



How did former George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum become a darling of the anti-Trump resistance? Photo courtesy of Policy Exchange.

Normcore Jedediah Purdy

One Nation After Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not-Yet-Deported
by E.J. Dionne, Jr., Norman J. Ornstein,
and Thomas E. Mann
St. Martin's Press, 2017, 352 pp.

Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic
by David Frum
Harper Collins, 2018, 320 pp.

Antipluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy
by William A. Galston
Yale University Press, 2018, 176 pp.

How Democracies Die
by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt
Crown, 2018, 320 pp.

The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It
by Yascha Mounk
Harvard University Press, 2018, 400 pp.

The proliferating “crisis-of-democracy” literature, like *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, has only one plot. And, like the crash-up car-chase movies, it has not let this fact slow its growth. *How Democracies Die*, by Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, and *The People vs. Democracy*, by Harvard instructor Yascha Mounk, are just two of the emblematic

titles, along with entries by George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum (*Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic*), political theorist and Clinton adviser William Galston (*Antipluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*), and a three-handed work, *One Nation After Trump*, by commentators E.J. Dionne, Jr., Norman J. Ornstein, and Thomas E. Mann. Readers may already have noticed that all these authors are, like your reviewer, white men credentialed by the establishment institutions whose “liberal tears” are jet-fuel in the engines of Trumpism. One of the telling things about the crisis-of-democracy literature is that it presents itself as the voice of reason, calling the people back to their principles. It isn't clear who is listening.

This, however, gets ahead of the story. Likely none of these books would exist—certainly none would be remotely the same—if Hillary Clinton had pulled a hundred thousand more votes out of the Midwest in 2016. All are organized around the shock of Trump's victory. Through this prism of moral and political affront, the light of more distant events coalesced into a pattern. Brexit had been a shock; now it became a prophecy. Countries that had seemed quite disparate or lain outside the American media's line of vision altogether became warnings of democracy's capacity for self-dissolution: post-Chávez Venezuela, Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines, and Viktor Orbán's Hungary. The strongman populisms of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, and, most ominously, Vladimir Putin in

Russia, all became variations on the crisis of democracy.

Just what is the crisis? In one sense, it is whatever made Trump's victory possible. In another, it is whatever ties together a global wave of nationalist, xenophobic, and authoritarian governments, some of them in countries—such as Poland and even Russia—that not so long ago seemed to be case studies in the triumph of liberal democracy. In a third sense, it is a great disappointment—a Return of History signaled by the blooming of tawdry kleptocracies dressed in many-hued flags and religious garments.

The unifying idea is that liberal democracy is not self-sustaining—not automatically, anyway. Even if they have opponents outside, such as Putin and his agents, liberal democrats should most fear the dysfunctions of their own system. But what makes the system work, and what breaks it?

These are urgent questions that were too easy for pundits to ignore before Trump made them unavoidable. But while all of these authors make some room for recent disruptions—the growth of inequality, the rise of social media, the backlash against immigration—they share a view that formed during the Cold War and seemed vindicated in 1989: that “democracy” means a cleaned-up version of what we do in the United States, complete with American-style capitalism, a word that hardly appears in these books because it is so deeply assumed. In this line of thought, which dates back at least to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s 1949 *The Vital Center*, a crisis of democracy requires a high-minded defense of the principled political center against the extremes of left and right. (“Populism” has recently become the catchphrase for that bipolar anti-liberalism.)

What is missing from these works, and the commentariat that they represent, is a genuine reckoning with twenty-first-century questions: whether we have ever been democratic, and whether the versions of capitalism that have emerged in the last forty years are compatible with democracy. The crisis-of-democracy literature largely presumes that these debates have been settled, so that any doubts about

that settlement must be symptoms of confusion or bad faith. That is why these books do not rise to the crisis that occasions them. Answering basic questions about the relationship between democracy and capitalism is an essential part of responding to the present crisis.

