

In Defence of Democracy

Lefort on the Democratic Deficit

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Contents

Introduction.....	2
Chapter 1: Democracy and the democratic deficit.....	4
The empty place of power.....	6
Separation of spheres.....	8
Institutionalisation of conflict.....	9
Imperfect democracy.....	10
Chapter 2: Lefort and the democratic deficit.....	12
The empty place as truly empty.....	12
Occupying the empty place.....	14
Democracy in danger?.....	16
Chapter 3: Populism.....	17
Populism as political logic.....	17
Polarisation and Caesarism.....	19
Populism and totalitarianism.....	21
Conclusion.....	23
Chapter 4: Deliberative and participatory democracy.....	24
Deliberative democracy.....	24
Participatory democracy.....	26
Conclusion.....	29
Conclusion.....	30
Bibliography.....	33

Introduction

There is much talk in the media and in the public debate about the crisis in which modern democracies are supposed to find themselves. The diagnosis that is often given states that there are groups in society that do not feel heard, that the representatives are not representative enough, in short: democracy is not democratic enough. The answer often given is: more democracy.

The issues with modern democracies are usually gathered under the term *democratic deficit*. To understand the nature of such a deficit, and to evaluate some of its proposed solutions, is the aim of this paper. Before we can even discuss theories of democratic improvement, we first need to establish what democracy exactly means. What is suggested when it is claimed that democracy is in some respects failing? Claude Lefort has written extensively on the question of democracy, and he will be my guide in helping to evaluate these claims. I will interpret Lefort's description of democracy and use it to analyse the democratic deficit as popularly described, populism in its claim at being the answer to the deficit, and other proposed strategies.

The question I will pose in this paper is: How to define the democratic deficit and evaluate possible solutions for it in view of Lefort's concept of democracy? In the first part I will investigate the nature of the democratic deficit, and in the second part I continue to evaluate possible solutions, amongst which populism is the most important one. Much rhetoric that is concerned with the problem of the democratic deficit is often labelled populist. This is usually meant to denigrate the speaker and his opinions, though some wear this label with pride and justify themselves by claiming populism is indeed the answer. I deem it therefore interesting to include it in an evaluation of possible ways of lessening the democratic deficit.

In the first chapter I will investigate the claim that there is such a thing as a democratic deficit, putting central Claude Lefort's conception of democracy. I will first expound Lefort's notion of democracy, using his central thesis of the place of power as a symbolically empty place, and his arguments on the separation of the spheres of power, law and knowledge and democracy as institutionalised conflict. With the help of these I will conclude that democracy is naturally and ideally vulnerable and formless, and in this sense we cannot speak of a deficit that needs to be solved so much as a weakness that is inherent to the system, and forms in fact its most vital strength.

However, in the second chapter I will argue that a democratic deficit can be thought of in the light of Lefort's theory. Lefort offers two ways of conceiving this. If democracy becomes technocratic and debates lose their meaning, and the chosen representatives come to stand only for

their own or corporate interests, they render the symbolically empty place actually empty, which presents a threat to both democracy and civil society. On the other hand, there is the threat of the empty place becoming occupied by actors who hold the view that the people are a unity and who wish to reshape society into an older, organic shape.

In the third chapter I will consider the value of populism as a possible strategy to address the democratic deficit. In my argument I will make use of Nadia Urbinati's conception of populism as an ideology that claims the people is one whole and has one will, which can best be articulated by one person. Ernesto Laclau will function as a counterpoint to this. With Lefort's criteria for democracy as conflictful, undetermined and pluralistic, I will conclude that instead of being a solution to its problems populism poses a threat to democracy.

I will continue to consider two possible strategies, both more concrete than populism, in the last chapter, namely deliberative and participatory democracy. Both models represent two distinctive and ambitious ways of transforming democracy. With the use of the aforementioned criteria established by Lefort for the sustaining of the balance in democracy between a meaningless disconnectedness of individuals and a too strong configuration of the political I will evaluate these proposals. They are both widely treated theories, but my interest shall lie primarily in how they can be assessed using Lefort's conception of democracy.

Chapter 1: Democracy and the democratic deficit

It is a commonly held notion that over the last decades a generally negative view about the performance of democratic institutions has become prevalent amongst members of Western democracies. Quite a few commentators share the idea that there is a widespread discontent amongst citizens about the functioning of the democratic governments under which they live. Pippa Norris cites a fair number of these authors. If we look at the available data we see amongst the populations in various countries in a recent time span a growing distrust of politicians and political action, lower voting turnout, declining party loyalties, and the rise of populist parties, the last point often being linked to a rejection of mainstream politics (Norris 2011, 3).

The label which is often applied to this phenomenon is the concept of a *democratic deficit*. A term originally coined in critiques aimed at the democratic level of the European Union, it has become used in a wider sense to denote any situation where there is a perceived lack of democratic legitimacy. Norris defines the democratic deficit as an occasion where the "*satisfaction with the performance of democracy diverges from public aspirations*" (Norris 2011, 4). The idea is that there has to be some sort of balance between the aspirations citizens hold for their democratic governments and the way they function in reality. It follows from this that public dissatisfaction with democratic legitimacy automatically presupposes that democratic values and principles are firmly embedded in the mindset of a large part of the population. The call so often heard is for more and better democracy, not for an alternative to democracy. The alternatives which are introduced in debates usually consist of options within the existing democratic framework, i.e. amendments and improvements. The scepticism expressed is not aimed at the basic notion of democracy, but at the current performance of a democratic system (Norris 2011, 32).

Norris identifies three causes for the democratic deficit. She finds an explanation in "*some combination of growing public expectations, negative news, and/or failing government performance*" (Norris 2011, 5). She considers the first part of this explanation, the demand side of the deficit, as the defining characteristic, the other two exerting influence on it. The characteristic of demand refers to the increased faith there exists in democratic values and principles. Democracy as a mode of government has become virtually unchallenged across the world. Yet, its success has recently turned in some ways against it. People are dissatisfied with the way their democratic institutions function precisely because they expect more from them. They have come to regard democracy as the equalising force it promises to be. It happens that it in reality can, however, not live up to their aspirations. They see that those they have chosen to speak in their name and defend

their interests do not seem to be able to do this satisfactorily.

The media form an important way for informing the public about the performance of democracy, and can have a negative influence on its opinions. They are not merely intermediates, but shape the message too. Frequent negative news about public affairs can undermine the faith people have in their institutions and engender distrust in society, despite this being perhaps not based on an entirely reliable picture.

Lastly, on the supply side we see actual failings in the performance of democratic governance. This concerns the noted failures of governments to address the needs and wishes of the people in terms of implementing unsuccessful policies. However, what is in the end more important is again the *perceived* failure of performance. The democratic deficit comes down to people having high expectations, but becoming dissatisfied by what they perceive to be the failing democratic performance of their governments.

If a democratic deficit is linked to the expectations citizens have of democracy, what then exactly do they aspire to? In other words, what do they think democracy should do? In looking at the myriad of solutions that have been offered, like referenda, voting by lottery, etcetera, there seems to be a common thread: the majority of these proposals wish to bridge the gap between the representatives and those whom they represent (Norris 2011, 38).

When we speak of the idea that our modern democracies are suffering from a democratic deficit, the source of this discontent can be brought under one header, namely the notion that the representatives of a people, a country's politicians and policy makers, are deemed to be not representative enough. This claim rests on the idea that the gap between citizens and politicians, which exists necessarily in a system of indirect democracy, is too wide, which is said to undermine the correct functioning of democratic representation. Politicians are claimed not to be in touch with what is happening in society, they are observed not to listen well enough to the demands and wishes of the populace, and to squander the trust that has been given to them by their voters. This causes democracy to not live up to its promises.

