Democratic Peace: Progress and Crisis

Christopher Hobson

When work on the democratic peace first emerged it contributed to the revitalization of liberal thought and represented an important contribution to International Relations (IR). Yet innovation has been replaced by stagnation. Coding and correlation are debated *ad infinitum*, while little attention is given to growing economic inequality, voter alienation, a decline in traditional parties, rising populism and a wide array of related trends that raise serious doubts about the health of democracies at the center of the zone of peace. Yet if democratic institutions are not functioning as they are meant to, and norms of compromise are disappearing domestically, what hope can there be that these will facilitate cooperative behavior between democracies? Rather than promoting peace, could it be that capitalism in its contemporary neoliberal form is undermining or hollowing out democracy? The static understanding of democracy adopted by this research means that such questions have been largely overlooked. In response, I focus on two major changes impacting established democracies and consider their significance for democratic peace arguments: the decline of democratic institutions and culture, as well as how neoliberalism is reshaping the relationship between democracy and capitalism. In developing this argument, I propose that the template that the democratic peace research program offers for studying the world is emblematic of—and contributing to—a troubling contracting of our political vision. An excessive concern with methodological rigor, combined with a narrow understanding of what qualifies as valid research, has resulted in a body of scholarship that is remarkably sophisticated but has surprisingly little to say about democracy and its place in the world.

The hope and confidence surrounding democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall has been replaced by growing uncertainty about what the future holds. The outcome of the third wave of democratization has been much more ambiguous than first expected, the Color Revolutions and Arab Spring have failed to live up to the initial high hopes that surrounded them, the deeply flawed attempts to install democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq have discredited the wider democracy promotion agenda, and nondemocratic powers like China and Russia have become more assertive. There are also increasing doubts about the health of older democracies and their ability to deal with a range of economic and social dilemmas. Democracy's ideational standing has taken a further battering following the British electorate's decision to exit the European Union (EU) and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, acts that hardly constitute ringing endorsements for this form of rule.[1] Reflecting this significant shift in mood, in April 2016 Roger Cohen penned an opinion piece for *The New York Times* ominously entitled "The Death of Liberalism," in which he warns that "the threat for liberal Western societies is within and without."[2] The early trajectory of the Trump presidency has only reinforced this sense that the Fukuyaman interregnum is at an end.

If one turns to the main body of work on democracy in International Relations (IR)—the democratic-peace research program—such concerns are noticeably absent. Indeed, it would appear that the liberal heyday of the 1990s has continued uninterrupted. A 2014 review article in the *Journal of Peace Research* makes no mention of the questions surrounding democracy's health, while devoting only half a sentence to the 2003 Iraq war and nothing to the 2008 financial crisis. It instead concludes with the predictable suggestion that future research should focus on developing more datasets.[3] Meanwhile, proponents continue to confidently assert that "in a subject of study where reliable insights are rare, the robust finding that democracies are more peaceful toward each other remains an important empirical regularity for future scholarship to build upon."[4] Such claims may remain valid within the context of the specific framework these scholars are operating, but they also reveal a distinct myopia that this research suffers from.

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The democratic-peace research program has undeniably made a valuable contribution to IR since its emergence in the 1980s. It successfully overturned the widespread disinterest in democracy that neo-realism previously helped foster, has offered strong arguments for the relevance of regime type in shaping international behavior, and has made considerable advances in the way conflict is studied. Nonetheless, there are persistent blind spots that mar this work. In particular, there has been a consistent refusal to deal with how key points of reference—democracy, peace, war, and capitalism—are historically conditioned and conceptually contested. In the case of democracy, abstracting it from a rich body of political thought and history has left this research poorly equipped to identify and consider how democracy, and the meaning given to it, has changed over time. Elsewhere I have developed this argument through returning to democracy's past;[5] here my focus is on the way more recent developments are undermining the democratic institutions and culture meant to facilitate peace. If representation and parties are not functioning as they are meant to, can we expect elections to restrain politicians in the same way? If norms of compromise and dialogue are disappearing domestically, what hope can there be that they will prevail internationally? Rather than promoting peace, could it be that capitalism in its contemporary neoliberal form is undermining or hollowing out democracy? The static understanding of democracy adopted by democratic-peace research means that such questions have been overlooked. The result is a remarkably naïve rendering of democracy: there is too much faith that it does what it says on the tin.

