

MIKE O'DONNELL

CRISES AND POPULAR DISSSENT

SECOND EDITION



**LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE AUTHORITARIAN
AND POPULIST CHALLENGE**

Crises and Popular Dissent, Second Edition

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Crises and Popular Dissent, Second Edition: Liberal Democracy and the Authoritarian and Populist Challenge

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To The O'Donnell, Chetty and Isa Clans – One World

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Preface: A World at Risk

There is a compelling reason for a second edition of this book. The threat of authoritarianism has become even clearer and greater since the first edition, written in late 2020 and early 2021. That is a fearful development given the atrocities of mid-20th century authoritarianism of both the Fascist and Communist variety. Now, again, from Russia to Venezuela, from China to Hungary and in many other countries, authoritarian rule is a reality or serious possibility. The threat to liberal democracy and the likely grim consequences of authoritarianism, should it become globally dominant, are such that the struggle between these ideologies now becomes the central concern of this book. However, the wider focus of the first edition on multiple crises is retained. This is an ‘age of crises’, and several, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency affected countries of different political systems – oblivious of ideology. Viruses and pollution do not favour one political creed over another, and likewise we should fight them collectively as a species. That is the deeper point. The existential risk of semi-inadvertent species self-destruction is an even bigger crisis than the conflict between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. The two are linked in that in times of crisis people sometimes turn to authoritarian leaders. The climate crisis lies heavily on the collective conscious, a worrying backcloth to other crises and may influence some to opt for ‘the big man’ solution.

Authoritarianism does not always take the same form in our time, as it did in previous periods. The internet opens a vast new space enabling governments potentially to exercise surveillance and control their own populations and illegally access private or classified information held abroad. China employs both these forms of authoritarian activity. For instance, in 2024 the British government accused China of state-sponsored cyberattacks on 43 MPs and peers and on the British Electoral Commission, seeking to acquire sensitive information (Harding, *The Conversation* 27 March 2024, p. 1). This confirmed that the so-called golden era of British–Chinese relations was over, in so far as it had ever been a serious commitment on the Chinese side or much more than wishful thinking on the part of the Cameron government on the British side. However, while technological development may facilitate anti-democratic activity, it does not change the defining characteristic of political authoritarianism which is the oppressive and undemocratic use of government power (see pp. 8–9 for further definition and discussion). In the political sphere the terms dictator or autocrat are frequently used to describe authoritarian individuals, and the term oligarchy an authoritarian group. However, the ruled as well as rulers may be authoritarian either by

conforming to the beliefs or dictates of authoritarian leaders or by acting in an authoritarian way through their own choice. Authoritarianism can occur in personal as well as public life. It is a generic form of political/personal power and an element in racism, patriarchy and other forms of gender oppression, and of any unequal and oppressive relationship. In a media saturated age, analysis of authoritarianism must consider the role of social media in relation to both owners' power to influence, if not control, politics, culture and consumption, and in why, what and how users of the internet communicate with each other. One author refers to social media as 'democratising public cruelty' (Seymour, 2020, G2 p. 1). Others find its content largely superficial – mere 'noise'. Of course, many find that the convenience and pleasures of social media out-weigh its disadvantages and dangers. However, these 'advantages' can be illusionary when those who seek to control the media succeed in peddling their own self-interest and propaganda and in blocking others from expressing themselves freely and critically. Dictators understand that through free speech can come challenge and change – including to their power and wealth. Thus, freedom of speech is a central pillar of democracy – so valued that many have died to defend it. The death of the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny on 16th February 2024 while held in prison and not yet satisfactorily explained, drew international condemnation. The imprisonment in Russia without charge since early 2023 of the Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich was a serious cause for concern until his release in a mass prisoner exchange in August 2024. Front line defenders of civil and democratic freedoms must not be forgotten (see Maria Ressa, pp. 211–212).

Populism, frequently, although not invariably, authoritarian, was a prominent feature of European politics in the late 20th and early 21st century, including in France and Holland, established Western European democracies. Despite this association with authoritarianism, populism was generally perceived as a form of protest rather than as a widespread or imminent threat to mainstream democratic politics. In the United States, too, populism featured more as protest than as a key aspect of regular party politics. American populist leaders, for instance, Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan, running as third-party candidates, might influence the outcome of presidential elections by taking votes from a main party candidate, but never won them, until Donald Trump did win in 2016, having persuaded the Republican Party to select him as their candidate. In Britain in the same year, the Brexit referendum, an electoral form favoured among populist leaders, was won by *Leavers* in a highly charged and conflictual atmosphere. Having achieved its single goal of persuading Britain to leave the European Union, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) disbanded, to be succeeded by the Brexit party in 2018, re-titled Reform UK in 2020. With Brexit and Trump's victory of 2016, populism had impacted mainstream politics as a powerful force for change as well as continuing as a form of protest (see Chapter 2). The uncompromising and confrontational style of populism, sometimes veering to insult and obscenity, began to permeate much of political communication. Under public scrutiny, certain politicians came to regret saving records of their *WhatsApp* conversations, or, for reasons they were sometimes vague about, deleted them. Populism was already a feature of politics in some other regions of the world, especially in newer

democracies of developing countries, where political parties were less established and institutionalised, and gained momentum and credibility from the surge of populism in the West. Putin's invasion and annexation of Ukraine-held Crimea in 2014 and Trump's election as President, following an aggressive campaign, gave further impetus to a gathering international trend to authoritarian politics, including adoption of a dominant leadership style, often short-cutting civil liberties and human rights.