There are differences in emphasis. Levitsky and Ziblatt compare Trumpism to creeping authoritarianism abroad, and their story about the United States is almost entirely about political culture: polarization, fight-to-the-death partisanship, and the erosion of public trust in political institutions. Mounk draws a more sweeping picture. He traces disaffection with democracy around the world, reporting that even relatively stable countries like France and Germany are seeing growing public contempt for the political establishment and growing (though still small) attraction to extreme alternatives such as military rule. He warns that resentment of “undemocratic liberalism” (European Union directives, trade regimes, judicial decisions) may be spurring illiberal democracy (Orbán, Trump). While most books in the genre offer modest reformism, *One Nation After Trump* endorses a fairly robust progressive agenda: the authors would fix elections by wiping out voter-suppression laws and moving to a national popular vote for the presidency, and they embrace major investment in infrastructure, education, and health. Galston, whose slim book sometimes resembles notes from a political-theory seminar, wants Democrats to embrace a more restrictive immigration policy (that might favor highly skilled immigrants, for instance). George W. Bush's speechwriter David (Axis of Evil) Frum, who has convinced some members of the #Resistance that any enemy of Trump is their friend, hopes that in rejecting Trumpist authoritarianism the country will also see through Bernie Sanders and “the tyranny and terror of utopian politics” he represents. Besides discerning Maoism in public financing of higher education, Frum is pleased that Trump has reinvigorated Americans' commitment to “the vital role of national security agencies.”

Beneath the lines between center-left and center-right, young intellectual entrepreneurs and silver-haired veterans of the actual Cold War, everyone is telling a version of the same story. The crisis-of-democracy authors are disciples of “norms,” the unwritten rules that keep political opponents from one another’s throats and enable a polity to plod along. Being unspoken, norms are often invisible until someone breaks them. You hardly notice that everyone on the highway is taking turns merging until That Guy screams through, splitting lanes, leaning on his horn, with truck nuts flapping from his trailer hitch.

One problem with identifying the protection of political norms with the defense of democracy is that such norms are intrinsically conservative (in a small-c sense) because they achieve stability by maintaining unspoken habits—which institutions you defer to, which policies you do not question, and so on. As political theorist Corey Robin pointed out when Levitsky and Ziblatt’s book appeared, democracy has essentially been a norm-breaking political force wherever it has been strong. It has broken norms about who can speak in public, who can hold power, and which issues are even considered political, and it has pressed these points from the household and neighborhood to Congress and the White House.

Even when norms do not lean to the right—for instance, the norm of honoring previous Supreme Court decisions is part of the reason the right to abortion established in *Roe v. Wade* has not been overturned—they are a depoliticized way of talking about political conflict. Norms are like the statues of dead leaders: you can’t know whether you are for or against them without knowing which values they support. The very idea that it would be possible to analyze political developments in terms of the decline of stabilizing, transpartisan norms rather than substantive ideology is a political position. The underlying assumption of those who defend norms is that, at some very deep level, Americans have always agreed on the key issues, above all liberty and equality, and have just had to work out the kinks through

the generations. That kind of thinking is a residue of the Cold War, when, as legal scholar Aziz Rana observed in a brilliant essay earlier this year, the quest for ideological legitimacy in the battle against communism led both parties to suppress their radical wings and converge on a common language of American principles and constitutional destiny.

The buttresses of that world have been crumbling since 1989, but it took a long time to fall. The year 2016 brought the first genuinely post-Cold War election: the perennial carnage of American capitalism, intensified by forty years of growing inequality, prepared the ground for Bernie Sanders’s socialism, while the nativism and racism that had slunk just outside respectable politics returned full-throated. What unifies the crisis-of-democracy genre is the failure to understand that the present moment is not an anomalous departure but rather a return to the baseline—to the historical norm, one might say.

One result is a response to the present crisis that is at once too dramatic and too sanguine. These books all treat Trump’s presidency as unprecedented—which is not at all true. (Rather, “unprecedented” was code for “terrible” in the language of American political consensus. And, of course, he is terrible.) But these authors are also rather modest in their suggestions. None of the proposals from this genre come close to the kinds of sweeping changes that made the New Deal or even the civil-rights revolution. What might that sort of transformation look like today? For one, we need substantial redistribution, starting with marginal tax rates at the 70 percent levels that lasted until the Reagan-era cuts of the 1980s. For another, we need entirely new institutions of planning and social provision, such as universal family leave and child care to help make the economy more humane and family life less exhausting, and to get closer to gender equity. We might also have to do much more to strengthen organized labor, to the point of considering radical measures such as mandatory unionization in large firms, which is often the only way to break management’s power. It could also mean a new dispensation of basic legal rights, such as

granting residents, rather than only citizens, the right to vote.