There is no shortage of solutions for this so-called malaise. Calls for more direct democracy, referenda, reforms of voting systems, online voting and so forth abound. What is important for a right evaluation of these proposals is first to investigate the legitimacy of the problem at hand. We can interpret the claim of the democratic deficit only by looking more closely at the concept of democracy and establish what the promises of democracy actually contain. Where is the cry for more democracy justified and where might it originate in a misunderstanding of the very concept of democracy?

In what follows I will examine Claude Lefort's account of democracy in some detail. I will identify three main criteria for identifying modern democracy: the empty place of power, the separation of the spheres of power, law and knowledge, and the institutionalisation of conflict. Further on, we will see how these support or undermine the legitimacy of the claim of a democratic deficit.

The empty place of power

In expounding his view of democracy Lefort takes an historical point as departure. Democracy as we know it today is a specifically modern phenomenon, and its origins can be traced back to what is commonly identified as one of the major dividing points in history, heralding the beginning of the modern age: the French Revolution. An important notion of Lefort is the idea that power in society in premodern times found its legitimacy in an order established outside of society. The move from outside legitimacy to inside legitimacy is one of the crucial themes of modernity, and helped create modern democracy (Flynn 1999, 486).

Lefort makes a comparison between premodernity and modernity, attempting to argue how radical the change that took place was, and how it made way for a new understanding of how politics functions. Society in the *ancien régime* was based on the identification of itself with a body (Lefort 1986, 302). This organic interpretation had its origins in medieval theo-political theory, which looked to the king as the embodiment of the figure of Christ. The king was seen as taking the position of the head of the people, the most vital part of the body that they formed together, and he was both mortal (in his individual body) and immortal (in his embodiment of the collective of society). This status was given to the king by referring to a transcendent order. There he found the legitimacy of his reign.

Because his body personified society as a whole, in a set of arrangements which was divinely sanctioned, here came the justification of the rigid top down system of hierarchies in premodern societies with which we are familiar. Developments in the centuries preceding the French Revolution did not significantly alter these arrangements, though they did weaken them. Rising individualism and the development of a stronger state, which started to form an entity separate from society, still left the image of the king as the body politic intact. Only with the sudden decapitation of the monarch did the organic representation of society fall apart.

With the head of the king was lost also the idea that all belonged to one whole, each playing his or her part in a clearly defined scheme. This is what Lefort calls, "the disincorporation of the individuals": "...these individuals might become entities that would have to be counted in a

universal suffrage that would take the place of the universal invested in the body politic" (Lefort 1986, 303). Society became a conglomerate of individuals, who must now be held together by different ties than those of the old order. The significant difference here is that these new ties, coming in place of the old ones, will be held in perpetual contention, as the ultimate ground for any societal order has vanished.

Just as Christ, the king functioned as the mediator between the people and a transcendent reality. This reality was first occupied by God or the gods, but through increasing secularisation it came to refer to abstract values like Justice and Reason, as personified in the state institutions. The absolute reference point did not reside any more in any divine realm, but rather in abstract notions as the aforementioned, which were however no less transcendent. The principle stayed the same: the power of the king referred to an absolute point outside of society, which made him both the representative and the safe-keeper of the unity of society.

The revolutionary power of modern democracy lies in the fact that the king is removed and, instead of being replaced, his seat is meant to remain empty: "The locus of power becomes *an empty place*" (Lefort 1988, 17). From now on, no one is ever allowed to hold the same position as him. No subsequent ruler can incorporate the power without damaging this new democratic framework and endangering this new form of organising the political. No individual or group can identify themselves with the place of power and bind themselves to it for a longer period than is prescribed. Power has lost its image: it will now only be seen in the temporary figures that wield it, circumscribed by rules and procedures.

Lefort points out that we would err if we would now consider power to reside *in* society. The real change lies in power not referring any more to anything outside of itself. It has become merely symbolical (Lefort 1988, 19).

Following this democratic revolution power is no longer connected to any kind of body. Instead, power resides in a symbolically empty place; symbolically empty, because naturally there are still those who wield it. Those who exercise power are, however, only temporary actors upon the political stage. Contrary to the king, who besides his earthly body possessed also an immortal body, which encompassed the entirety of society and was linked directly to God, these new rulers are only passing mortals. They are fallible, bound by rules extraneous to them, and cannot represent the whole populace, but merely give a voice to a part that has given them their vote.

The destruction of the body of the king leads to the introduction of a fundamentally unstable society, one that has lost its sure footing, and wherein the people now perpetually have to struggle with questions about identity, purpose, and the like. Their unity, of which they were theoretically

assured under the monarch, is far from secure now. The very existence of a *people*, a group of individuals differentiated from other groups, has been brought into question. Before, these distinctions were anchored in the person of the king; now, the identity of the people is open to discussion. The people have become the sovereign, but it is up for debate who is actually part of the people. At the heart of democracy lies this paradox: while the power belongs to the people, at the same time it belongs to no one in particular (Lefort 1986, 304).

Separation of spheres

The king united in himself the principles of power, law and knowledge (Lefort 1986, 306). This does not mean he was the ultimate source of these principles, though he embodied them. He also was subject to a power outside of both him and the people, the absolute point that formed the true source of power, law and knowledge. He held his position as ruler because he channelled that power coming from outside society into society. He was both above the law and subject to it.

With his demise there occurred an individuation of spheres. The state and the public space became separated and the different spheres found their independence. Every sphere, whether legal, economical, cultural, academic, etcetera, started to function according to its own norms (Lefort 1986, 279).

The sphere of law was already hampered by the impossibility of finding an essence, because it always had to legitimise its claims in face of an ultimate lack of absolute grounds. Now, it became even more unstable as it found its foundations being questioned in an ever-lasting debate, into which suddenly more voices had entered. The legitimacy of laws are now being questioned more than before, and by more participants, where before there was still a higher reference point in the form of the body of the king. Power and law do not coincide any more; power is now being circumscribed by law, the latter which retains an exteriority to the former. Lefort is talking here for example of the declaration of the rights of man. The power of the state is in this case bound by an external force. Before, the state incorporated and determined any force, now there are factors outside of it which partly determine the actions of the state, by prohibition or prescription.

This is also true for the sphere of knowledge (Lefort 1988, 17). Now that it has lost the securer ground in the old arrangement of power, questions of knowledge and science have lost their political anchor as the debate opens up. The power now has to take into account scientific truths and acknowledge factual events. It cannot satisfy itself any longer by reference to itself as the ultimate possessor and guarantor of truth. From now on there will be a multitude of opinions which fight in the public domain. The loss of certainty leads to the obligation for society to engage in a discussion

about facts and truths without one party ever having the right to claim their dominance over the others in the realm of knowledge.