Despite its ambiguous relationship to democracy, populism, specifically left populism, but more particularly the related but distinct tradition of progressivism, offer ideas and policies that could revive radical reform including in relation to the environment, climate change and human and planetary well-being. The legacy of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s is still strong if severely contested, and could be defended and built on, as could the ideas and vision of today's younger activists. 'Old left' ideology, though still relevant, is not an adequate blueprint for late modern, digital, global society; a new left must find renewed energy and direction. Otherwise, there is a risk of an era of deepening illiberalism, inequality and further ecological degradation. Three related themes are developed throughout the book: liberalism – hegemony and crisis; the authoritarian and populist challenge to liberalism; and constructing a progressive future while combating reactionary nationalism? The relationships between these themes are central to understanding the key political and social developments of a conflict-ridden and anxious period and of finding a way out of it, not to some unattainable utopia, but to a fair and peaceful global society.

My approach to understanding the struggle between democracy and authoritarianism is inter-disciplinary. It has a base in contemporary history, mainly sociopolitical. This reflects that without the facts, a reliable and informed interpretation is impossible. With sufficient evidence the reader as well as the author has a basis on which to construct a grounded interpretation, built up cumulatively as the book's narrative unfolds. My interpretation of the contemporary global-wide clash between authoritarianism and democracy is that it is due mainly to two sets of related factors. Firstly, is a widespread reaction against Western power, broadly to 'liberal' imperialism, which has left a scatter of grievances or 'sore points' in many areas. The Israel– Hamas conflict is currently an acute case, and conflicting Chinese and American interests in Taiwan are liable to flare into crisis soon. The three powers leading the reaction against the West – China, Russia and Iran – are basically authoritarian. North Korea can be added to this bloc. There are also numerous anti-Western militias in various parts of the world, some with bases in the Middle East and with varying degrees of support from a 'host' government. Second is population movement due to relative extreme global inequality prompting a reaction in the West to adopt tight immigration controls and otherwise more authoritarian policies, including seeking ways of avoiding human rights restrictions on them (see p. 99). At a more intuitive level, as was suggested earlier, a third factor is worth considering. Due to climate change, the pandemic and to an accumulation of other factors, the world has become an uneasy place. Scarcity now threatens the once seemingly secure, as well as the long-suffering insecure. Anxiety, grievance and suspicion

are ‘in the air’. If ‘negative energy’ is not to explode, big solutions will have to be found. In such circumstances, people sometimes turn to a charismatic individual to solve the situation or, at least, to improve matters. This is seldom a good move. History bears out that it is a high risk ‘solution’ dependent on the performance of one person. There is room for individual talent and leadership in democracies but within the context of a system of choice, wider engagement, responsibility and support. And if things do go seriously wrong, there is a greater possibility of a ‘safer landing’.

Crises. ‘Poly-Crises’. ‘Permacrises’ . . .

The terms at the head of this section are self-explanatory: we live in a time of many and constant crises. Already there has been a succession of crises in the 21st century. Like most of the sources I drew upon in the first edition of *Crises and Popular Dissent* (2021), I approach the concept of crisis largely in terms of actions, processes or events that cause or precipitate serious, often unanticipated, shock and/or disruption to people, institutions or systems or various combinations of them. Most crises carry the threat that things could get worse – with potential chaos or collapse and an uncertain ‘beyond’ looming. The list of phenomena widely regarded as crises since the start of the new millennium is long and varied. In approximate chronological order, this is my selection from the perspective of 2024.

9/11 – the Al Qaeda attack on the United States of 11 September 2001; 7/7 – the Al Qaeda attack on the London transport system of 7 July 2005; the Financial and Economic crisis of 2007–2008; the recurrent cost-of-living crisis; Brexit (2016) – Britain leaves the European Union; Donald Trump’s election as President of the United States in 2016 and second term bid in 2024 (and the rise of other authoritarian leaders); a Global Crisis of Population Movement (Migration) and the refugee crisis of 2016; the Global Pandemic of COVID-19 (2020); the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022; the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel’s invasion of Gaza and the humanitarian crisis they provoked.

Two crises crossed the whole period and will go well beyond it. They are, the disruptive impact of recent and new technologies, and the epochal planetary climate crisis – overshadowing all.

There is an academic debate about whether crises are ‘real’ or ‘socially constructed’. As Sylvia Walby succinctly puts it: ‘They are both’ (2015, p. 15). In fuller terms, crises are made by people or are natural events of various periods of time, experienced and understood as disruptive and/or painful. There is a subjective element to crises in that what is experienced as a crisis by some may not be by others – for instance, the cost-of-living crisis is likely to be considered as such by the poor but less so, if at all, by owners of supermarkets. The above list contains long-term, on-going crises, and crisis episodes, unexpected shocks or moments. However, this distinction is partly blurred in that long-term crises may produce acute episodes within their lifespan and conversely such episodes may

precipitate or punctuate long-term crises. Thus, 9/11 was an acute episode of crisis in the United States that reflected a chronic state of crisis between that country and Al Qaeda and by extension between ‘the West’ and radical Islam. The succession of crises referred to above have led to the popularisation of the term ‘permacrisis’ that also implies that crises are now an inevitable and inherent part of modernity. Ulrich Beck’s concept of ‘risk society’ partly explains this depressing perception (1972). Thus, negative, or partly negative developments of late modernity affect or potentially affect the whole of humanity or much of it, due primarily to globalisation and the digital revolution. Three main on-going crises with negative or potentially negative consequences are climate change, mass migration often related to poverty and the threat of nuclear destruction. The first two are aspects of globalisation, directly experienced by millions and witnessed by millions more, from various degrees of proximity. Similarly, the consequences of nuclear war are also potentially universal to the human and other species. Sylvia Walby argues that the existential dangers associated with global risk mean that it is an even greater and more urgent matter than class inequality – a traditional focus of liberal and socialist progressives (2015). Of course, achieving thriving and environmentally sustainable economies and controlling climate change could, and as many, including myself believe, *should* be directed to reducing inequality.