Beyond specific arguments being made about the international behavior of democracies, the greater significance of this body of work lies in the powerful blueprint it proposes for how political science and IR should be undertaken. The strength of their findings is offered as clear evidence of the superiority of neopositivism, with the research program presented as an exemplar of good scholarly practice. In this regard, it is necessary to reflect on the politics of theorizing about democratic peace, something that Piki Ish-Shalom has done previously in arguing that claims to objectivity and being scientific have contributed to the "rhetorical capital" of the approach.[6] Not only has this made democratic-peace claims attractive to opportunistic political actors, it has also played a disciplinary role, further entrenching neopositivism's hegemonic position.

The template that the democratic peace research program offers for studying the world is emblematic of—and contributing to—a troubling contracting of our political vision. An excessive concern with methodological rigor, combined with a narrow understanding of what qualifies as valid research, has resulted in a body of scholarship that is remarkably sophisticated but has surprisingly little to say about democracy and its place in the world. Put strongly, the path taken by the democratic-peace research program ultimately leads to a normative and political dead-end, as it excludes too much of what gives democracy meaning and makes it worthy of study in the first place. This direction is all the more problematic given the damage Trump and his ilk are inflicting on democracy, both in America and to its ideational standing more generally.

Reflecting on this problematic state of affairs, I explore the restricted manner in which the democratic peace research program understands democracy, and consider how its underlying assumptions have left it oblivious to many of the most significant trends now shaping this form of rule, resulting in an increasingly incomplete and inaccurate rendering of democracy's place in the world. In doing so, my argument proceeds as follows. First, the trajectory of the democratic-peace research program is considered in more detail. While presented as an important case of good scholarly practice, its actual track record has been much more uneven. Those who share its neopositivist framework are carefully responded to, while non-positivist approaches are ignored or sidelined. This lack of intellectual pluralism has resulted in democratic-peace scholarship becoming out of step with the broader literature on democracy. Highlighting arguments that established democracies are potentially in crisis or decaying, it is suggested that these developments call into question the underlying *ceteris paribus* assumption present in democratic-peace research. I then focus on two major trends impacting democracies at the center of the zone of peace: the decline of democratic institutions and culture, as well as the shifting relationship between democracy and capitalism. I show that these changes are directly relevant for the claims being made by democratic-peace scholars. In concluding, I suggest that democratic-peace research provides a significant example of a wider trend in political science of methodological concerns assuming an outsized role, resulting in scholarship that is ill-equipped to tackle the most fundamental political dilemmas of our time.

The Uneven Development of the Democratic-Peace Research Program

The democratic-peace research program was made by and for the liberal *zeitgeist* that marked the end of the Cold War. This emerging body of work suggested that liberal democracy and its expansion offered the prospect of a fundamentally different and more peaceful form of international politics.[7] At its base was the finding that there has rarely, if ever, been war between established liberal democracies. This correlation has proven to be remarkably robust and is even accepted by some of its most strident critics.[8] The large-*N* studies that dominate this research have been much less effective in convincingly demonstrating causation, however.[9] This is certainly not from lack of trying: there is now a voluminous literature

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focused on testing normative and structural explanations for the dyadic peace.[10] More recently, scholars have proposed that this pattern can be better explained by factors connected to capitalism. While this differs in identifying a "capitalist peace,"[11] it still can be considered part of the broader democratic-peace research program.[12] These scholars may disagree over whether democracy or capitalism is more causally significant, but they are effectively contributing to the same body of work.

