stupidity even if we rely exclusively on the simple separation of intelligence as the privileging of knowledge and stupidity as marginalized otherness.⁵³ For instance, conversion therapy advocates, QAnon supporters, and “race scientists” do not ground their worldview on the absence of facts. Quite the opposite, they claim to be the ones holding the facts. They support their claim on statistics and information. Despite being wrong, they do not claim that we should ignore the facts.

The same is true for Trump and Bolsonaro. Again, it is not that they are “in fact” astute political characters. They are unquestionably bad politicians (and human beings in general) but they do not abdicate the privilege of intelligence and they do not challenge existing political structures. If anything, they are

⁵² The intention here is fundamental considering the short taxonomy in the introduction.

⁵³ See Rancière, “The Populism that is not to be Found,” 103–104, for an account of racism (i.e., uncivilized behavior) does not emerge from the immigrant suburbs but from the invisible and neutral hand of the state and its policies, often even from left/progressive sectors.

radical defenders of lawfulness. Unlike so-called liberal “snowflakes,” they argue that the law is a *fact* and must be upheld against the stupid masses.⁵⁴

Slogans such as “intolerance towards criminals,” “when the looting starts the shooting starts,” and “just don’t break the law and you would have nothing to fear,” are emblematic of that lawfulness. The cleverness of their common sensical imperativeness is something to be highlighted: there is no reasonable opposition to them.⁵⁵ To oppose it, means opposing legality and morality, hence supporting criminality. Only bad citizens, or idiots, would advocate that, so (1) they can be legitimately repressed, (2) they are always the figure of some other since no one thinks of themselves as idiots/bad people, and (3) one should support those repressive platforms since one is a good citizen who defends law and morality and has nothing to fear and only something to gain from them since they will persecute the bad elements exclusively.

Those who stormed the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021, were not doing so *against* the constitution but on its behalf. More specifically, the “sacred” second amendment not only allows the possession of firearms, also seems to even motivate citizens to take up arms to preserve any corrupt takeover of power: ‘A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.’⁵⁶ Or the second paragraph of the declaration of independence:

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness.⁵⁷

54 See for instance reports on Trump’s claims to superior intelligence by USNEWS, The Washington Post and CNN. This list is hopefully sufficient evidence of my claim, but it can easily be expanded by any research of the simple combination of words like “Trump” and “IQ” just to use the limited framework of intelligence and not its expanded semantic sphere explored here, which included themes of order, lawfulness, preservation, and so on.

55 As will be argued in the next two paragraphs, the opposition opposes specific implementations of that logic as unreasonable while reinforcing the reasonability of the principles.

56 Moreover, the fact that such a right is not extended to improper citizens such as felons and the “ill minded” is consistent with the overarching argument advanced here.

57 For the sake of the overarching argument, I would highlight that this is not exceptional. In fact, it is a common feature in several constitutions.

They were not trying to break the law but rather to prevent it from being broken. In other words, they were “stopping the steal.” They are obviously wrong, but the argument here is that in calling them “stupid” we buy into the account that stupidity threatens normality, and in that sense, even if indirectly, reinforces the narrative: normality, intelligence, and “truth” must prevail.

The moral panic around post-truth relies on the possibility of a return to normality where facts and expertise guides politics against this degeneration. In other words, the dispute over the correct facts overshadows the overarching *common* presupposition: facts should govern. To put it as explicitly as I can, the lurking idea that our social fabric is threatened by elements that refuse to comply to its prerogatives is the cause not the outcome of destruction: it allows for destruction since it allows for an undemocratic logic to govern as the hegemonic common sense via a guise of “prevention,” “protection,” “return to normality,” and so on. In simple words, facts never stopped governing, even if very often they are proven to be incorrect, and moreover, it is this common sensical self-feeding logic that creates the monster and is empowered by its creation, as it presents itself as the only “reasonable” alternative to it.

In this manner, we notice a reproduction of the dominant strategy in the attempt to oppose it. In making the case that the issue with Trump, Bolsonaro, the capitol invaders, or any other problematic ideology, is that they are breaking the law or another conceptualization of a social contract, one is merely directing the logic highlighted above towards them. It uncritically employs problematics accounts of criminality and normalcy that can never serve a counter-hegemonic purpose since it exists precisely to prevent any counter-hegemonic project.⁵⁸ The irony in this iteration being that the progressive alternative does the conservative's work by taking the position of the hegemonic posture and appealing to some form of legal authority. In other words, in treating them as marginals, the opposition not only grants them that their claims for order, morality, and lawfulness represent a disruption to the current situation, hence reinforcing their conservative posture, but it also places itself against those values while not fully adopting a radical posture of disruption with the *status quo*. It has the same conservative discourse as the extreme right of defending civilization against barbarism without being as strong and committed in its postures.⁵⁹ Even though the cases highlighted before are presented as stupid

58 As it was established in the previous section, ideas of normalcy, the individual agent, and its framing as a subject of society, are inherently the product of a dominating structure.