As well as threatening or producing breakdown or disaster, crises can bring opportunities to learn lessons and plan anew. Unsurprisingly, after analysing their chosen crisis or crises, most authors writing in this area, whether through urgency or optimism, turn to solutions. Ian Bremmer’s choice of title for his book *The Power of Crisis* (2022) points firmly in the direction of using the three crises he analyses – the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate ‘emergency’ and ‘disruptive’ technologies – as an incentive to ‘change the world’. ‘History’, he states, ‘says we need a crisis... we’ve got several’ (p. 11). Slightly unnervingly, he cites the two world wars as examples of events that in their horror inspired aspirations to create a better world. Bremmer acknowledges that the *League of Nations* founded after the First World War achieved relatively little. He is more positive about the efforts to reconstruct the international political, economic and justice systems partly through the newly established United Nations after the Second World War but, as the Israel-Hamas war suggests, the system is inadequate. Hopefully it will not take a nuclear war, or sudden climate implosion to inspire a third attempt to create a safer more humane world. Surely now the threats have become too large to be allowed to run their course. In fact, Bremmer believes that ‘the human race can’t survive a new world war’ and even that a ‘US–China Cold War will make effective global cooperation impossible’ (because of the damage to economic and commercial interdependency) (p. 11). As Bremmer recognises the damage and suffering are such that we must try again:

That’s why we must use the crises already breaking around us... to create a new international system that’s built for today’s, and tomorrow’s, purpose. (pp. 11–12)

As implied by the title of his book, *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World* (2021), Fareed Zakaria also takes a positive learning approach. Be ready next time for a similar outbreak is his message. As an anti-big statist inclined, pro liberal capitalist, his emphasis is to achieve preparedness through peaceful cooperation and exchange, rather than anything resembling a global government. However, he states emphatically ‘that markets are not enough’ (p. 57). He observes that in the United States there has been a revaluation of the role of the state by left and right. Trump caught this shifting current of opinion, ‘espousing protectionism, subsidies, immigration control, and cultural nationalism’ (p. 58). Sylvia Walby analyses the financial crisis beginning in 2008, followed by economic recession, and recommends more regulation and greater employment of wasted women’s talent and labour as areas for improvement. Zakaria endorses a quite radical package of reforms – ‘(r)egulations, properly tailored; tax policies to help workers more and capital less...; major investments in science and technology; education and training . . .’ (p. 74). The list goes on. Zakaria is reluctant to call this socialism . . . mentioning the ‘green new deal’ as a genuine and timely shift in direction from traditional left policies. Still, he praises social democratic Denmark – but paradoxically partly because it pursues a relatively open market policy as well directing substantial state/tax-payers money towards public investment. Adding Zakaria’s domestic reforms to Bremmer’s ideas for a form of world government equipped to reduce global risk and inequality, and the shape of a perhaps safer and fairer world system begins to appear. To complete the vision of realistic utopia, this book argues throughout for greater local and community participation and power within the context of more effective democratic global governance.

Chapter by Chapter

Chapter 1 introduces the core themes of this book and defines key supporting concepts, concluding with reference to my own values and sociopolitical perspective and a vote of confidence in the potential of activist youth as a main carrier of progressive change. Chapter 2 provides an overview of populism, vital because the outbreak of populist sentiment and movements substantially contributed to the political and cultural direction of the early new millennium, disrupting post-Cold War liberal hegemony. Two contrasting views of populism are compared: Cas Mudde’s sharply critical account of populism and Chantal Mouffe’s support for left and opposition to right populism. In the latter part of the chapter, I develop my perspective that ‘cultural populism’ is ‘semi-autonomous’ from political populism. Chapter 3 critically examines the core values of liberalism, commenting on its weaknesses and enduring qualities, with reference to its historical development. The roots of liberal society lie in the European Enlightenment emerging in the early 17th century and gaining momentum in the late 18th and early 19th centuries of industrial and sociopolitical revolution. Yet, contradictions within liberalism have contributed to its difficulties, including a tendency of liberal politicians to embroil their countries in overseas wars and

latterly lacking either the will or imagination to innovate radically in ideas and policy. This edition adds a section on the maneuverings of China and Russia in the global south in pursuit of their own commercial and political goals, including undermining Western influence and supplanting liberalism.