Institutionalisation of conflict

This leads us to the next point. In democracy conflict has become institutionalised. Lefort points at the remarkable fact that, instead of being threatened by it, democracy actually thrives on conflict: "The erection of a political stage on which competition can take place shows that division is, in a general way, constitutive of the very unity of society" (Lefort 1988, 18). It does not strive to eradicate conflict by imposing a uniform system of rules of conduct, whether religious or moral, on the population. Instead, a stage is raised where actors can be in conflict with each other, and this forms one of the constituent elements of the democratic regime. Unity in society is based on division. If we make a comparison with the ancien régime we see that there unity was guaranteed by the king and divisions in society were not tolerated for their destabilising effects. Modern democracy, according to Lefort, has found a way to incorporate these necessary (because of the pluriformity of individual wishes and values) conflicts, and instead of being seen as a destabilising force they are now channelled onto a political platform. Democratic society has no form, no body. It is its fundamental indeterminacy that makes it the historical regime *pur sang*, for it accepts its contingent place by putting itself on a timeline so to speak, allowing for a continuous self-examination.

The key point is that democracy comes into being and maintains itself when all certitudes have been lost (Lefort 1988, 19). On all levels of society these certitudes have disappeared – whether in the sphere of power, law, or knowledge – and citizens have to find a way to cope with this radical uncertainty. A democratic society does not offer a template for how its denizens should live or what they should believe, but instead gives a platform to a never-ending debate on these subjects. This is both a strength and a weakness, and importantly, it is essential to it.

Differing parties are given a place in the political sphere where they can fight out their battles in order to find agreement in such a manner that civil war is prevented (Lefort 2007, 613). Power is contested by them in a controlled framework. This framework is provided by democratic procedures, outlining the rules of the game, i.e. how actors are expected to express their claims and how these are to be engaged with peacefully on the political stage. As the absolute legitimacy of power has disappeared, it is forever open for questioning.

Representative democracy contains a paradox in that the people is sovereign, but their voice is only the starting point of political action. Representation creates a space in which private interests

– of which votes are a form of expression – are transformed into public interests. There should be no place for private interests in the political sphere, even though they stand at the base of the political decision making. People vote for what they think benefits them, but when assembled these votes should be given expression in policy that benefits all. This is why it is important to note that though the representatives are representing the people, they are not the same as those whom they represent. In their appointed place as representatives they have the freedom of judgement, which entails also a prerogative to go against the opinions of their voters. Lefort goes as far as ascribing to them a pedagogical role towards the electorate: they must be allowed to use their own judgement in political matters, even if this means defending things contrary to the opinions of the citizens. Clearly, this must be done with the interests of the citizens kept in mind (Lefort 2007, 615).

Lefort argues here for the representatives to be given an open mandate, in contrast with an imperative mandate. With an imperative mandate the representative functions as a mere executor of the will of the voters. The votes he has been given form a dictate for how his policy should be. In an open mandate, on the contrary, the representative is given the liberty to interpret what his directions and policies should be. This allows for more leeway and flexibility in the confrontations with other political actors (Müller 2017, 31). We will see further on how this is important for Lefort's defence of representative democracy.

Elections are the heyday of democracy, the most important event on the democratic calendar. Civilians let their voices be heard by way of a vote, showing approval or rejection of those who have temporarily occupied the place of power. It is the moment the people decides on its own future. However, what takes place during the voting process is an individuation of the people. Every individual votes for one, which foregoes any notion of the will of the people. It shows democracy to be a way to hold together a society based on indeterminacy and uncertainty, without denying these essential qualities, nor succumbing to them.

Imperfect democracy

If we look at the claim for the democratic deficit through the lens of Lefort, we ascertain there are some problems with how it is commonly defined. Again, the claim made is that there is a gap between the representatives and those whom they represent. It is argued that there is a need to narrow this gap by bringing politics closer to the people and to give them a greater say in policy making.

Following Lefort's analysis we can argue that given his conception of democracy as a radically unstable and undetermined form of governing, a little reticence is in its place. Thinking

that democracy is the holy grail that will deliver us from all societal woes might be a somewhat naive interpretation. We should not close our eyes for the fact that some of its imperfections are intrinsic, and that calls for addressing them reveal an ignorance of what constitutes democracy.

This does not mean to say there should not be a continual revaluation of democratic practices. In fact, this is exactly what Lefort would argue should happen. Yet, some of these seeming inadequacies are what make democracy function. The loss of a larger organic whole and the disappearance of a strong and recognisable leader have allowed for the inclusion of more people. The separation of spheres has allowed a flourishing of the individual spheres, who are no longer subservient to one principle, anchored in one person. And by placing conflict centre-stage a way has been found to bring about policies peacefully while retaining pluralism, without society descending into an all-against-all.

Lefort does acknowledge that all does not have to be well in democracy. He identifies two major threats. Further on we will look in more detail at some of the proposals to bridge the gap and mitigate the democratic deficit. We will look closer at how exactly these attempts can be contested. But first, it is important to establish in what ways a democratic deficit can manifest itself according to Lefort.

Chapter 2: Lefort and the democratic deficit

According to Lefort, what is commonly seen as a major issue with democracy, the gap between citizens and their representatives, is not as problematic as is often argued. He does, however, offer alternative interpretations of problematising democracy. As Bernard Flynn points out, there are two possible legitimacy problems with democracy in Lefort's conception (Flynn 1999, 489). They both stem from the fact that power in society does not any longer reside in one authority or one body, but is derived from the people, which is by definition a plural entity. Where in the premodern situation there existed one figure who represented the voice of all and incorporated all their needs and wishes, in democracy we see a spreading of this representation over multiple actors, who can be held to account and are always in danger of being subverted.

This can lead to the following threats to democracy. On the one side the symbolically empty place of power ends up being actually empty. The political actors cease to fulfil their roles as representatives of the people, instead being concerned only about personal or private interests. The exercise of power and the whole business of politics become at best a technocratic exercise, at worst a nest of corruption. Without discourse, in which the voices of the people meet to discuss the proper policies, democracy is hollowed out.

On the other side, and as a response to this possibility, the empty place of power can come to be closed. To fight the threat of arriving at a truly empty place of power, some wish to remove the divisions amongst a people and render them whole again. This attempt at countering the disincorporation of society is aimed at recreating the social body that was lost with the decapitation of the king. It tries to place an all-encompassing fabric on society in its illusion of one undivided people, that speaks with one unambiguous voice. In this regard Lefort's writings on totalitarianism are particularly enlightening.

The place of power in democracy always rests at the intersection of becoming hollowed out or occupied. It is from this precarious balance that it draws its strength and where it encounters its threats. In this chapter I will consider each of these threats in more detail, following Lefort's analysis.

The empty place as truly empty

In Lefort's conception of democracy there is an emphasis on the ever-present tension between on the one side society as merely an aggregation of individuals who are only loosely bound to each other, and on the other side a conception of the people as one and undivided. In modern democracy

there is a continuous movement between the possibility of a people falling apart and dissolving in numerous elements, or them being forced to be shared under one common unity that negates individual differences in the name of the collective good.

In line with this thought Lefort characterises as a basic threat to democracy when the symbolically empty place of power becomes actually empty. "If the place of power appears, no longer as symbolically, but as really empty, then those who exercise it are perceived as mere ordinary individuals, as forming a faction at the service of private interests and, by the same token, legitimacy collapses throughout society" (Lefort 1986, 279).

We have seen that the empty place of power is not truly empty, for there are always those who rule, though in modern democracy they perform this in the capacity of representatives. Moreover, their decisions are circumscribed by rules and procedures, preventing them from acquiring more power than is justifiable, and from remaining longer in their positions of power than is desirable. In this sense the place of power is empty only symbolically. What happens when it becomes actually empty is that the representatives of the people lose their special status and come to be regarded as any other individuals, whose actions are subject to their own wishes and desires. The difference between the representatives and the represented vanishes and what remains is only a collection of private persons pursuing their own interests. Government becomes one of the means for those in power to accomplish their particular wishes.