These sorts of ideas may seem too radical to be taken seriously, or just too far outside the mainstream of American political practice. But that is exactly the point. Earlier crises of democracy and capitalism, such as the New Deal and the labor struggles that preceded it, pressed well past the limits of the then-mainstream, and were called un-American for it. Earlier efforts to renegotiate political and economic membership, such as Reconstruction and the civil rights movement (as practiced, not in anodyne hindsight), involved fundamental changes in the distribution of legal rights and powers. This kind of radicalism makes up one American tradition worth calling on now, one that was eclipsed by the Cold War's myth of constitutional consensus and buried by the neoliberal long 1990s (1989–2008), when reform meant trimming around the edges rather than remaking existing institutions. The crisis-of-democracy genre might have revived this radical tradition. Instead, it tends to recapitulate the constraints that recent decades have clapped onto the political imagination.

It also advances an oddly personal politics. A political science fixated on norms fits easily with a political ethics based on virtue, and the crisis-of-democracy literature really, really wants us to be better, more grateful citizens. Mounk, for instance, calls for a version of “renewing civic faith” that strikes just the right balance of political trust and doubt, a prudent tonic of “inclusive nationalism” that is neither too cosmopolitan nor too particular. He is free with “we” and “our.” So are they all.

It was another habit of the long 1990s to assume that because the political problems of ideological contest had been solved, what remained was a matter for either experts or ethicists. It isn't surprising that, when expertise seems to be losing its authority, the diagnosis falls back on ethics—the demonstrably odious character of the president, but also the norms of American political culture, and, at bottom, the attitudes of its citizens.

What is peculiar is to see these themes sounded so ingenuously when the last ten years have been, in many ways, one long

unlearning of them. Barack Obama's campaign, for many who threw ourselves into it, reanimated the idea that politics still mattered, that mobilized people could remake the terms of their common lives. This was the meaning of the Obama catchphrase, “We are the ones we've been waiting for,” and it was the significance of his defying Hillary Clinton's nomination, deemed inevitable according to every formula of politics as post-ideological game of consultants. The later disappointments of the Obama administration—its well-intentioned deference to centers of expertise and power, from Wall Street to the Pentagon—was a lesson in the limits of power without democratic mobilization, rhetorical brilliance without ideological clarity. Obama, who seemed to some of us—including me—to usher in something new, now looks more like the gorgeous sunset of an era.

Some left critics see the crisis-of-democracy literature as self-evidently in bad faith. Mounk comes in for special invective. At least part of the reason must be a sense that he should be young enough to know better, unlike the Olds who grew up with this kind of language. All of these writers try to call their readers to some common purpose. They want to draw on, amplify, or inculcate a sense of being in things together, a motive to respect one another's differences, to make some sacrifices for one another, to honor some principles because they are right and also—sort of, sometimes—ours.

There may be reasons to object to how any of them would spell this out, but the impulse is a creditable one. The thing is that it doesn't seem to work. The revivalists resemble the Emperor Julian, who tried to restore Roman paganism during the fourth century, and found that the life had gone out of it. Whatever had made it vital was gone, leaving behind empty forms and phrases.

The energy in 2016 was entirely elsewhere. Everyone sensed this—except, perhaps, the Clinton campaign. Sanders and Trump stood for opposite principles and visions of the country, but the two candidates shared an indifference to the standard formula of American politics: Constitution + heroic history = America.

This was the equation that made Barack Obama, John McCain, and Ted Cruz divergent participants in a single political culture. Sanders talked like what he is, a person of the democratic left, to whom America is a place to be worked on, not in itself a source of meaning or identity. Trump departed from Cold-War rhetoric in the opposite direction. To hear him speak, he might never have heard of the Constitution (other than the Second Amendment, a euphemistic hook for his favored themes of violence and racialized fear), the Revolution, or the Civil War—or for that matter the civil rights movement, a redemptive touchstone for Cold-War liberalism. For him, America is not a philosophical problem or a historical challenge, but a chance to beat down whoever falls on the wrong side of the border or the loyalty test. “America, fuck yeah!” as Team America would have it.