Chapter 4 analyses why Britain voted for Brexit in 2016 and America for Trump in 2016 but not in 2020. The underlying trends explaining these dramatic and, for many, unexpected events go back several decades: neoliberalism, globalisation and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment intertwined with right-wing populism. In the first 20 years of the millennium there was a deluge of books mainly written by liberals about the threats to liberal democracy. Deep, and insufficiently considered, divisions between neoliberals and progressive liberals are discussed, as are perhaps equally damaging disagreements among progressive liberals themselves that weakened opposition to Brexit and Trump. The social equality agenda is basic and necessary, but it must accommodate the changes brought about by the social movements with their roots in the 1960s that seek a wide margin of identity and lifestyle freedom, the second part of the slogan, 'bread and roses'.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 examine the above themes in relation to the United States, Europe and Britain, as well as factors specifically relevant to each. They are the geopolitical 'spine' of the book. Liberalism is further discussed in terms of two related ideologies or narratives, progressive liberalism and neoliberalism. The latter is seen by the former as a Trojan horse within liberalism, an ideology of extreme competition and capital accumulation in tension with the more humanist and socially interventionist tradition of progressive liberalism, including the regulation (but not routine state management) of markets. These two ideologies by no means cover the whole of liberalism which as a way of thinking and acting penetrated almost every aspect of Western culture and gradually much of the rest of the world. Indeed, the process of global modernisation is, for better and worse, largely a liberal one although it has provoked a variety of reactions around the world, many seeking to define their own ideologies and identities, liberal or otherwise. Conservatism, in the sense of support for traditional values and institutions, not always comfortably fitting with its modern identification with capitalism, and socialism's foundation in collective values and strong state, continue to challenge liberal hegemony both in the West and elsewhere. However, both these ideologies now also largely embrace the freedoms won mainly by the social movements mentioned above, sometimes referred to as social liberalism although this term does not convey the tough political struggles involved in achieving them. An important part of the sections on liberalism is an analysis of social democracy as an ideology and political practice that combines elements of progressive liberalism and socialism; both traditions can claim a sustained commitment to democratic and social progress that could provide a renewed basis for collaboration. However, while belief in human rights extends beyond liberalism, including many socialists and some conservatively minded people, it has a particularly prominent place within the liberal tradition.

Chapters 7 and 8 are closely integrated and build a case for a new phase of reform in British democracy. Chapter 7 briefly reviews the history and more fully

the current state of populism in Britain and how it might influence the perspectives and policies of Britain's main political parties. It also presents my differences as well as common ground with Chantal Mouffe's analysis of left populism and my preference for the term progressivism as the descriptor of a proposed movement for radical democracy and social equality. Chapter 7 also reviews the state of British politics post-Brexit and with reference to populism and progressivism looks at possible directions of development. Chapter 8 drawing mainly on examples from Britain argues for a revival of progressivism through an infusion of radical democratic policy which would introduce participatory democracy into the country's main institutional systems. A major move to radical reform requires that progressive liberals, left populists and social democrats build on their shared beliefs, make common progressive cause and, equally importantly, channel the idealism and energy of younger activists. The label given to this collaborative approach to values, organisation and policy, matters less than that it does in fact happen and that its practical implications for liberty and equality are clearly spelled out. The name 'Progressive Alliance' or one similar could be adopted to draw together and signal to the public the direction of its reforming intent. Without such a robust initiative, the turn to the authoritarian right in parts of Europe and internationally, may last long enough to mould society in its own hierarchical and controlling image. In the United States, it is now clear that the defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 election is no guarantee of a period of dynamic progressive reform, but Joe Biden's presidency with its slew of social and educational reforms, infrastructural investment and his administration's relatively competent handling of the COVID-19 pandemic gave modest hope to progressives. The desire for a more genuinely democratic, fairer and safer world has not been quenched, the countermovement to reactionary times may come soon enough. ...

Chapter 9 considers sociopolitical issues relating to environmental damage, climate change and human and planetary health and well-being. These are the most crucial issues discussed in this book – in a period when several other matters of major import have occurred. COVID-19 and its social effects are analysed in the wider context of humans' relationship to nature. Looking ahead, more pre-planned resource mobilisation to achieve collective goals, including to reduce poverty and improve the general standard of health and planetary well-being should figure prominently in a progressive project. The cost of being prepared could pay for itself by reducing the severity of the next crisis as well as strengthening a sense of fairness and community. There will need to be a substantial degree of international cooperation in this, given the global nature of the problems facing humanity. We, as a species, must do better and must do differently. Chapter 10 overviews and reflects on some of the issues concerning the relationship of democracy to authoritarianism raised throughout this book, including the worrying problem of why people are attracted to authoritarianism at all.

Organisationally, the book moves through three introductory conceptual and theoretical chapters, a spine of four geopolitical chapters, the next two chapters focus on solutions and policy and the final one is an author's 'free hit' asking mainly awkward questions about democracy – but also finding and giving some

answers. References are at the back of the book. Internet references are mainly given there to avoid cluttering the text. In text, the key to references is the name of the relevant author(s) or institution.

I would like to thank several people who have supported me in this project. The in-house back-up came mainly from Katy Mathers and Lydia Cutmore and technical support from Elise Carmichael, Mohamed Imrankhan and his team. Many thanks to all. My partner Dorrie Chetty again provided practical and emotional support even as she had her own teaching and writing commitments. Special thanks to her! My good friend Jim Pey again did what he did last time by providing stimulating critique and discussion as well as some very useful material. My thanks, too, to Gavin Hinks for reading and commenting knowledgeably on several chapters. Family and friends have watched with tolerance and a touch of wonder as I performed the great (semi) disappearing act that a sizeable writing project requires. I hope they find the results of my efforts readable and interesting. In future, a much bigger chunk of ‘my’ time will be at their call – should they want or need it in their busy lives.

The British General Election of 4 July 2024: A Choice of Futures or More of the Same? A Progressive Revival?