This phenomenon spreads across society as everywhere groups and sectors start to take into account only their own interests. Legitimacy suffers a wide collapse because of this broad privatisation, which eventually can lead to the end of civil society.

How does this collapse from within come about? Lefort speaks of this threat in abstract terms. He uses it primarily in juxtaposition with the other threat to democracy, the occupation of the place of power, which I will discuss further down. Still, we can imagine how the hollowing out of democracy can unfold in two ways: through corruption, and through the installation of technocracy.

In the first instance society allows its political leaders to subject their political actions to their private interests. Instead of functioning as the representatives of groups of voters, who through this medium let their voices be heard on the political stage, they concern themselves primarily with furthering their own interests. It is evident that in this way a real democratic process is stopped in its tracks as those in power only act on particular matters, leaving the wishes of the population at large unheeded.

In the second instance, the installation of technocracy, the discourse that is necessary for democracy to thrive is weakened. The implementation of technocratic measures assumes that there

is a right way to manage state affairs and organise society. The idea of a pluralism of opinions and their clash in a perpetual debate, crucial to Lefort's understanding of democracy, is negated as those in power solve problems by applying a certain method (e.g. a scientific method), which is not brought under discussion. In this case there is no need to consult the people. Their voices are not heard and consequently the democratic process is seriously damaged.

Occupying the empty place

The other great threat to democracy, and the one to which Lefort gives more weight, is the closing off of the empty place of power. Lefort explicates this by giving a theory of totalitarianism. Instead of being alien to democracy and a reversal to dictatorial regimes of old, he regards it as the opposite side of democracy's coin. Totalitarianism is inextricably bound to democracy and it forms an ever-present threat to it. In his interpretation totalitarianism is a reaction to the radical indeterminacy of democracy (Flynn 1999, 490). What interests us here is what totalitarianism means and how democracy can lead to it, as this sheds light on how democracy's inherent weaknesses, necessarily linked as they are to its unstable nature, can if unchecked unhinge the entire democratic process.

At the basis of totalitarian thought is the idea of the people as one. "In the so-called socialist world, there can be no other division than that between the people and its enemies: a division between inside and outside, no internal division" (Lefort 1986, 297). According to this idea there can be no divisions amongst people *within* a group of people. When lines are drawn, it is always between us and the enemy, who exists outside of us the people. If there are enemies amongst us, they are inadvertently agents of outside forces and therefore not deemed to belong to us. The Other always remains the Other and cannot be incorporated in us, for he is regarded as an existential threat. To be a people, to form a nation here means to be a whole. Every form of disunity, which we have seen before is regarded by Lefort as constitutive for democracy, is hereby denied. In democracy the very basis of the demos, those who have the right to be included as members of the people, is always open for questioning. Its limits are never clearly demarcated. In totalitarianism Lefort sees a counterforce operating, which threatens to upend this radical openness and close off once and for all the boundaries between individuals. In this way it also makes sense to speak of the Other as being a hostile agent, for in the face of its enemies the people recognise their singularity, what sets them apart from the others.

Lefort does not mean to be saying that we can never speak of setting boundaries, as it is fairly obvious that some kind of boundaries are inevitable in order to constitute a form of democratic order. His claim is that these boundaries will stay forever in flux. They are to be argued

for, set out, contested and set out again, and this into perpetuity. Totalitarianism, however, attempts to give these boundaries a stronger grounding in its denial of their mutability.

In totalitarianism Lefort sees a return of the image of society as a body (Lefort 1986, 298). The comparisons often made by totalitarian governments between the enemies of the people and illnesses or parasites illustrates this: the body is in constant need of defence against foreign elements, who threaten its existence, whether they are on the outside or on the inside. In the former occasion clear boundaries are set up to form a defence for the people, by showing them who belongs to them and who does not. In the latter case these 'parasites' are expelled. In this case Lefort refers to the examples in the Soviet Union of the Terror of Stalin and the showcase trials, already implemented by Lenin.

Lefort signals no problem for the totalitarian idea of the people as one and sovereign, and at the same time their governance by a party. There is no problem because the party is regarded as part of the people, instead of simply being its rulers. It strives to present itself as the head of the body politic, insofar that it is both a member of the body and the place where its consciousness resides. We see here the old image of the king as head of society resurfacing. The party leads society, but encompasses at the same the totality of the people.

A noted difference between the image of the king and the image of the party is that in the latter, the power to which they both refer and from which they derive their legitimacy is not placed in a transcendent order, as in the *ancien régime* (Lefort 1986, 299). Instead, the power finds itself in society proper: the entirety of society identifies itself with the party, and the party in turn with the power, which Lefort calls, using a word termed by Solzhenitsyn, the Egocrat. This Egocrat is the totalitarian leader, who does not occupy a similar place as the king, as he makes no reference to an authority outside of him. In this sense totalitarianism is not a return to the states of the *ancien régime*, though it is an expression of a longing for the wholeness that characterised those regimes.

Totalitarianism is adverse to modern democracy in its attempt to return to the identification of society with a body. Another important reversal it attempts is its undermining of the separation of spheres. Because of the establishment of power in society, the different spheres of power, law and knowledge are brought into the domain of the state, which identifies itself with society, as we have seen before. Consequently, the state gains exclusive control over the ways to decide what the law entails and what is true. As we have seen, these spheres became separated after the fall of the king, and each sphere gained a large degree of autonomy. In the totalitarian state they are brought back under one power, constricting again their scope.

Totalitarianism is only possible because democracy paved its way. The rise of the notion of

the people as sovereign, the loss of the legitimacy of old hierarchies of kingdom and empire, and the spreading of the values of liberty and equality led to the image of a society which is its own cause and its own goal. The problems democracy brought forth, like its fundamental indeterminacy and its institutionalised conflict, led to a concern for their mitigation. Totalitarianism had the cure: all indeterminacy, all conflict, all divisions were erased in a picture of society in perfect harmony with all its parts. But this could only arise out of the democratic ideal of the people as the legitimate place of power (Lefort 1986, 305).

Democracy in danger?

The threats to democracy are twofold: its precarious balance is always in danger of moving towards either a hollowing out of the place of power, or the occupying of this space. This balance is part of its essence. According to Lefort there is no such thing as a stable democracy. By its nature it is always in constant movement. This provides it with its fruitful dynamism and inclusive pluralism, but also presents it with persisting threats.

A democratic deficit in Lefort's analysis of democracy's threats would come down to considering these two instances as always being present in democracy, but nevertheless being avoidable outcomes. Technocracy and corruption on the one hand, a totalitarian attempt at solving the paradox of democracy on the other. Here it is that we must look for failing democratic performance.

Chapter 3: Populism

After having thrown some light on the concept of democratic deficit with Lefort's account of democracy I will proceed with analysing possible solutions. There are a number of ways proposed to decrease the deficit and strengthen the democratic process. In this chapter I will start with tackling an influential and highly visible movement or practice in politics which is often presented as an answer to improving the problems at hand. I speak here, of course, of the phenomenon of populism. Populism is a hotly debated term and I will steer clear of the larger debate surrounding its precise nature, instead only touching on the contested nature of some of its characteristics. For the present discussion I take the theory of Nadia Urbinati as a starting point, as her observations seem particularly insightful when it comes to evaluating populism.