Liberal scholars may have challenged neo-realism's conclusions, but in doing so, they accepted and powerfully reinforced Kenneth Waltz's Lakatosian vision for IR. Outlining the value of democratic-peace scholarship, Allan Dafoe, John Oneal, and Bruce Russett determine that

> the study of international relations can rarely generate strong causal inferences about important questions. In such a scientific domain, a robust empirical association involving important phenomena is of great value: It provides a key descriptive feature to be explained and an empirical foundation for theory. The democratic peace is such a foundation: It is robust and substantively important.[13]

From this perspective, this scholarship is significant not only because of its findings, but also for the blueprint it provides for producing valid knowledge. David Lake concurs in identifying it as an exemplar of how to undertake research in IR, noting that it had advanced "through sets of shared assumptions and common epistemologies and ontologies that allowed theory to be extended to new topics, additional hypotheses to be deduced, and propositions confronted with evidence according to agreed-upon standards."[14] Lake is not alone in reaching this conclusion; proponents argue that it is a noteworthy example of a progressive research program.[15]

The claim that democratic-peace scholarship is an exemplar for how research in IR should be undertaken deserves closer scrutiny. While appreciating Lake's preference for "progress *within* paradigms rather than war *between* paradigms,"[16] this easily becomes an apologia for marginalizing or ignoring perspectives that do not conform to the strictures of neopositivism. On this point, Milja Kurki notes that "emphasis on scientific validity has arguably served to de-legitimise other epistemological approaches to democratic peace, notably interpretive frameworks."[17] This can be seen in the way questions over correlation, causation, modelling and coding are answered in a detailed and thorough manner, whereas non-positivist challenges are largely ignored. For example, Sebastian Rosato's prominent critique, which centered on causation, was quickly replied to with a special forum in *American Political Science Review*, whereas Ido Oren's powerful 1995 *International Security* article is still awaiting a convincing response two decades later. Likewise, Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey's early contributions, which were central in setting out a research agenda for critical democratic-peace scholarship, have received little engagement from their neopositivist counterparts.[18] Another prominent example is the frosty reception given to Tony Smith's fiery *A Pact with the Devil*, which proposes that liberal scholars were culpable in helping to construct the intellectual framework that motivated the 2003 Iraq war.[19] Despite being written by an established American academic, someone responsible for a seminal work on democracy in IR,[20] his forthright claims have been responded to with a pronounced silence. Such practices have powerful disciplining effects.[21] Not only does this unwillingness to engage with alternative approaches contradict important democratic and scholarly values of pluralism and dialogue, it also limits the insights that can be generated. These shortcomings are particularly relevant insofar as non-positivist research has focused on topics that neopositivists have tended to bypass, such as democratic wars and the politicization of democratic-peace findings.[22]

This refusal to countenance critiques that do not commence from shared neopositivist premises is most apparent when it comes to definitional questions. Neopositivist democratic-peace research relies on a fixed definition of democracy, normally adopted directly from the influential contributions of Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl, or indirectly as a result of employing the Polity dataset. Debates over the form and nature of democracy are bypassed, as it is quickly defined in reference to a standard set of liberal procedures and institutions. This privileging of a specific, ahistorical conception of democracy is only possible by denying its deeply contested and historically variable nature.[23] From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that the democratic-peace research program has such a thin understanding of democracy, as the concept has been detached from much of the historical and philosophical context that fills it with meaning. On this point, I build on Kurki's proposal for an alternate framework of causal analysis for democratic peace, one that commences by asking "detailed questions about how democracies work institutionally, socially and historically" and in doing so, recognizing there is a need to "to conceptualise not just democracies, but also their embeddedness in complex global contexts"[24]

Democracy and Crisis

The democratic-peace research program displays remarkably high levels of methodological sophistication, but in focusing on a narrow set of social-scientific propositions and not engaging with other approaches, it is left with an overly static understanding of its key variable. This gives a false sense of stability to democracy, when history shows that its form and meaning have always been more open and in flux than democratic-peace research allows for, with crisis being a recurring part of this narrative.[25] Once again democracy appears to be in troubled waters, which is reflected in a growing literature examining whether