The day after I sent the manuscript of this book to the publisher, the then Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak announced a general election for just a few weeks away. Sunak may or may not be Prime Minister as you are reading this. Keir Starmer might be. This book contains much about change, and general elections, often, though not always, bring change. Even if the governing party wins, a tranche of MPs across the Commons will exit, and new ones will arrive – hopefully with convincing, if not necessarily new, ideas and policies.

Expectation of an impending general election had been rife in Westminster and the media for weeks. Not surprisingly, the party leaders and the media tend to see the election differently. A common line taken by some media commentators is that there is not *that* much difference between the policies of the two parties. This is partly because they consider that Labour has moved towards the political centre since Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership, and to that extent has become more like the Tories. This point is made particularly strongly in relation to the economy – largely based on Labour’s ‘prudent’ approach to risk, including wealth redistribution. A weakness in this argument is that the Tories have become less like the Tories or, at least, less like traditional Tories. In short, they are accused of having moved to the right, even in some of their rhetoric and policies on immigration, the populist right. It also helps to sustain the ‘they’re all the same’ argument that Labour has been reticent in providing detail on some of its policies. Instead, it had adopted a classic opposition election strategy of attacking the government’s record. It’s first line of attack (or ‘first step’) if it wins power is the embracingly vague ‘to stop the chaos’.

The leaders of two parties are, predictably, emphatic that there are big and important differences between them. Certainly, Labour is the more ‘statist’ despite its clear commitment to a mixed economy. It intends to set up a Clean

Energy Company and nationalise most of the railway companies within five years of government. There is also a chance that policies of participatory democracy and decentralisation of power that gained currency in Labour's ranks in recent years and strongly advocated in this book, will receive some implementation. Apart from claiming superiority in economic and financial management, the Conservatives have staked much of their credibility on cutting immigration, partly by sending illegal refugees to Rwanda (see pp. 98–99). However, as Harold MacMillan observed, governments are often less driven by their Manifestoes than by events. Foreign and defence policy is not typically at the centre of election debate, but it may well be that as conflict continues to rage in the Ukraine and could spread elsewhere in Europe, and in Israel and Gaza is threatening to involve much of the Middle East, the next government will be defined more by its performance in the international than the domestic context (see Chapters 3 and 6).

The outcome of the election was a landslide victory for the Labour Party, but in the global context, this only marginally diminished the shift to the right of 30 or so years. True, a few days later, an alliance of the French centre and left parties managed to keep the Fascist-oriented National Rally out of government. However, that these parties needed to combine to achieve this indicates the strength of the far right in France. Thwarted at the ballot-box in France and Britain, it may be more likely that anti-democratic and violent elements of the far right will increasingly take to the streets and intimidate and manipulate through social media. This occurred in both countries in 2024, in Britain following the general election (see p. 164). Across much of the globe, the picture is similarly volatile. Putin's grip on Russia *appears* still firm, but Ukraine's counter offensives may bring it under pressure, and both sides in the Israel-Hamas war have acted with autocratic disregard for human rights and basic humanity, risking a regional military apocalypse should they fail to find a way to live in mutual acceptance. In Latin America, several countries have recently shifted to more authoritarian rule (see p. 212). However, the long dominance of single party rule in the democracies of India and South Africa was slightly diluted in both cases to a more representative and wider sharing of power following general elections in 2024. There is no reliable way of predicting when and where authoritarianism might arise or what its outcomes might be. However, the signs of authoritarianism are widespread, and in places it is dominant. The smiling face of the charismatic autocrat should be treated with suspicion. Don't be fooled. One reason why democracy is 'the least-worst system' is that it provides access to information and the means to act rationally, including to oppose authoritarianism.

Chapter 1

The Crisis of Liberal Hegemony and the Authoritarian and Populist Challenges: Terms and Context

Introduction: the Global and Local Scope of the Struggle

The central theme of this book is the global-wide tension between liberal democracy and authoritarianism, with populism in some cases playing a role within it. This tension occurs at the macro-level between countries, and it may also develop within countries, including those with democratic systems of governance. From early in the 19th century, the number of democracies in the world steadily increased, largely due to newly independent nation states opting for democracy. Inevitably, that flow has slowed as the main phase of post-imperial national independence recedes. Widespread questioning of the global impact of European and American power and culture, including liberal ideology, and the rise of the powerful autocratic socio-political systems of Russia and, especially China, have undermined confidence in liberal democracy, including in the West. I begin with an indicative rather than comprehensive description of the ‘state of play’ between authoritarianism and liberal democracy, with definitions coming later in this chapter. Of course, the reality is more complex than a division of the world into authoritarian and democratic states. That is partly the point, many countries are in the throes of a struggle between these conflicting ideologies, as several cases cited below illustrate. Many established democracies, as well as more recent ones, have been assailed by authoritarian forces. However, there are better alternatives than shifting towards authoritarianism, the main one being to strengthen democracies, for which suggestions are made throughout this book. However, I write grimly aware that the genocide and mass slaughter of the 1930s could happen again, and in thin optimism, that it need not do so.

Major liberal democracies within the Anglosphere are the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia. Continental Europe is the location of multiple democracies, some more liberal than others. The European Union of 27 European states, although founded as an economic partnership, requires members to meet basic democratic standards, including holding regular elections and subscribing to

human rights. Despite this, authoritarian inclined leaders do emerge in the EU, notably Viktor Orbán, first becoming Prime Minister of Hungary in 1998, and Robert Fico, elected Prime Minister of Slovakia in 2023. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), comprised of 32 members, a political-military defensive institution of Western democracy, is discussed below.