The thing that really defined Trump’s political language was its nihilism about politics itself, the appetite it stoked for political bullshit that doesn’t even pretend to hold together, but just staggers from one emotional trigger to another. Trump essentially short-sold the high-minded political style of the late Cold War, betting that it would prove weaker than it looked under pressure—that people neither expected much from government nor thought it important enough to be well-run; that a lot of voters despised their political class and the cultural and financial elites around it; and that recreational cruelty and you-can’t-bullshit-a-bullshitter snark would feel more authentic than any respectably sanctioned appeal to better angels. We are, he intimated, the barbarians we’ve been waiting for.

What you make of the demolition of Cold-War politics has a lot to do with what you think might wait behind its crumbling edifice. To the extent that you live inside the end-of-history sensibility of the long 1990s, the choice is liberalism or barbarism—après Macron, le déluge. Trump himself is a walking case for this position, of course—and if the position is right, then the appeal of liberal revivalism is obvious. It is a last-ditch mission to save civilization

from itself. Mounk ends his book by conjuring up doomed resistance to Roman tyrants, which is either comically self-dramatizing or a sensible rehearsal for the next act of this alarming play, depending on which play you think this is.

The crisis-of-democracy literature tends not to engage the double-edged character of the Cold War or the ambiguously progressive character of the liberalism that it produced. Mid-century geopolitics provided the rationale for brutal proxy wars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and new versions of rather old forms of racism and imperialism outside the North Atlantic. The essential lawlessness and bloody-mindedness of U.S. policy, from Vietnam and Cambodia to El Salvador and Mozambique, not to mention the long indulgence of South Africa’s Apartheid government, give the lie to all moralizing about Cold-War geopolitics. And anticommunism was the prompt for driving labor radicalism to the fringes in capitalist democracies and suppressing challenges to those countries’ braided hierarchies of race and class.

Yet without Cold-War pressures, things might have been worse. The United States might have remained a candidly apartheid state, and labor might have relived the Gilded Age, when unions were radical but also faced live ammunition. It is grating when Cold-War nostalgists suggest that the civil rights movement represented the unfolding of inherent American principles, ushered in by enlightened elites. But it is also true that the black freedom struggle’s gains in the mid-twentieth century depended on strategic alliances in Washington that took their shape, for better and worse, from geopolitical exigency and a certain liberal idealism.

So the specific version of liberal democracy that is in crisis now opens doors to both left and right. The crisis-of-democracy literature tends to see only the opening to the right, and races to bar that door with any materials at hand. This is awfully politically narrow after a year when a self-proclaimed democratic socialist might have been the Democratic nominee, and might have beaten Trump, and in which Macron’s victory over Marine Le Pen

in France might have fallen instead to the left-wing Jean-Luc Mélenchon. (Mélenchon finished 4.4 points behind Macron in the first round of France's two-stage election, and whoever survived that round was going to beat Le Pen.) Those surges, and Jeremy Corbyn's in the United Kingdom, are marked departures from the long 1990s. If nothing else, they confirm that alienation from the current arrangement need not mean political nihilism: It can mean a fighting creed that doesn't reject the state but demands much more of it, and of one another. Frum's Serious Conservative Intellectual brainstem registers all of this as Maoism, but it isn't clear why Mounk, who has written insightfully about structural injustice and its ideologies, shouldn't be more enthusiastic. One fears it is partly owing to that Cold-War habit of striking the wise path between straw men Left and Right.

But the hopes that 2016 stirred are easy to overestimate. Private-sector unions represent less than 7 percent of the workforce and are mostly focused on their own survival. Compared to the mainstream of economics and policy, there is scant left thinking to draw on in recasting trade, financial governance, the structure of work, or social provision. Although Frum's implication that social democracy is some sort of totalitarian fever dream is a pastiche of high-minded centrism, it was not simple neoliberal bad faith to see some of these problems as hard.