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established democracies are in a state of crisis or terminal decline.[26] Matthew Flinders offers a useful overview of seven interrelated problems they are suffering from: (1) the civic culture has changed, reflected in the decrease of levels of political engagement and trust; (2) the rise of populism; (3) neo-liberalism and the expansion of market rationality into politics; (4) depoliticization and the reduction of democratic space; (5) hyper democracy: the intensification of political pressures on government; (6) a lack of genuine dialogue and listening to other opinions; and (7) poor basic knowledge amongst the public about how politics works and what politicians do.[27] One may disagree with some of the diagnoses, but collectively what this literature strongly suggests is that the key component of the democratic peace—democracy—is decaying or transforming, and if this is the case, it calls into question the underlying *ceteris paribus* assumption. Comfortably assuming that liberal democracies will continue to exist as they have done so previously is flying in the face of a growing body of theoretical and empirical work indicating otherwise.

If liberal democracy is undergoing change or is in decline, the greatest threat to the zone of peace may actually come from within. Democratic-peace research, however, has spent remarkably little time considering the health of established democracies.[28] This is increasingly difficult to justify given the strong signs of democratic decay and dysfunction present in North America and Europe. In the case of the United States, surely it is time to consider whether the country's remarkable stretch of perfect Polity scores needs to be re-examined. It has maintained a full score of 10 since 1871, despite the fact that civil rights for African Americans were not completely achieved until the 1960s.[29] If one turns to other rankings, the situation appears much less sanguine. For instance, in the 2016 edition of the *Democracy Index* by *The Economist*, the United States was ranked twenty-first, slipping from the "full democracy" category, instead being classed as a "flawed democracy." And with the election of Donald Trump, one hardly needs such indices to ascertain that America's democracy is troubled. Nor is it alone, with a similar array of problems present in Europe. The Eurozone crisis and subsequent fallout has highlighted the EU's deeply ambiguous and complicated relationship with democracy. This was most directly seen in Greece and Italy, which had technocratic governments installed to satisfy the EU and the markets, leading the *New Statesman* to conclude that "the European debt crisis has been almost as damaging for democracy as it has been for the economies of the Eurozone."[30] Meanwhile, the ineffectual EU response to considerable democratic rollback in Hungary and Poland has called into question the capacity of the organization to secure democracy in the region. Troubling signs can be found across Europe, with populists and far right parties quickly gaining in strength as frustrations with austerity measures and immigration bubble over. In this regard, the Brexit debacle offered an acute summary of the problems afflicting democracies across Europe. Many more examples could be given, but the basic point is clear: all is not well in democracies at the heart of the zone of peace.

Certainly many of the issues that established democracies are now grappling with have appeared in different forms previously. In particular, the relationship between the political and economic realms has repeatedly been a source of tension and conflict. When Larry Bartels talks of a "new gilded age" in the United States, he is drawing a comparison with the considerable economic inequality that defined the country's democracy in the late nineteenth century.[31] Similarly, Kevin Phillips identifies three eras in which money came to have an overriding influence on politics: the gilded age, the 1920s, and the period since the 1980s.[32] More generally, crisis has been a recurrent theme for democracy, but as David Runciman notes, one reason the current situation "might be a watershed is that it signals the unraveling of an extended political/economic experiment."[33] An increased complexity of problems has combined with reduced state capacity to create an especially difficult confluence of pressures in a world shaped by neoliberalism and globalization. Not only do these developments have ramifications for the arguments of democratic-peace scholars, they also point to the limits of this dominant way of understanding democracy's role in the world. I will develop this argument in more detail, first through examining how democratic institutions and culture are being eroded, and then by exploring how the relationship between democracy and capitalism has been altered with the rise of neoliberalism.