Giving a reason for treating populism in a part on possible strategies for mitigating the issues with modern democracy risks stating the obvious. Populism, as a term used to refer to a certain phenomenon in society, has had for some years a resurgence, and is used by both sides of the political spectrum. The populist label is perhaps too readily applied by political commentators eager to frame a certain policy or politician. It is used by politicians who claim to implement populist measures to give the people a greater voice in democratic procedures. They find themselves supported by some thinkers, as for example Ernesto Laclau. The general claim is that populism strives to produce a more democratic politics.

For an understanding of how this is not what populism actually aims at, and how it does not address democratic inadequacies, as Urbinati argues and which is the interpretation I will follow, it helps if we take a brief look at someone who proposes a more favourable view. I will not deal too extensively here with Laclau and neither will I try to refute his views in their entirety. He is important for the current discussion insofar as Urbinati criticises his theory of populism and attempts to correct him.

Populism as political logic

Laclau equates populism with politics, only politics in a wider sense and in a more democratic form. He identifies three structural dimensions that are at the basis of his conception of populism: "the unification of a plurality of demands in an equivalential chain; the constitution of an internal frontier dividing society into two camps; the consolidation of the equivalential chain through the construction of a popular identity" (Laclau 2005, 77). We will have a closer look at each dimension

in turn.

Laclau starts by identifying the smallest constitutive units of society, namely demands (Laclau 2005, 73). A demand remains a request when it is met by the authorities and the want satisfied. When this does not happen and, crucially, people with unmet demands note that other people close to them also do not see their particular demands being met, after some time these demands can become linked in a chain. When none of them are addressed individually they all come together and form an equivalential whole, being equivalent in their status of not being met.

Although these demands can differ from each other, they are brought together in their opposition to the institutions that fail to address them. In this manner an internal frontier within society is formed, putting in opposition those with unmet demands and those who have the power to meet them but fail to do so. Laclau makes a distinction between a democratic and a popular demand (Laclau 2005, 74). A democratic demand remains isolated from the chain, whether it is satisfied or not. When it starts to unite with other demands in the aforementioned chain, it creates a plurality of popular demands, which in turn has a chance of leading to the establishment of a popular subjectivity. Here we find the beginning of what might be called a people, who position themselves in their claims against those in power. A people is thus formed when the plurality of individual demands are linked and find a common signification in a system of articulation.

Laclau characterises this system of articulation as forming the core element of populism. Populism is not a type of movement, nor an ideology, but a "political logic" (Laclau 2005, 117). It is the form, not the contents that matter. Trying to give a content to the term populism misses the point. Populism does not have a defined content, i.e. a definite set of policies linked to a certain ideology. It is merely a way of articulating content, whatever that might be. In this sense it is also easy to see how this conception of populism can explain its wide application, being used to refer to those from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. If populism has no content, but is merely a way to bring the unsatisfied claims of the people to the fore in a confrontation with those in power, these claims can be of any type of ideology.

If populism is simply a way to articulate demands, as Laclau asserts, then we can imagine how it could be suggested to strengthen the democratic process. When the representatives fail to heed the demands of the citizens and formulate adequate answers to their calls, such confrontational measures might bring immediate attention to the problems of the people, and bring closer their alleviation. Only when linked the particular demands can carry enough weight for the people to force a solution.

However, this interpretation of populism has its flaws. We will now look at how Urbinati identifies some of these and proposes her own interpretation, which aims at being more inclusive and at doing more justice to the darker side of populism that she perceives.

Polarisation and Caesarism

Urbinati characterises populism as "a disfigurement of democracy" (Urbinati 2014, 129). She acknowledges that it is far from clear what the term actually means, but she argues that there are at least some fundamental traits that can be identified. The comprehensive definition that she comes up with runs as follows:

Simplification and polarization produce verticalization of political consent, which inaugurates a deeper unification of the masses under an organic narrative and a charismatic or Caesarist leader personating it. (Urbinati 2014, 131, her emphasis)

The two most important characteristics of populism, both occupying a prominent position in the definition above, are polarisation and Caesarism. Urbinati uses both to argue against Laclau's positive evaluation of populism and for her own interpretation.

In populism, polarisation leads to society being divided into two antagonistic camps: on the one side the good and the just, who are many, and on the other side the corrupt, who are few. This corresponds to a distinction between the people and the elite, whereby the people are packed together as one unified force, whose individual identities and wills are subsumed under the larger header of the group. The elite, by contrast, are those who undermine and actively work against the interests of the majority, and are regarded as its enemies (Urbinati 2014, 132).

She argues that populism is an ideology of the concentration of power and opinion, instead of a dispersion thereof. In a well-functioning democracy these are spread amongst a large number of actors, in order to do justice to the democratic principles of equality and liberty for all. Every citizen is entitled to formulate his own opinions and bring them out into the public domain, and possibly in opposition to the opinions of others. Power is diffused over multiple players and institutions, to make its abuse difficult. Populism wishes to place both of these into the hands of a clearly defined group. Of course, it argues that this group encompasses all of the people, and that its expression is the people's will, i.e. the will of all. However, she argues that the way the people as a group is delineated from the others is problematic.

We have seen how Laclau proposes an opposition between people with unmet demands, the

popular subjectivity, and those in power, who fail to satisfy their claims. For Laclau this is populism: a way to further the interests of the people by creating division and stimulating conflict. A victory for the people would then be a real victory for the majority, because they would obtain power in this way. This would still fall within the electoral structure of democracy, albeit a radical reinterpretation of it. It would simplify the antagonistic elements present in democracy by dividing them into two blocks and providing a unification of the people, which in this view would further their interests considerably.

Urbinati argues that the pluralism necessary for democracy, which Laclau gives a place in his equivalential chain of demands, is undermined by this confrontational way of organising politics. The unification of the actors causes the individual voice to be drowned in the larger whole, which is undemocratic in an understanding of democracy as a form of government that attempts to be as inclusive as possible. Polarisation does not only lead to simplification of pluralism, but to its denial (Urbinati 2014, 160).

For Urbinati populism deems the indirectness of representative democracy to be an impediment, and it will prefer a more direct way of realising the wishes of the people in the shape of a chosen leader. This leader claims to be the spokesperson of the people, the one who embodies their will and closes the gap between representatives and represented. The fact that he makes these claims outside of the electoral system and against the democratic institutions, not just against the current performance of representation, makes the populist leader a threat to democracy (Urbinati 2014, 153). This manifests itself in the doubts the populist leader expresses over democratic institutions, such as parliament, and over their legitimacy.

Urbinati uses the term Caesarism to denote the possible consequence of this type of leadership: the rise of an autocratic and charismatic leader. Her criticism of Laclau is that it is precisely the occurrence of Caesarism that Laclau cannot account for in his theory of populism. The unifying of the people leads to the crowning of a leader who forms the focal point of their wishes. Their voices are supposed to have become as one, and it is in this figure that they find their articulation. In this manner this leader represents the people outside the democratic institutions. He does not have to be elected or be member of a party in order to claim legitimacy.

Laclau does not deny the occurrence of personalisation of the unifying force, but he does not regard it as essential to populism; unlike the oppositions which form the propellant of action and democratic change. Urbinati disagrees: following Laclau's line, populism can then hardly be distinguished from ordinary politics, making the term superfluous and the debate without meaning

(Urbinati 2014, 158). She stresses that populism is a particular ideology, to which she gives a strongly negative evaluation.