59 It cannot be more conservative than the conservatives and in trying to be it reduces the whole political dispute to the sphere of conservatism, hence eliminating any actual political debate or option of disruption. Moreover, since this is portrayed as the realistic and reasonable posture, the elimination of politics is naturalized. This logic, where the

in a spectacular and mediatic manner, which should already alert any counter-hegemonic stance, they are fundamentally “normal.”⁶⁰ The issue with those so-called outrageous phenomena is not that they are criminal/outrageous, but rather that they are unable to be. They will repeatedly fall within the law or only on its edge since they are ultimately within the political common sense.

Nothing is more emblematic of this than the response to the capitol invasion that resulted in what can only be described as symbolic imprisonment that were immediately followed by a wide discussion over the constitutional rights of those people resulting in limitations to what was already a limited response.⁶¹ One could mention anecdotal instances ranging from organic food demands to one woman being set free to go to her planned Mexico vacation, but in my opinion the most symbolic case was the fact that after some airlines put people who proudly associated to the invasion on the “no-fly list,” this was proven to hurt their constitutional rights since no American can be placed there without being charged with terrorism. I argue this is the most symbolic because of the combination between the known leniency in using terrorist charges in the past together with the very unamerican intervention in the private sector on behalf of people who were publicly self-advertising their intention to invade a government building among other clear infringements of the law less the 48 hours before. Those people had no fear of becoming criminals and I would argue that it is no surprise that history has proven them right since they were in fact operating within the “law” (in the larger sense of a social contract) even when planning to infringe its literal sense.

Put plainly, on both sides of the discussion stupidity is a radical form of otherness that remains that which must be contained, or better yet, eliminated. As a way of illustrating the theory mentioned previously, the cases demonstrate that despite what might seem to be the case, stupidity has never taken over; the issue was and remains the rule of intelligence. As stupid as it might sound, Trump, QAnon, and conversion therapy remain of the regime which speaks to/from intelligence. Trump supporters and flat earthers are not stupid. They are

marginalization of stupidity results in elimination of politics and democracy, was the subject of the previous section.

60 As demonstrated in the previous section, this spectacle erases the possibility of any political dispute.

61 I am aware that a number of arrests were made but I insist on their symbolic nature considering that there is already the possibility of a pardon pending on the results of the next election. The sole fact that this is a topic of conversation makes it symbolic when this case is contrasted to the fact that there are people serving life sentences for much less significant crimes under the “three strike rule”. This is further aggravated by taking into account the contrast in profile of the two groups.

simply wrong; just as eugenicist programs and the practices of colonization were and *are* wrong. In calling them stupid we adhere to and reproduce the same logic in our attempts to refute their claims.

The essential question that emerges when considering the theories along the contemporary case, is: what do we have to lose from abdicating intelligence? It is not that renouncing intelligence will disappear all evil; rather that we do not need such a promise. There is nothing to gain from upholding the imperative of intelligence. The politics of intelligence is *inherently* violent and not by accident. Moreover, one finds that intelligence is not only pure domination but also the self-evident privilege of this domination: the neutral violence of progress that cannot be refuted nor refused. Only idiots refuse the facts so there is no harm in repressing them. In fact, it is for their own good. This is the logic that engenders both the eugenics of sterilization and the IMF's worldwide imposition of neoliberal debt reconstruction policies (for example, in Argentina, Nigeria, and Trinidad & Tobago [the Budhoo case])⁶² – yet only one of them is no longer a valid policy.⁶³

6 The Case for Political Stupidity

Et je proposerais donc, comme toute première définition de la critique, cette caractérisation générale: l'art de n'être pas tellement gouverné.

[So, I would propose, as an initial definition of critique, this general characterization: the art of not being governed.]

FOUCAULT⁶⁴

Stupidity emerges as a central political category since it has both historically served as a mechanism of marginalization and in the current age of information and (supposedly) democratic inclusion. It continues to operate in similar iterations as a transparent self-evident political logic. In the neoliberal age of inclusion and tolerance, it serves as a legitimate mechanism of exclusion under a meritocratic discourse. My argument is that it is not enough to challenge the

62 For his impressive letter of resignation see, Davison L. Budhoo, *Enough is Enough* (Apex Press, 1990).

63 Even though both still take place.

64 Michel Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que la Critique? Suivie de la Culture de Soi* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2015).

definition of stupidity without challenging the political structure that relies on its marginalization. The criticism that certain groups were wrongly defined as “stupid” or that the enlighten position does not entitle the authority to categorize another group as “stupid” (or even that it is itself a stupid stance) does not fully challenge the technocratic perspective if it is not accompanied by a rejection of an “intelligent” account of politics.