Anyone who was around liberal-elite policy types in the long 1990s knows that, whatever they might say when put on the spot today, they admitted back then that they had no idea what the hell to do about inequality. Does the left today? It is distinguished by refusing to take the neoliberal "no" for an answer, and by its justified impatience with the narrow 1990s sense of what is possible. But these are only openings, beginnings.

Meanwhile, corporate and financial elites have shown that, although they would rather have both profit and moral approval, they will take profit where they find it. Disdain for Trump is a shibboleth of enlightened taste, but refusing his tax cuts is not, let alone turning down

the contracts for his military expansion. In these respects, Trumpism is basically Reagan Republicanism without the California simulacrum of sunny goodwill. For the democratic left, the balance of forces is unfavorable.

If you started out by supporting strong egalitarian democracy rather than "norms," you would have a clearer compass. There are norms that a democracy really does need to function. But their importance is entirely different from the mine run of ever-contested norms—some consequential but entirely dispensable, like the filibuster, some downright trivial. (Levitsky and Ziblatt point out that Trump has broken the norm of keeping a pet in the White House. One hopes they were laughing at themselves when they wrote this.) The really essential norms are what make politics a successful substitute for civil war: its power to determine when to subject one's will to those of others. Politics pulls this off by invoking various kinds of authority: religious, nationalist, monarchical. Democracy's authority comes from an artificial thing called "popular will," which of course doesn't literally exist. It is the meaning we give to the vote count, as processed by various institutional structures such as legislatures. If elections could no longer generate political authority, something else would fill the gap, or things would fall apart. Lying about the basic facts of elections, especially by elites and politicians, is a deep kind of norm-breaking that really can erode self-rule.

This is why it is chilling that, as Levitsky and Ziblatt report, before the 2016 vote 84 percent of Republicans told pollsters they believed a "meaningful amount" of fraud occurred in American elections, and almost 60 percent said "illegal" immigrants would "vote in meaningful amounts" in presidential balloting. A July 2017 poll showed that 47 percent of Republicans believed Trump had won the popular vote, rather than losing it by nearly 3 million votes. Fifty-two percent of Republicans said they would support the president if he postponed the 2020 elections to "make sure that only eligible American citizens

can vote.” This April, Trump returned to this theme, claiming that “in places like California,” millions of people vote illegally.

This is norm-breaking of a very particular kind. If it succeeds, it prevents elections from settling political conflicts, because agreement over their meaning has been destroyed. The Republican party is pressing this story because it needs to sustain minority rule—in the Electoral College against the popular vote, in a gerrymandered Congress against the national trend toward Democrats, in closely divided states like North Carolina and Wisconsin where voter suppression helps to sustain artificial majorities and supermajorities. And it is no coincidence who is in the ruling minority: the nearly 90 percent of Republican voters who identify as white, compared with not much over 50 percent among Democratic voters. Trump’s rhetoric of “places like California” is as racialized and nativist as tracing Obama’s birth to Kenya. On one level, the lies establish the rationale for voter suppression, on another, the possibility of openly rejecting an election loss. On yet another level, they rely on the idea that a non-white American majority is not really a majority at all. That is, they tend to switch the basis of political legitimacy from majoritarianism to ethnonational identity.

How did we get here? Competing explanations for Trump’s ascendance have produced much more heat than light. He tapped into “economic anxiety”—discontent over mechanization, stagnating wages, and resentment of trade agreements—and wove these into a racialized, anti-immigrant politics that made whiteness and native-born citizenship increasingly salient. One could easily reverse the order of the sentence and say that he tapped into deep-running rivers of racism and xenophobia and anchored these to economic worries. The fact remains that the nightmarish key to his success was his ability to fuse racial and economic motives—which have, after all, never been very distinct in American life. The question is what to do about it.

Arriving at the wrong answer is more excusable than posing the wrong question. The crisis-of-democracy literature doesn’t

get the question quite right. It looks across the world for parallels to what is happening in the United States today, a comparative approach that manages to be both U.S.-centric and historically narrow. It might have been more illuminating to investigate the long-running illiberal, anti-democratic, racist, nativist, and plutocratic strands in American politics. While these books acknowledge “inequality” and “insecurity,” and even sometimes the ways liberalized trade and finance can undercut democracy, they don’t entertain the thought that capitalism and democracy might be in deep tension. Maybe for the world to be safe for democracy, it needs to be less safe for at least some versions of capitalism.