Within representative democracy power is dispersed and has no head, or to put it differently, it has many. Populism strives to condense and concentrate power in order to make the gap between the state and the people smaller. To give its many demands articulation it will rally around a spokesperson, who is not necessarily elected, but might only be acclaimed: in his position as defender of the people's will he does not have to be democratically chosen, but rather only hailed as the best advocate of the people's demands. Using a rhetoric aimed at discrediting current politics and politicians, he can present himself as an outsider who will do things differently. He might later come to power by vote counting, but his position as the unchallenged leader of the population does not necessarily need a democratic base (Urbinati 2014, 160).

If we look back at the definition of populism as stated above, we can reformulate it thus: populism is the loss of plurality by unifying one group and positioning it against a minority, which is regarded as its antagonist. The broad consent of democracy, spread out horizontally over many heads, turns upwards and finds its expression in the body of one charismatic and autocratic leader. It has now become clear that Urbinati does not accept any concept of populism as correcting or improving democratic procedure, but instead sees it as a threat to the very fabric of democracy.

Populism and totalitarianism

Urbinati refers to Lefort as one who "foresaw the populist risk" in his analysis of totalitarianism (Urbinati 2014, 132). And indeed, Lefort seems particularly applicable to an evaluation of populism. Although he does not himself say much about populism, the way he describes the dangers to democracy posed by totalitarianism seems to correspond with some characteristics of populism identified by Urbinati.

If we recollect the earlier discussion of Lefort's characterisation of totalitarianism we see how in that perversion of democracy an attempt is made at creating an homogeneous people. Lines are drawn between us and them, and the individual is enclosed in a larger group that is supposed to speak in his name. Pluralism is denied as the people's will is proclaimed to be the only legitimate expression of power. In populism a similar polarisation takes place when the idea of democracy as a headless or many-headed form of society makes way for an older, organic form, which is lead by one head, the charismatic leader. Populism in Urbinati's definition wishes to get rid of the indeterminacy and conflictual nature of modern democracy by harking back to a lost unity of mind

and voice.

Lefort calls the paradox of democracy the existence of an aggregation of individuals who do not form one whole any more, but who are still expected to belong to some form of society that accounts for both this pluralism and coherence, for without the last one we cannot speak of any meaningful cohabitation. This question is solved in totalitarianism by delineating a certain group and claiming that it stands for the whole, thereby silencing the individual voice. In democracy, the question as to what constitutes the people always ought to remain open, to allow for a perpetual debate about inclusion and exclusion.

What is more, populism seems bend on emphasising that there is such a thing as a clearly defined people, in whose name its leader then claims to operate. As well as in totalitarianism, we see a similar use of antagonism between those who belong to this people and those who do not. The latter ones are said to oppose the first and be its enemies.

The concentration of power and opinion that Urbinati signals in populism can be compared to the bringing together of the spheres of power, law and knowledge under totalitarian rule. Those spheres had separated after the fall of the king and the disincorporation of society and helped create a multicentred and pluralist society. Populism wishes to transfer power and opinion to one entity, so that power can be wielded in a biased manner, legitimised by the support of a people that is first assumed to exist. Opinion becomes the opinion of one privileged group, which now can ordain what is just and what is true, brushing off dissenting voices or minority opinions and dismissing them as less valuable. One narrative is held up as the correct one, while in a democracy there should be room for many.

The institutions that protect the separation of the interests of society and of the state, while at the same time allowing them to relate, are eroded by populism. These institutions become the instruments through which the populists advance their own interests, though they are presented as the interests of all. In the attempt to diminish the indirectness of representation by championing a more direct link between the citizens and policy making, this ends up being restricted to expressing the interests of only a certain group.

Another similarity is between the party and the populist leader. The party both rules society and forms a part of it, reminiscent of the image of society as a body with the king as its head. Just like the totalitarian party the populist leader embodies the will of the people, gives expression to it, and cannot err in that regard. If someone is wrong, it is the people, for the leader functions merely as its spokesperson. He claims to have been given an imperative mandate: he only carries out the

wishes of the people he says to represent. This is problematic for two reasons: he is hereby not accountable for any policies that fail, as he can deny all responsibility by pointing at his mere executive role. Moreover, his claim to speak for the people as a whole is, as we have seen, highly doubtful to begin with.

Conclusion

In spite of these striking similarities, an important reservation has to be made. Andrew Arato claims that populism should not be equated too readily with totalitarianism (Arato 2013, 157). According to Lefort, with the disappearance of the body of the king there is a gap between the symbolic and the real. That this gap remains is a condition of democracy. Its meaning is always suspended as it defies any description, which would necessarily be reductive. No one can fill the empty place in the actual sense, as doing that would negate the symbolic meaning it has received, which would lead to the end of democracy. Inserting the people in the place of God as the ultimate referent of legitimacy would only swap different masters: the notion of the people must itself be done away with.

Arato argues that while populism only attempts to occupy the empty place of power, totalitarianism also destroys the distinction between the symbolic and the real. I take this to mean that totalitarianism goes a step further than populism: it not only claims absolute power in a space where no one is allowed to claim this, namely the political space, but goes on to negate the very base of democracy by completely subsuming every aspect of life under one domain. In this way we can regard populism as a form of proto-totalitarianism, not being the same but certainly displaying traits of totalitarianism in an embryonic stage.

When we look at Urbinati's account of populism and how it fits in with Lefort's analysis of the inherent instabilities of democracy, we see some resemblances which would make us doubt the claims of populism for addressing the democratic deficit. Populism, in its most totalitarian form, strives to occupy the empty place of power and deform the institutions of democracy by using them to advance the interests of a narrow group, while claiming to do this in the name of the people. Populism in this interpretation has definite totalitarian tendencies, which make it a threat to democracy, not a solution for its inadequacies. If we ignore for a moment the way populism seems to pave the way to totalitarianism, pointing at a future state that may never actually come into being, the totalitarian traits that it displays are already on their own damaging enough to democracy.

Chapter 4: Deliberative and participatory democracy

In the last chapter I have analysed populism as a possible strategy for solving the democratic deficit. With Lefort we have seen that populism, instead of offering a way to a more democratic system of governing, as it purports, actually poses a threat to democracy. This is characterised by its attempt to occupy the empty place of power, thereby threatening pluralism and representation. Populism usually proposes a number of solutions to the democratic deficit which are, despite their association with it, not to be discarded too quickly. The baseline of populism is the belief in the fictional unity of the people and its representation by the chosen leader, and it is this underlying ideology that threatens democracy as such. However, some of its calls for changes to the way democracy functions, as e.g. a more direct mode of participation, are related to other, less misguided attempts at bringing democracy closer to the people.

In this chapter I will look at two of these concrete proposals for democratising democracy, namely deliberative and participatory democracy. These are two of the more substantial strategies proposed to reform democracy. Whereas populism consists of an amalgam of proposals, made less credible by the antidemocratic nature of its background ideology, these two models are examples of more open and applicable strategies for democratic improvement.

I am not going to give an expansive refutation of the following strategies. Instead, I wish to look at them in the light of Lefort's reasoning and see how he might evaluate them. In doing so I wish to show that, though they have their merits, they seem to be not wholly successful in reaching the wished-for democratisation.

Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy is "a framework of social and institutional conditions that facilitates free discussion among equal citizens... and ties the authorization to exercise public power (and the exercise itself) to such discussion" (Cohen 2003, 21). It wishes to institutionalise the idea that the justification for political power is based on the participation of citizens in a free and open discussion grounded in reason. To bring the people closer to the political reality it aims at strengthening the connection between their will and its execution in actual policy.