Democratic Institutions and Culture in Decline

There has been considerable continuity in the liberal democratic model since it first emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The basic structure of a constitutional state combined with a representative form of democracy and a market-based economy has been constant. What has primarily changed is the scope and nature of these institutions, how they relate together, and the meaning given to them. As Bernard Manin observes:

> The "people" is certainly a much larger entity in our own day than it was in the eighteenth century, the advent of universal suffrage having substantially enlarged the citizen body. But on the other hand, there has been no significant change in the institutions regulating the selection of representatives and the influence of the popular will on their decisions once in office.[34]

The relative consistency in the basic contours of liberal democracy may help rationalize adopting a fixed definition when constructing data sets, but doing so conceals significant differences in the way these institutions have

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operated, the political culture that has surrounded them, and the meaning given to these forms and practices. This is consequential, as these variations have ramifications for both the structural and normative variants of the democratic peace.

Structural explanations of the democratic peace suggest that democratic institutions work to restrict the possibility of leaders going to war. Elections hold politicians accountable and warn them off easily engaging in conflict, checks and balances limit their ability to rush into war, and public debate can also work as a brake on rash decisions. Even if we accept claims that these mechanisms have worked in the past, there are strong signs that these institutions are undergoing major change, which throws into doubt their capacity to function in the way democratic-peace proponents presume. The key assumption that politicians will avoid conflict with other democracies because they will be held accountable through elections is called into question by the marked decline in voting and citizen engagement. Voter turnout has dropped sharply in established democracies since the 1980s, with the pattern being remarkably consistent, even across democracies with different political and social institutions.[35] On this point, Peter Mair draws a useful analogy with climate change, observing that, "although there is no undisturbed downward trend in levels of electoral participation, record lows now come with greater frequency, and in a greater number of polities."[36] This has consequences for the way democracy operates, and in turn, for democratic-peace arguments.

The decline in voter turnout is more pronounced amongst younger voters and those of lower socioeconomic standing, who feel increasingly alienated from politics, which they see as being dominated by the interests of the rich. This sentiment is understandable, with studies suggesting that wealth is a significant factor in determining whether citizens are listened to, with the voices of those at the bottom of the income distribution not being heard.[37] Martin Gilens looks specifically at foreign policy and finds that responsiveness to lower-income Americans declines considerably when their preferences diverge with the affluent.[38] In a widely reported study published in *Perspectives on Politics*, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page judge that "Americans do enjoy many features central to democratic governance . . . but . . . if policymaking is dominated by powerful business organizations and a small number of affluent Americans, then America's claims to being a democratic society are seriously threatened."[39]

Certainly this is not the first time that wealth has played a pronounced role in the functioning of American democracy, with Phillips optimistically noting that previously control has been reasserted over the economy after market crashes and major economic downturns.[40] Whether this will happen again is an open question, but it hard to be confident given the remarkable level of opposition and obstruction to the policies of President Barack Obama.[41] Furthermore, Trump has shown a strong preference for deregulation and further freeing the market from democratically imposed constraints. These developments have been fueled by what Jane Mayer terms "dark money," huge sums covertly employed by extremely wealthy conservatives in order to reshape American democracy in accordance with their libertarian beliefs and economic interests.[42] This problem of money in politics has been exacerbated by the 2010 Citizens United decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, which opened the floodgates for corporate spending on political campaigns, with more than one billion dollars being spent in the following five years.[43] The manner in which money influences politics is especially pronounced in the United States, but it is by no means unique. In a survey of advanced industrial democracies, Frederick Solt concludes that economic inequality has a significant impact on political equality: people with lower incomes participate less while the relative political power of the rich increases.[44] According to Francis Fukuyama, this state of affairs has resulted in a general "crisis of representation, in which ordinary citizens feel that their supposedly democratic government no longer truly reflects their interests and is under the control of a variety of shadowy elites."[45]

This "crisis of representation" is connected to, and amplified by, the decline of traditional political parties. Parties are no longer clearly defined by class cleavages, as they have become more professionalized and general membership has fallen drastically, while policy differences have become less significant. Mair has charted the rapid decline of parties in Europe, arguing that it has particularly grave consequences:

> The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form.[46]

As noted earlier, most core institutions of democracy have remained constant, but their function and significance have changed. This is certainly the case with representation. An important feature of this has been decision-making increasingly being turned over to appointed experts who wield considerable power. Philip Coggan terms this process "double delegation," whereby the people delegate to representatives, who in turn delegate responsibility to unelected officials.[47] One consequence of this is important decisions being removed from democratic control. In turn, this democratic deficit exacerbates problems with voter alienation. Surveying these changes, Donatella della Porta notes that "the assumption that elections give citizens the power to punish bad governors and confirm good ones requires collective actors that are able to give transparency and, especially, continuity to the

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accountability process."[48] This is precisely what is becoming more doubtful. And if key institutions of liberal democracy—elections and political parties—are not functioning as they did previously, it also calls into question their ability to channel democracies towards peaceful behavior with one another.

These developments are also relevant for democratic culture, and in turn, normative explanations for democratic peace. This approach suggests that democratic norms of non-violence, compromise, and reciprocity are extended to the international sphere and shape the way that democracies interact with one another. In established democracies the core idea that power should be transferred peacefully remains in place, but there are signs that much of the surrounding culture is weakening. Political literacy has declined, publics are distrustful of elites, and traditional forms of representation are breaking down. As Simon Tormey observes, "the mood is not contemplative or deliberative. It is angry and resentful."[49] This shift is connected to, and reinforced by, the rise of negative politics, a style of engagement that effectively denies the legitimacy of alternate positions and rejects the traditional role of a loyal opposition. Two powerful examples are the scorched earth strategy of the Tea Party, most clearly seen in the 2013 government shutdown, and the Brexit campaign, which relied on scare tactics and barefaced lies. Rejection, blocking, dismissal, and other negative strategies may serve the immediate interests of those wielding them, but they are deeply corrosive of democratic practices. As Rosanvallon notes, "instead of oversight and criticism as ways of increasing citizen activity, today's negative politics marks a painful and energy-sapping shrinkage of that activity."[50] Alternatively, it can work to enflame passions that may be difficult to control or satisfy. Either way, this style of negative politics leads to an erosion of norms of respect and compromise. And if the domestic politics of democracies are becoming less tolerant and open, this raises questions about what kind of behaviors will be transferred to the international realm. Simply put, the democratic norms that are supposed to facilitate peace are disappearing.

Closely related to these changes in democratic culture has been the rise of populist parties and candidates. Populism is not so much a refutation of democracy, as it is a particular interpretation, one that downplays the checks and balances of liberalism. It sees politics in Manichean terms, denying the possibility for compromise.[51] There is an abiding tendency to simplify complex issues, with the threatening "other"—normally a "corrupt eliteor a minority group—identified as the source of the country's woes. Populists challenge politics as usual with "a heady combination of charisma, political incorrectness and sometimes blatant discrimination or even illegality," with Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey warning that "populism is a force to be reckoned with" and that it has "deep ramifications for democratic life in an increasingly mediatised political world."[52] Contemporary populism's close fit with the media and current forms of communication distinguishes it from previous iterations and may explain why it is becoming increasingly prevalent. It also encourages more mainstream politicians to adopt the populist style in order to be successful.[53] What this suggests is that even where populists fail to achieve power, they still can play an important role in reshaping political discourse and generally doing so in a direction in line with negative politics.