The focus on the norms of political elites is in one way a refreshing change from the technological determinism of the long 1990s, which tended to treat neoliberal globalization as an inevitable product of technology, with governments either leading, following, or getting run over if they stood in the way. Attention to norms at least acknowledges that politics matters. But it is a modest focus, limited to ensuring government becomes neither bloodletting nor openly corrupt. (These goals are, of course, necessary under Trump, just not sufficient.)

A more robust approach would ask how political leadership and mobilization open up new ideological frontiers, for better or worse. Among the lessons of 2016: nativist campaigns create nativists, racist campaigns create racists. Socialist campaigns create democratic socialists. It seems entirely possible—though nail-bitingly uncertain—that this fall, and in two-plus years, American majorities will reject today’s nativist, racist, and plutocratic movements. But in favor of what? To come to terms with the crises of democratic capitalism and the ideological openings of the post-Cold War era, it will have to be more than a renewal of moral seriousness and elite responsibility. Not long ago it seemed to many respectables that we lived in the best of all possible worlds, allowing for some improvements around the edges. Now nearly everyone sees that another world is possible—a much worse one, narrower, crueler, and more nihilistic. In fact, that

“best” world seems to have had the defect that it fostered the worse one. The most important political question of this time, then, is whether a still better world is also possible—and, if so, what that world would be.

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Seizing the Means of Reproduction

Emily Callaci

How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump
by Laura Briggs
University of California Press, 2018, 304 pp.

In the 1970s, feminists demanded that their government pay them wages for housework. Beginning with the International Feminist Collective in Italy in 1972, the Wages for Housework movement spread across the globe. Their demands for compensation issued from a larger political ambition: to abolish gender inequality by eliminating the distinction between work done in the home and work done in the marketplace. “Wages for housework for all women,” the New York Wages for Housework Committee argued, “means the power to refuse the double shift of a second job, which is now our only alternative to working for nothing.”

At the core of the Wages for Housework movement was the concept of reproductive labor. Simply put, reproductive labor is the work required to sustain human life and raise future generations. The concept comes from Marx, who distinguished the productive labor of the factory from the unpaid work that reproduces labor power. For capitalism to survive, workers must be nourished from one workday to the next, and future generations of workers must be born and raised. Cooking or preparing food, cleaning and maintaining the

home, caring for the elderly or the sick, and raising and looking after children are all forms of labor that make possible the flow of generations. Historically, that work has been performed by women.

Reproductive labor is like electricity, invisible yet everywhere, and it powers everything. Much of the negotiation of daily life involves deciding either to give your time and energy to performing reproductive labor, or outsourcing it to someone else. It is unrecognized, uncelebrated, often unpaid, and yet utterly necessary. It is not currently a part of our everyday political lexicon, but look closely into any major political issue today, and you will likely find a struggle over reproductive labor.

This is the provocation of Laura Briggs’s book, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*. It is a history of neoliberalism, told from the vantage point of the family. The chronology is a familiar one: in the late 1970s the U.S. government moved to address inflation by tightening the money supply, dismantling the social safety net, and weakening the bargaining power of unions. Confronted with the double blow of stagnating real wages and fewer sources of public support for reproductive labor, most households could not sustain themselves on a single income. Meanwhile, conservatives justified the shrinking of public programs by denigrating black families and fulminating against “welfare queens.” (In reality, white women and children were the biggest beneficiaries of welfare.) All of this has shifted responsibility for reproductive labor from the public sphere onto the shoulders of private individuals and families. The dual-income nuclear family has become the site of all dependency. Those who don’t fit into that family model are deemed immoral; those who do face ever increasing burdens of reproductive labor.

This turn in reproductive politics has led to what Briggs calls “offshoring reproduction.” Families under increased financial pressure must pay others to do reproductive labor. The work of social reproduction is pushed further and further down the social hierarchy—onto employed women taking up a “second shift” at