India and the Philippines are among the major non-Western democracies and illustrate that formally ‘becoming a democracy’ is not a guarantee against the challenge of authoritarianism. These countries are ex-colonies of Britain and Spain, respectively, choosing to become democracies as they became independent, and claiming the right to do so as an argument for independence. However, their cultures are still significantly traditional and conservative, with religious belief having an influence on political identification, but with elites and middle classes increasingly receptive to Western values and lifestyles, although not uncritically. India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi is a globally high-profile populist figure. He painted a positive picture of India as ‘the mother of democracy and a model of diversity’ when welcoming delegates in September 2023 to the G20 Conference, as president in that year (quoted Ayyub, *Guardian*, 2023, p. 4). In contrast, Rana Ayyub describes him as ‘a Hindu nationalist who is culturally divisive’ (p. 4). Such contradiction between populist leaders’ self-images and the views of sceptical observers is common, leaving readers to make their own judgements with reference to evidence. Similarly, former President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has drawn severe criticism for his authoritarian rule, including for the charge of overseeing tens of thousands of murders in his war against the illegal drug trade (see Maria Ressa, *How to Stand up to a Dictator*, 2022, p. 1).

Latin America has strong populist traditions of left and right, partly reflecting, authoritarian elements in certain political ideologies of Spain and Portugal. In January 2023, Brazil elected a socialist populist president, Lula da Silva, and Argentina, a free-marketeer president, Javier Milei in November. Each dealt with their country’s endemic economic problems from polarised ideological positions with Milei experiencing early opposition to his cuts in the welfare budget. Like most Latin America countries, these two are democracies, though their presidential elections tend to be fought in a typically personalised and confrontational fashion. Unsurprisingly, President Trump swiftly and enthusiastically congratulated Milei on his victory, whereas Lula managed to do so coolly without mentioning Milei’s name (see also pp. 212–213 on Latin-American populism).

China and Russia are the most powerful and influential authoritarian states. In global geo-political terms, they and their ‘satellite’ countries are an authoritarian inclined ‘bloc’ with contrasting and often conflicting values and material interests to the liberal ‘bloc’. NATO is a key institution of the liberal ‘bloc’. Currently (2024) it consists of 32 member states, including the United States and most Western and Northern European countries, most of the latter also members of the European Union (EU). NATO is constituted as a defensive alliance, an attack on one member regarded as an attack on all. For many developing countries, Russia and especially China, on the one hand, and the major liberal democracies, on the other, offer contrasting ideological models and systems of government. The impact of the Western European empires across most of the world meant that,

although they seldom governed their subject nations democratically, the partially but incrementally democratic character of their own national institutions helped stimulate democratic ambition within their colonies. However, in the early period of their empires, the imperial nations were far from fully democratic themselves, notably in relation to the denial of the voting franchise to women and most working-class men. Similar inconsistency characterised the early phase of the United States internal continental and external overseas expansion; the exclusion of slaves, and indigenous peoples contrasting with democratic rights extended to most white men. However, in the 20th century, American global ascendancy included periods when the 'building' or protection of democracy was cited, along with more material interests, as a motive for intervention in foreign countries, often accompanied at the government and popular level with democratic hyperbole. More recently, China and Russia have sought influence, power, and profit in various parts of the world, including, particularly in China's case, using 'soft' power through economic assistance, often financed through loans, and cultural interaction, as well as, more sinisterly, employing cyber spying and manipulation.

Both China and Russia have ambitions for global influence and power in addition to their more established areas of conflict with major Western powers. However, in both cases, the 'hot points' of potential conflict tend to be areas where they perceive given Western powers as invasive and provocative. For instance, regarded in this way are America's support for an independent Taiwan which China considers part of its territory; and Russia's opposition to NATO's expansion in parts of central and Eastern Europe, most recently Finland joining in 2023 and Sweden in 2024. As Nathalie Tocci observes there has been a recent trend for countries in the global south, some having experienced Western imperialism, to form more co-operative relations with Russia and China (Tocci, 2023). For instance, in 2023, more countries in the global South than anticipated abstained from voting for American and British supported UN resolutions that condemned Russia and Hamas in relation to their respective conflicts in Ukraine and Israel.

The Re-Emergence of Authoritarianism in the West

To the concern of many liberal politicians and commentators, the authoritarian challenge to liberal democracy, as well as a major aspect of international competition and conflict, is also an issue contested in numerous Western states. Authoritarian sentiment has emerged, or rather re-emerged, as a significant feature of politics and culture in the West over the last 30 years. Given the extensive impact of fascism and totalitarian communism in the 1930s and 1940s, the liberal-social democratic consensus in much of the West in the decades following the second world war, now begins to look like, if not the exception, at best a fragile norm specific to the late 20th and, falteringly, the early 21st centuries. The recent surge of authoritarianism has predominantly taken the form of populism, although not all forms and expressions of that ideology are

authoritarian, still less fascist. Nevertheless, history teaches us, should we choose to learn, that 'we the people' can recognise and confront malign cultural and political trends before they take fire. Likewise, the dangerous charms and seductive arguments of those who prosecute them, intellectuals sometimes, as well as demagogues, should be seen for the toxins they are.