Its emphasis is on *reasoned* discussion, as the importance of mere discussion is included in every concept of democracy (Christiano 1997, 246). Instead, what is central in a deliberative concept of democracy is the idea of deliberation: a discussion amongst equals, who treat one

another as reasonable and their arguments as reasoned, though they might not be in agreement. The results of this deliberation are considered to be the final word on the matter. Where in representative democracy votes represent the will of the people, here the deliberative efforts of equal participants ensure the legitimacy of the political policies. The collective will is not merely an aggregation of votes, but the expression of reasoned deliberation between individual citizens. In this way pluralism, central to any democratic theory, poses little danger to the ideal of a political community. Where this ideal is weakened by the existence of many individuals who assert themselves, not longer being able to share themselves behind one creed or ideology, in deliberative democracy those governed govern themselves by accepting reasonable decisions.

An important issue here is how the participants evaluate the different reasons given by the other participants. Some form of consensus must be reached, or a majority rule administered, to come to a reasonable outcome that can be transformed into policy. It is not enough to forward arguments that are considered true or persuasive by one, for the others must also be persuaded. Everyone deliberating has to keep in mind the commitments and dispositions of the others. Here it helps if there are some general reasons in the background shared by all. Then there might be disagreement about the results, but as the participants can find themselves in these general conditions the likelihood of reaching satisfying results is higher (Cohen 2003, 22).

If we look at this depiction of deliberative democracy, quite summary but capturing its core tenets, we can make an evaluation based on Lefort. While the scope of its inclusiveness and its method seem laudable, there are some reservations to be made.

As we have seen before, Lefort warns for the danger of the seat of power becoming actually empty. This happens when the representatives start to represent only their particular interests and the political life of debate and conflict becomes meaningless and non-transparent. As a deliberative democracy on a nation-wide scale cannot possibly include all citizens in the deliberation, the participants have to be chosen, by lot or otherwise. Two issues emerge: first, the return of representation, as it is difficult to include every citizen in the deliberative model. This would mean that deliberation is not possible without representation, making the deliberative model slightly redundant.

Second, this time the representation might be less legitimate. There is the problem that the participants speak only for themselves, not for the people: they are there only because they are representative *for* the people, i.e. they all together are regarded as forming a balanced reflection of the people. Thus this might end up leaning more towards an oligarchy in its resemblance of a

'council of the wise', implementing policies that benefit especially themselves, than being the legitimate expression of the collective will.

Furthermore, because of the need to have certain general conditions that all share in order to reach agreements there is a danger of excluding some citizens from the deliberation process. The debating style, conventions, acceptable forms of arguments and modes of expression all control the parameters of the deliberation. Those who are unable to adjust to these parameters risk being sidelined. In a representative system these parameters are set wider and can themselves be contested. Lefort would stress the inherent instability of democracy, which forms its strength: everything can be brought under the attention of the public and opposed, even the very foundations of the consensus. In deliberative democracy these generally accepted conditions need to be kept in place in order to make room for eventual agreement. Lefort asserts that in order to be as inclusive as possible democracy ought to allow for the largest number of dissenting voices, because democracy is dissent and conflict, though peacefully resolved.

A third point we can make with Lefort is the doubt about the distinction between self-interest and just deliberation. The participants in the deliberation are said to be motivated only by the latter, and only then is it possible to come to a reasonable conclusion that truly reflects the collective will. We can safely assume that this might not always be the case. Because there is a direct link between the citizens and the resulting policies, bargaining and negotiating for their own interests are a more substantial problem in a deliberative than in a representative model. In the latter, the people can cast their vote thinking solely about their own interests. However, their representatives will have to defend these preferences by bringing them into the debate and playing them off against each other. If a citizen does not like the outcome of this conflict, he can let his opinion be heard by voting differently in the next elections. In this gap between the self-interest of the individual citizen and the eventual outcome of politics lies an important democratic safeguard.

Participatory democracy

Participatory democracy, although in some ways related to the concept of deliberative democracy, distinguishes itself from the latter by putting the emphasis on participation. Its aim is to widen the scope of democracy by moving away political power from representatives to all active citizens (Vitale 2006, 750). An important thing to consider is that participatory democracy is meant to function as a means to further other ends, namely addressing social inequalities and giving a larger amount of people more to do in the political sphere, besides only voting. It aims at including more

people in the decision-making process, thereby claiming to achieve a democratisation of democracy. Moreover, the participants themselves are involved in the implementation of the decisions they have agreed upon, keeping the links between their desires and demands close to their actual realisation and triggering a deeper satisfaction amongst the people.

At the same time, there is a pedagogical goal, as this direct participation leads to growing societal awareness and political capacities in the participants, which in turn is supposed to lead to better decisions and improved outcomes of the democratic process (Elster 1997, 24). The idea is that if people are directly involved in the democratic process and made responsible for its outcome, instead of delegating this to their representatives, they will sense stronger communal bonds. Moreover, to counter the argument that denies that the majority of citizens have the necessary capacities to perform well in the political process, this model would have it that by drawing a larger part of the citizenry more often into this process and making them active players will improve their efficacy and proficiency.

The participatory model need not be opposed to the representative model, but could rather function as complementary to it. Vitale proposes for example interweaving the two models by introducing or extending participatory systems in political parties and strengthening the accountability of the representatives by making them work more closely with the participants that have elected them. The representation mechanisms are thus kept in place, but are made to reflect more directly what has been decided in the collective vote, instead of being the outcome of an aggregation of individual votes (Vitale 2006, 752).

Given a light interpretation of participatory democracy as functioning within and together with a system of representation this model seems to have its merits, though it can be questioned how far then its supposed democratisation of democracy goes. If it stays well within the limits of representative democracy it might be only tweaking it, which I think is not what its proponents wish to do. They seem to have a more radical change in mind.

If we have a look at such a strong interpretation with Lefort we can raise some questions about this model. Leaving the matter of the feasibility of organising such a wide participation aside, it can be doubted if the majority of the people are willing to put so much time and effort into participating in the political process, or if they have or ever will have the necessary capabilities to deal with every matter they come across. The demands made on them will be strenuous, that being the cost of not delegating. If we follow this line, the outcome of this might be that there will eventually be only a small party of people who will be making the decisions, those who are the

most committed or have the most opportunities to engage in the process. They derive their authority from the participatory model in which they act, which is undermined by them being the sole voices heard.

Pluralism is under threat by this underestimation of social complexity. The gap between the representatives and those whom they represent is seen as problematic and in need of closing by allowing more to participate in political decision-making. In the light of Lefort's notion of democracy, we can argue that this gap is nowhere as wide or problematic as assumed. For Lefort it is of paramount importance that the seat of power remains symbolically empty. In this way, no one is allowed to take a final position in the political sphere and it remains forever open to anyone to make a contribution, voice a demand, join the debate, etcetera. A consequence of this opening up of the seat of power is the loss of a clearly recognisable order. The arrangements of power have become radically uncertain, which might lead in certain groups to a feeling of disorientation and apprehension. There is no place any more for a ruler with a direct link to the people. Instead, the stage has widened and more actors have been allowed to participate in the political life.

In attempting to mitigate this radical uncertainty some might wish to restrain democratic procedures, giving more room to certain actors instead of others. Think here for example of a threshold for parties. For Lefort, however, this leads to the closing of the open space and to a deterioration of the democratic playing field. The crux is that the radical uncertainty of democracy presupposes a gap between people and politicians. The severing of the head of the monarch was the severing of the unconditional and universal connection of the state with the people. Unity was broken in favour of a more egalitarian and inclusive form of organisation.