Returning to the Rancièrian definition, the stupidity of no matter who, whatever and whoever, opposes the meritocratic universalistic idea of everyone as a political principle. Those are two types of unconditional democracy. One is the accessibility of the Coca-Cola that becomes the universal common denominator between the president of the USA and the lowest of the workers. All cokes are the same and all cokes are good: it is the universality of the market and its possibilities. On the other hand, stupidity’s unconditionality is its impossibility of participating. While normative democracy is one of equivalence, the democracy of stupidity is one of equality. Within the administrative logic, everyone is theoretically equivalent under a common denominator that imposes order. Under stupidity we are all equally incapable, there is no guarantee or order that sets the principle of politics. Stupidity is non-qualified or non-conditioned politics; it is one of equality in the absence of any value for equivalence.

Normative democracy is a form of de-bureaucratization and transparency where accessibility seems unconditioned since it seems unrestrained. But despite its inclusive approach (which is evidently false), it operates as a mechanism that reifies the self-evidence of the market via its positive implementation. In other words, the unconditionality is merely the transparency of capital as a form of universal equivalence between everything and everyone. What appears as an unconditional and self-governing sphere turns into an all-encompassing model of production. This marketization of reality reveals itself to be a stagnation of life rather than its realization: the supposedly unmediated logic of capitalism reveals itself to be an absolutely mediated interaction, only that capital becomes the invisible naturalized element.

Such structure is constructed via the relationship between democracy and intelligence: the transparency of the overwhelming abundance of information of the marketplace of ideas has no outside. Under the full exposure of an absolute knowledge, there is nothing else to be discovered. In this sense, intelligence creates a blindness of overwhelming visibility. Or in other words, one often forgets the self-evident (and quite trivial) truth that transparency is equivalent to invisibility. It is not that information and communication bring no light to darkness, but, more interestingly, they do, and it is precisely in doing it that they obfuscate the possibility of something appearing.

In this manner, the challenge that stupidity might pose to the neoliberal marketized implementations of “direct democracy” that equates what is popular (or can be made to be) with democratic via mechanisms of majority or elections, is to posit that democracy does not regard the empty neoliberal freedom of an autonomous agent capable of choosing or electing (as if reality was equivalent to a supermarket).

Stupidity is the courage of the impotent, or as Musil claims: ‘If one were therefore looking for the most general notion of wisdom,⁶⁵ these comparisons would yield something like the notion of capability or soundness, and everything that is incapable or unsound might then, on occasion, also be called stupid’⁶⁶ and ‘This notion of the diminution of achievement, which sticks like a burr, will later reveal itself to be the most universal notion of stupidity that we have.’⁶⁷ This is also the courage of the stupid student in Kafka’s *Abraham* who mishears his name being called for an award. As he walks up to take the award, he unknowingly challenging his subjectification. This courage can also be found in the girl who stupidly shouts that the king is naked, thus destabilizing the social structure. As in this last case, one finds our reality being supported by a trivial pretense that everything is working or could work when the blatant and evident truth is that it is ruined. Still, intelligence demands that we be realistic and work through it rather than abandon it since there is no actual gain in realizing the king is naked. In fact, everybody already knew it. Only an idiot would state the truth rather than hold to such silly lie.

The interruption of the girl who shouts that the king is naked is not a sudden revelation that challenges the already established knowledge. In this manner, stupidity’s political claim would not be the introduction of a new element but merely the affirmation of reality regardless of its consequences. In this context of hyperbolic transparency of information where nothing can be hidden anymore, the stupid fact, that which has no part, that which cannot be presented or represented, hides in plain sight: the evident and blatant fact that capitalism/enlightenment has exhausted itself. Still, the affirmation of such truth has no consequences regardless of its correctness: truth as appropriate knowledge is not sufficient to impact reality. As in the tale, everyone is already aware of reality so claiming that capitalism is ruined or pointing to the illusory force of money is a powerless and trivial statement. One needs the possibility of an enacted construction of truth.

65 The English text has “stupidity” rather than wisdom. Intelligence or wisdom are the appropriate translation of the original “Klugheit.”

66 Musil, *Precision and Soul*, 276 [my emphasis].

67 Ibid., 273.

In other words, only an idiot misunderstands order and walks right through it. The Kafkian student does not wish to avoid or escape authority. In fact, within a meritocratic structure, there would be no explicit authority being exerted on him since one can extrapolate Kafka's account and assume that in the eyes of the school that student was just someone of no particular interest. A figure in the collective causing no harm or benefit, transparent in its overwhelming presence, i.e., so idiotically banal that it becomes invisible. Still, in its act of receiving the award, the act of not understanding the condition and requirements for participation, the student walks through the harmonious administration of his life and dismantles its logic. Again, not by demonstrating his worthiness according to those standards or the injustice of upholding unfair and arbitrary conditions, but by failing to uphold it to such a deeper extent that it crumbles.