Populism's relationship to liberal democracy is deeply ambivalent. In some circumstances it can have positive effects by incorporating excluded voices and identifying legitimate grievances with "business as usual." These potential benefits are offset by populism's negative consequences, however, which can include: the weakening of checks and balances, the disregarding of minority rights, a moralization of politics that inhibits compromise, and the shrinking of the political realm.[54] In particular, the way in which populism undermines key norms of compromise and dialogue is consequential for democratic-peace claims. Following the logic of the normative argument, democratic norms transfer from the domestic realm to the international sphere when dealing with fellow democracies. Yet if the political culture of established democracies has altered such that there is less room for compromise and there is an increasing polarization of political discourse, this throws into doubt the claim that democratic norms will facilitate conflict avoidance and dispute resolution. An important example here is Rodrigo Duterte, the populist president of the Philippines who came to power in June 2016. In his first two months in office, he directed slurs at President Obama and the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, suggested withdrawing from the United Nations (UN), has refused to meet with the UN Secretary General, and his war on drugs has resulted in approximately 2,000 extra-judicial killings.[55] Given that populist parties—and politicians utilizing a populist style—are becoming more successful and widespread, the Manichean version of politics that they promote may have significant domestic and international consequences for established democracies within the zone of peace.

Reflecting on contemporary politics, Claus Offe concludes that "while there is no realistic and normatively respectable alternative to liberal democracy in sight, the widely observed decline of democratic politics, as well as state policies under democracy, provides reasons for concern."[56] He is hardly alone in determining that there are serious grounds to be worried.[57] Such trends are directly relevant for democratic-peace arguments. Democratic institutions being undermined or circumvented have consequences for claims that the electoral system as well as checks and balances work to restrain democracies from

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engaging in conflict. Likewise, the rise of negative politics and populism means that norms of dialogue and compromise are being eroded, which is pertinent for suggestions that democratic culture facilitates peaceful behavior between democracies. These troubling developments are readily apparent, and the grim history of the 20th century provides ample evidence of the worst consequences of democratic failure. The past also offers a reminder that democracies have faced similar problems before. Here one need only recall the 1975 Trilateral Commission's report, *The Crisis of Democracy*, which appeared just 14 years before Fukuyama would announce the "victory" of liberal democracy. Yet as Fareed Zakaria notes, perhaps the crisis "never really went away; it was just papered over with temporary solutions and obscured by a series of lucky breaks."[58] This is also the central thesis of Streeck's recent book, *Buying Time*, which sees the current woes of democracy as a continuation and extension of more fundamental contradictions that began to appear in the late 1960s. Streeck's pessimistic prognosis stems from the manner in which the previously stable relationship between the political and economic spheres in democracy has unraveled, which I will now consider in more detail.

Democracy and Capitalism: Uneasy Partners

Building on the long tradition of "commercial liberalism" that emphasizes the pacifying effect of trade and commerce, democratic-peace research tends to assume a positive and complimentary relationship between democracy and capitalism. A prominent example of this is Russett and Oneal's "Kantian Triangle," in which democracy and economic interdependence are two of the triangle's corners.[59] As the research program has developed further, some scholars have moved beyond suggesting that free trade works as a supplement in promoting peaceful behavior to instead proposing that it is the key factor. The debate over what role capitalism plays in the dyadic peace is arguably now the central point of contention in this research program.[60] While this literature acknowledges an alternative tradition of thought that argues capitalism fuels war, it largely assumes that the economic and political realms work together in a harmonious fashion to promote peace and preserve democracy. Critical scholarship is more skeptical, but an overriding focus on democratic wars has meant the economic dimension has not received sufficient attention. A notable exception is Barkawi and Laffey's early contribution, which proposed that the global capitalist system may work at cross-purposes with the expansion of democracy and peace.[61] This argument was recently picked up by John MacMillan, who uses a critical materialist approach to highlight the relevance of core-periphery relations for democratic-peace claims. He points to the way that global capitalism has restricted possibilities for democratization in periphery states, while also fostering forms of social violence missed by democratic-peace scholarship.[62] If anything, MacMillan understates his case: neoliberal globalization has had grave consequences for democracies not only in the periphery, but also in the core.