In the first 20 years of the new millennium the liberal democracies of the developed world, including the United States, still the world's dominant power, experienced a rising challenge from populism, mainly nationalistic right populism but also left populism. This book provides an explanatory account of why and how this happened mainly focussing on the United States, Britain, and Europe, but with consideration of other areas as well. In particular, Latin America has strong traditions of right and left populism as referred to above. Right populism is part of a wider, although not unbroken nor uncontested, gradual rightwards trend in these regions that began in the 1970s, partly as a response to immigration. This broader shift to the right is also addressed here. In reviewing the crises and conflicts of recent years in these regions, I make an argument for what is termed radical democracy – rooted in civic participation, some reform of national democratic institutions, and a healing 'one world' cosmopolitan vision backed by practical humanitarian policies. After the troubled opening years of the 21st century followed by the blight of COVID-19, the aspiration is for 'a better normal'. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ensuing war, and the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas in October 2023, both carrying the threat of wider conflict, do not augur well for a much-needed period of international reconciliation and cooperation, and a diversion of energy to sustaining the planet.

Although expressive of real needs and genuine sentiments, right populism shows a marked tendency to authoritarianism. However, it may be that the defeat of Donald Trump in the American presidential election of 2020 will presage a more widespread turn away from right populism to less strident democratic communication. Trump lost to the mildly progressive Democratic Party candidate, Joe Biden, but for many it may be that Biden was not Donald Trump was enough reason to vote for him. Whether they have done so again in 2024 for that or other reasons will be known by now to readers of this book. The turn-out for the 2020 election was, by some margin, a record. This may well be eclipsed by an anxious and divided electorate in 2024.

Left populism has its own issues with authoritarian leaders, but it is more positively characterised by elements of radical democracy which advocates greater democratic participation and decentralisation. The term radical comes from the Latin meaning 'root' and it is especially grassroots power that radical democracy seeks to exercise and enhance. For now, radical democracy is less a self-conscious movement and more an idea that is being turned into a reality in many local communities. The surge of mutual self-help that quickly emerged during COVID-19 demonstrates its latent potential. If it becomes more widespread and is matched by funding and decentralising policies at the national level, radical democracy could help to inspire a new phase in democracy. Democracy in the West has evolved slowly since the early modern period, through struggle and

often in the face of determined opposition. The purpose of radical democracy is to further democratise not only the political system but also the main institutional sectors of society by the empowerment of those they are supposed to serve. This is ambitious, but this book will illustrate an active and widespread base of support for such a policy direction. The argument made here is better described as progressive than left populist, although clearly it is closer to the latter than to right populism.

Radical Democracy: A Counter to Authoritarianism

The principles of decentralisation and participation that underly radical democracy are, with due regard for cultural difference, widely applicable. However, for reasons of practicality, the case made here applies mainly to developed societies with examples drawn mainly from Britain (Chapter 8). The movement for the radical democratisation of power is, in the mid-2020s, underway at the local and community level in Britain – as is described in several sections of this book. It is logical that the movement for grassroots power should not wait for the government to bestow it but is driven by the energy of localities and communities. There is much activist and third sector work in civil society at local and community levels that contributes to and could anchor such a ‘bottom-up’ movement. However, this book is not an argument for anarchism. In a globalised world with several powerful, including predatory states, the nation state is not about to disappear. Yet, national government in liberal democracies also needs further democratisation, rather than increased centralisation of power as has been a recent tendency. It is clearly wrong that in Britain parties with millions of members are regularly deprived of anything approaching proportional party representation in parliament because of the first past-the-post electoral system. And in the United States it is possible for a candidate in a presidential election to win the popular vote yet lose the election – because of an archaic electoral college system that is based on state representation. This perverse outcome occurred in 2016 when Hillary Clinton received more than 2 million votes than Donald Trump but lost to him in the electoral college. Reform of these undemocratic anomalies requires national legislation as do other pro-democratic policies as well as a range of social equality measures including, perhaps, a universal basic income (UBI). Accordingly, I argue here that to achieve radical democracy requires grassroots activists and left populist movements to cooperate with mainstream national social democratic and progressive parties to persuade them to adopt democratic reforms, including participatory democracy. Further any radically progressive vision must urgently address the threat of climate change and planetary well-being. In other words, it must be a vision for humanity and the environment. A related aim of this book is to contribute to dispelling the pervasive pall of political and cultural demoralisation and confusion of recent years. This was brought about largely by the complex, convoluted and generally disastrous way neoliberalism (pp. 16–17) became entwined with right populism. However, I focus less on negative criticism than to advocate what positively can be done.

Democratic reform cannot be achieved without extensive public support, especially if the commanding heights of power are held by those indifferent or opposed to it. Accordingly, I highlight the struggle to extend democratic power through the micro to the macro levels. One of the causes of the turmoil of recent years lies in the limitations of representative democracy, including its tendency to allow the formation of unaccountable or insufficiently accountable elites that operate largely beyond effective parliamentary control yet sometimes drawing in elected politicians attracted for their own ends (Crouch, 2004, 2011). However, the aim is not to undermine representative democracy, but rather to buttress and balance it by extending citizens' direct and practical involvement in democratic processes. The term 'radical democracy' is a general descriptor of this enhancement of democracy, a main feature of which is participatory democracy and other forms of direct democracy such as citizens' assemblies. With greater popular power would come increased input to policy, no doubt including social equality measures. I describe what the above goals and aspirations mean in concrete terms as I develop the argument.

Themes and Questions

The relationship between authoritarianism, populism and liberalism and the case for radical democracy are explored in this book through the following themes:

- liberalism – hegemony and crisis;
- the causes and consequences of the rise of authoritarianism;
- the populist challenge(s) to liberalism;
- the rise and challenges of new social movements;
- combating reactionary nationalism;
- constructing a participatory and progressive future.