Stupidity's impotency makes it ungovernable so it could serve as an unconditional political act in the sense that it has neither interest nor strategy. It is incapable of being intelligent, and in its impotency, it serves neither a refusal nor a replacement of intelligence. It is the element that is truly independent from government unlike the supposedly self-sufficient administrators who rely on the labour of the masses they must subordinate. The ungovernability of stupidity would hopefully grant it the freedom to act politically as a truly desubjectified agent, not in the sense that it knows what it does and acts purposely, but in the sense that it is in no way conditioned or grounded, i.e., *it has no arche so it is an-archic*.

As in the tale where Lie deceives Truth into diving into the well only to run away with its clothes, leaving it horrifically naked and unable to show itself, the invitation proposed here is to think stupidity as a possible form of presenting this account of an unbearable truth. For example, one place of intersection could be a connection between Musil's account of failure and Heidegger's argument about errancy and truth:

Errancy is the most concealed gift of truth – for in it is bestowed the essence of truth as the stewardship of the self-refusal and as the purest preservation of being in the unrecognizable protection of what always is. To be sure: errancy is here not “error,” an established mistake, the failure of truth as correctness – but instead is that which belongs to the “there” – of *Da-sein*.⁶⁸

68 Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings VII–XI: Black Notebooks 1938–1939* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 14 [emphasis in original].

One can also look to Jacques Lacan's notion of "un-thinking":

I think where I am not, therefore I am where I think not. ... I am not, wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am wherever I don't think I am thinking.⁶⁹

Additionally, we can consult Nancy's ontology of patency:

The world is simply patent, if one may understand by that an appearance that does not "appear," no immanence of a subject having preceded its transcendence, and no obscure ground its luminosity. ... Truth, in fact, or sense of sense, is the patency of the world: that is, on the one hand, the appearing of the nonapparent, or the nonappearing of all "patency," and on the other hand, this, that there is only the world. ... Patency is related to itself-as if one were saying simply: *patet*, "it is manifest," "it is evident," not so as to initiate infinite reflexivity ('it is evident that it is evident'), but rather so as to make appear, to make heard, felt, and touched, the "subject" *it* of the obviousness. This *it* is uttered, on the one hand, as a "*there* is obviousness," putting the accent on the *there*, there is there, according to the multiplicity of places, spaces, zones, instants, and, on the other hand, as an "it is *it* that is obvious," "it" being neither a person nor a thing, nor a principle, nor a ground, but the singular plural of occurrences of existence, or presence, or passage.⁷⁰

One still needs to work out exactly how and if those connections exist, and moreover, if within this context stupidity can serve the purpose framed here. This chapter hints in the direction of a positive answer but even if the answer is found to be negative, hopefully the questions opened here remain relevant. That is, the question of the conditions of democracy and the way that framework restrains democracy by creating a legitimated fear of popular participation, not just despite but also because of our intelligent efforts. In other words, by raising the question of stupidity, I propose that we reflect on the notion of democracy and the unconditionality that it entails, specifically in light of recent undemocratic claims and the responses that have been offered. Arguments such as "democracy has gone too far," or that "we live in an overly democratic time, and it is dangerous," and the logical implication that there

69 Jacques Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," *Yale French Studies* 36/37 (1966): 136.

70 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 33–34.

must be means to guarantee a sense of “normality,” are traps that further reinforce the issues they aim to confront. In the counter direction of that logic, the only claim being made here is that we need more unconditional democracy rather than restrictions on it.

Hopefully, this text sets the agenda for opposing any form of realistic or conciliatory politics. In that manner, even if the positive side is not yet fully constructed, the negative claim that the contemporary logic must be replaced in a fundamental way is established; that any conception of agency, autonomy, rationality, and so on is inherently tainted and must be dismissed. To put it as directly as possible, considering what was established here, any legalistic or institutional avenues are to be taken not just as ineffective but counter-productive in any endeavor to change society. For instance, notions such as human rights, or for that matter any conception of rights either on a national or international level, becomes a dead end since it is grounded on the conception of autonomy and agency that develops into the idea of proper citizenship.⁷¹ Briefly, the aim of this chapter is merely to convince its reader that the solution to our current crisis will be radical, or it will not be.

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71 As Angela Mitropoulos states: ‘Rights are not something one possesses even if many of us are reputed, by correlation, to possess our own labor in the form of an increasingly self-managed or self-employed exploitation. Rights, like power, are *exercised*, in practice and by bodies. As juridical codes, they are both bestowed and denied by the state, at its discretion.’ Angela Mitropoulos, “Precari-us?” *Mute: Culture and Politics after the Net* 1, no. 29 (Spring 2005): 5.

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