A representative democracy functions as the safeguard of this form of organisation, as it allows for a large number of demands and opinions to be discussed by representatives of groups of people, in order to reach a desirable policy which favours the most. If one would choose to implement an imperative mandate, making the representative basically only a spokesperson for and enactor of the will of a certain group, the will of one group might overrule those of others.

To sum up, in Lefort's view the gap between politicians and citizens is there to ensure that democratic government remains open and all-encompassing. Were a representative merely an extension of his voters, the wrongful idea would gain credence that there is less need for discussion within the political sphere, and that it is wise for citizens to have the last say. As Lefort argues, not one group can gain control over the political debate, but it is instead of paramount importance that ideas should be contested in a political arena by political actors who defend their view not as the

only just one, but rather as one of many.

A similar point to be levelled against proposals for more ways of direct democracy to counter a democratic deficit lies in the wrong-headed notion that there is a need to lessen conflict within society, to harmonise the political sphere. This is supposed to lead to a more efficient and democratic process. With Lefort we can argue that conflict is necessary in a democracy, even a constituent element, as it is the task of democracy to give a voice to as many people as possible, allowing them to work out their differing demands in a controlled and transparent environment.

After the death of the monarch and the disappearance of any ground for establishing legitimacy in a transcendent sphere, what remains is perpetual conflict between different parties, all vying for attention in their wish to have their demands met. This is a situation that should not be thought of as needing resolution. Conflict is the motor of any democratic institution, for by accepting the indeterminacy of modern society it follows that, instead of trying to reduce the ensuing pluralism of voices, they must be given a controlled environment in which to clash peacefully. This forms the challenge of modern democracy.

Conclusion

Evaluating the deliberative and participatory model of democracy along the lines Lefort sets out, we can make some reservations regarding their efficacy concerning democratising democracy. They might be said to be working from an incomplete understanding of democracy. If we follow Lefort in his analysis of the failings of democracy, in order to address the democratic deficit we had better answer to the threats he identifies. We have seen before that this is a two-sided problem: on the one hand the actual emptying of the place of power, on the other hand the occupation of that place. Strategies that wish to succeed in improving democratic performance have to take into consideration these two issues.

Conclusion

The question that I have investigated in this paper was how to define the democratic deficit and evaluate possible solutions for it in view of Lefort's conception of democracy. I have proceeded as follows. In the first chapter I have discussed the definition and causes of the democratic deficit. With Pippa Norris I defined the democratic deficit as the perceived discrepancy between the aspirations and wishes people have for the democratic system, and its actual performance. When democracy fails to live up to its promises, this means that there exist certain evident expectations amongst the population, which when not met may cause unrest and calls for change.

To understand what these promises of democracy are, I have treated Lefort's conception of democracy in some detail. For Lefort democracy is a fundamentally weak and flawed system of governing, but these flaws are inherent and form democracy's strength. Modern democracy came into being when the organic interpretation of society as a body with the king at its head fell with the decapitation of the ruler. From then on, any determinacy and unity of society was out of the picture, and forever so. I highlighted three main points in Lefort's conception of democracy, all bound up to this disappearance of absolute ground.

First, the seat of power has become symbolically empty, now being occupied only by temporary representatives, whose actions are circumscribed by rules and procedures. No one individual, group or party is allowed to hold power for longer than prescribed. Furthermore, the spheres of law and knowledge have moved out of the sphere of power. They are no longer determined by those in power, but each now functions according to its own norms. Lastly, conflict has become a constituting element of society. Instead of being banned, conflict is channelled onto a political stage on which different actors, representing various interests, fight out their differences in a continual but peaceful struggle. The absolute monism of the *ancien régime* has been replaced with a dynamic and volatile society.

Following Lefort's analysis, I have argued that the common view of the failings of democracy can be considered to be a judgement made too rashly. Many of its perceived flaws are in fact what make democracy work in the first place. Calls to address these flaws might not derive from a clear understanding of democracy.

Having signalled the troubles with the common problematisation of democratic performance, in the second chapter I have focused on Lefort's interpretation of the democratic deficit. For Lefort there are two threats to democracy, both inherent to the system.

The first is when the place of power becomes not only symbolically but actually empty. This occurs when the political actors cease to fulfil their roles as representatives of the people, by concerning themselves only with their private interests. In this way politics becomes a place of technocracy or corruption. In the first case the vital debate in democracy is ignored as unnecessary, as for every problem a suitable solution is proposed without much need for discussion. In the latter case only particular interests are taken into consideration, which naturally renders democracy hollow.

The second threat is when the empty place of power becomes occupied. In a reaction to the loss of unity and the threat of a truly empty place of power, an attempt is made to make the people whole again. Society is once again seen as one and undivided, and the will of the people reflected in one person or party. I have illustrated this with Lefort's analysis of totalitarianism. With Lefort I argued that when we speak of a democratic deficit, we should refer to these two issues, which are ever present in a modern democratic society. They are the permanent shadows of democracy.

In the second part of my paper I turned to the evaluation of possible strategies to mitigate the democratic deficit. The first I treated was populism, giving it ample space as its current hotly debated status befits. I first defined populism by looking at two different interpretations of it. I positioned Laclau's argumentation of populism as a political logic against Urbinati's conception. Following the latter I asserted that populism is not only a formal strategy, but has its own contents. These are found in its attempts at falsely unifying the people, asserting it has one collective will and claiming this will finds its ultimate expression in the person of the charismatic leader.

Applying Lefort to this conception I argued that his analysis of totalitarianism can be useful when evaluating populism. Populism has totalitarian tendencies in its wish to deny the plurality and indeterminacy of society by returning to an earlier organic form of society with the people as one and undivided. Moreover, the claim that one leader can embody a spurious will of the people fits this picture. Populism's concentration of power and opinion in Urbinati's interpretation echoes what Lefort writes about the inverse of the separation of spheres in totalitarianism.

Still, I concluded by making some reservations against all too readily equating populism and totalitarianism. Populism might be seen as proto-totalitarianism: it does not (yet) go to the same lengths, but it displays totalitarian traits which make it in itself damaging to democracy.

In the final chapter I continued to have a look at some more concrete examples of strategies against the democratic deficit. I analysed the theories of deliberative and participatory democracies in the light of Lefort's conception of democracy. Both theories make some strides towards a further

democratisation of the system, but they seem to be lacking in some important ways.

Deliberative democracy might not be able to work without representation, because of the practical problem of involving all citizens. Moreover, the need for general conditions to streamline the deliberation process can have a constricting influence on the inclusiveness of democracy. Lastly, there is the issue of the distinction between self-interest and just deliberation. In the participatory model of democracy pluralism is under threat by the underestimation of social complexity. The gap between representatives and the represented need not be problematic, for it provides the place where the political actors can engage with one another in the name of their voters. Out of this conflict policies will issue forth, which will be contested by some and applauded by others. Until the next elections, when the tables can be turned.

To conclude, the way the democratic deficit is commonly defined tries to address flaws of democracy that are inherent to the system and, as I have argued with Lefort, fundamental to its functioning. In this way it has become clear that neither populism, an ideology with undemocratic traits, nor the two more concrete strategies I have treated here, the deliberative and participatory models of democracy, manages to significantly decrease the democratic deficit. Instead, I think it is more fruitful to focus on the threats Lefort sees for democracy, which concern the protection of the empty place of power. In this interpretation the democratic deficit can only be dealt with by keeping in mind the precarious balance democracy finds itself in, and striving to maintain that balance despite the threats perpetually hovering over it.

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