The relationships between these themes are central to understanding the main political and social developments of a crisis-ridden and fractious period and to finding a way out of it. However, this is not a straightforward collision between two clearly defined ideologies. There are varieties of liberalism and populism that in some instances interact positively as well as negatively. There were also other political ideologies involved in the conflicts of the opening decades of the 21st century, prominently socialism and various elements of far-right ideology such as neo-Fascism and white supremacy that tended to operate in the hinterland between illegal and legal political practice. The relationship of these ideologies to political parties is discussed later in this introductory chapter.

Each of the themes listed above suggests many questions. Readers may well ask their own questions and should find relevance to them in what follows. The questions below are the main ones I pursued in relation to each of the above themes.

Why, from being the hegemonic ideology, did liberalism go into crisis?

What are the explanations for the rise and possible effects of authoritarianism?

- What do populists want that liberalism is not providing?
- What part do/can social movements play in a progressive revival?
- Why is nationalism often so important to right populists?
- What might a participatory democratic and progressive future, look like, for the planet as well as the species?

These questions are considered throughout the book. The first question listed is addressed more specifically in the concluding pages of this chapter and in Chapters 3 and 6; the second question in Chapters 2, 5, and 6; the third in Chapters 2, 5, and 8; the fourth especially in Chapters 4, 7, and 8; the fifth in Chapters 4, 5, and 6; and the sixth in Chapters 1, 7, and 8. The political and ideological implications of COVID-19 and climate and planetary issues are discussed in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 comments on major issues of democracy and authoritarianism examined earlier and challenges readers to do the same.

Key Concepts in Relation to Themes and Questions

This section introduces key concepts used throughout the book and explains how they apply to liberalism, authoritarianism, and populism. More detail and references are given in context in the relevant chapters.

Liberalism: Neoliberalism and Progressive Liberalism. Hegemony

The term liberalism is used here in respect to two main trends in liberal thought and practice. The first is neoliberalism and the second is progressive liberalism. Neoliberalism is an ideology based on the belief that capitalism is the best foundation for modern societies and that the state, other than performing basic functions, mainly maintaining law and order, should interfere only minimally with the ‘free market’ (Hayek, 1944). In contrast, progressive liberals see a major role for the state in regulating and investing in the economy and in providing a system of social welfare for citizens. I have included ‘cosmopolitan liberalism’ as a strand within progressive liberalism although, like neoliberals, cosmopolitan liberals support globalisation and tend to favour low trade tariffs. However, they are progressive in that they advocate a more social democratic version of globalisation based on human rights and a more interventionist social justice role for the United Nations (see Giddens, 2001). Neoliberalism and progressive liberalism are distinctive but the commitment of the former to capitalism and the qualified acceptance of it by the latter facilitates sometimes uneasy co-existence and some ideological ‘cross-over’. That said, neoliberalism developed as the hegemonic ideology from the early 1980s and is still very influential despite the rise of economic nationalism. Highly competitive capitalism, however branded, is quite compatible with assertive nationalism.

Hegemony refers to social control through cultural means or ‘soft power’ rather than through force. Hegemonic control develops in civil society through

education and the media which in Marxist perspective are considered to convey the values of the capitalist class but are also as areas of potential struggle. However, the concept that people are socialised to conform to a given social system is generally accepted in social science (see pp. 13–14). Neoliberalism began as an intellectual movement and, although not always acknowledged by name, its influence percolated widely throughout society.

Authoritarianism and Authority

The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics and international Relations* defines authoritarianism as: ‘A style of government in which the rulers demand unquestioning obedience from the ruled’ (OCDPIR, p. 32). Dictatorship and oligarchy are forms of authoritarianism in excluding others from power and asserting dominance over them. Authoritarian governments demand and seek to enforce control over their subjects whose freedom is correspondingly limited. The rise of populism has seen a less precise use of the term authoritarianism come into vogue, perhaps implied in the above definition in the word ‘style’. Certain populist politicians and political parties can appear ‘inclined’ to authoritarianism without seeking to impose the formal mechanisms of control typical of autocratic governments such as severely curtailing the freedom of the media or imprisoning opponents without due legal process. Thus, whereas Boris Johnson was a classic populist in manner and rhetoric, he was not associated with repression such as the harassment, injuries, and imprisonment inflicted on the late Alexei Navalny, a former major critic of President Putin, and leader of the *Russia of the Future Party*. The term authoritarian is also used to describe repressive and reactionary collective attitudes which might lead to prejudiced or discriminatory behaviour, notably of the kind that might be aroused by a charismatic demagogue. There is a sharp debate about how far such attitudes, consciously or unconsciously held, were characteristic of the working class ‘Red Wall’ and ‘Rust Belt’ votes raised by Johnson and Donald Trump in their respective campaigns of 2019 and 2016 (see pp. 90–92 below). How far these campaigns reflected authoritarian tendencies is controversial. Uncontroversial is that when authoritarian tendencies spread and harden into mass Fascism or totalitarian Communism, they are a danger to their chosen target groups and to the wider public should resistance be provoked, and social order weaken.

This book argues that a populist influenced culture as well as a populist politics developed in American and British societies during the early years of this century. This also occurred widely in Europe where it weakened social democracy across much of the continent (see p. 131). Lacking established structures of social constraint, authoritarian and other oppressive language and sentiments became rife on social media. Anti-immigration sentiment was an element in this cultural trend and social media a main means of its expression. Arguably, the confrontational and seemingly ill-considered and even potentially dangerous nature of much social media communication had a degrading effect on public life and