History and theory offer a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between democracy and capitalism than the one prevalent in democratic-peace research. All models of democracy necessarily include a set of assumptions about how the political and economic spheres relate.[63] This point is bypassed by democratic-peace scholars, who assume a natural fit between democracy and markets. Yet this relationship is not inevitable: it is historically conditioned and has changed over time. Indeed, classical liberals were doubtful that capitalism and democracy were compatible.[64] An important part of the development of the liberal democratic model was the more radical social features associated with democracy—which liberals saw as a threat to property rights—being muted and restrained. Certainly within democratic-peace research there is an awareness that liberal democracy is a composite form, with scholars such as John Owen arguing that it is actually liberalism—not democracy—that does the causal work in dyadic arguments.[65] The point here is a different one, however: insofar as the dominant model of liberal democracy is one in which liberalism is the senior partner, this has important ramifications for the way the political and economic spheres are related. As Kurki notes, "even (and especially!) the liberal model, by separating the economic and the political, structures the relationship between democracy and the economy."[66]

Central to the development and expansion of the zone of peace after World War II were democracies reasserting political control over the economic realm. Capitalism, largely freed from political restraints, had proven corrosive of democracy and peace in the first half of the twentieth century.[67] The experience of the Great Depression and its role in fueling the rise of Fascism, combined with the ongoing challenge posed by Communism, meant that in the immediate postwar-period democracies introduced reforms that tempered the dangerous excesses of unchecked markets and in so doing, promoted a form of capitalism that was more socially sustainable. This reflected an awareness of the remarkable power of capitalism in generating economic growth, but also the considerable political and social costs it can have if not carefully regulated. As Berman notes, in this form of democracy "not only did it include free and fair elections and explicit protections of individual rights and liberties, it was also committed to ensuring certain social and economic rights and outcomes."[68] The Keynesian bargain oversaw a period of economic growth and social stability that lasted until the economic problems of the early 1970s. In the following decades there was a massive revision in the way the economic and political realms relate, triggered by

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the interconnected trends of the decline of the welfare state, the rise of neoliberalism and the intensification of globalization. As Streeck notes, "the history of capitalism after the 1970s . . . is a history of capital's escape from the system of social regulation imposed on it against its will after 1945."[69] While this transformation has had far-reaching consequences for democracy, it has generally been overlooked by the democratic-peace research program.[70]

The emergence and subsequent hegemony of neoliberalism has played a fundamental role in reshaping the relationship between politics and economics in contemporary democracy, threatening to completely sever the latter from the constraints imposed by the former. To the extent that trends related to neoliberalism have been considered by those making capitalist or democratic-peace arguments, Erik Gartzke suggests that the globalization of capital reduces the likelihood of conflict between economically integrated states, while Patrick McDonald proposes that privatization reduces state autonomy and the resources available to mobilize for war, which can work to reduce conflict.[71] In considering these issues, remarkably neither makes any reference to neoliberalism. A considerably different perspective is provided by Offe:

> Neoliberal states are regimes whose policy agenda is so restricted that the substantive concerns of the "people" remain largely bracketed out from it and have no access to the making of public policies, as major areas of public interest (urban development, health, education, the environment, transportation, utilities, etc.) are taken off the agenda of political authorities in the name of privatisation, deregulation, marketisation, competitiveness, and efficiency.[72]

What Offe points to is the manner in which neoliberalism has shrunk the political sphere in democracies. It is not simply that the economic realm has become detached from democratic control, helping to exacerbate inequality. The situation is more drastic than this; it is what Manet terms the "economic evisceration of our bodies politic."[73] Market-based relations have become the dominant framework for conceiving of the role of government, what citizenship means, how we see ourselves, the way we determine value, and how people relate to each other in society.[74] Economic logic is effectively consuming the political sphere, corrupting the register in which democracy is enacted. If one takes these arguments seriously, it suggests that one of the greatest threats to the dyadic peace comes from established democracies being hollowed out and destroyed from within. Put strongly, neoliberalism is acting like acid on democratic norms and institutions, eating away not only at the foundations of this form of rule, but also the zone of peace.

A defining feature of the neoliberal era has been a marked rise in economic inequality, reversing the previous movement towards greater equality during the immediate decades after World War II. This has been constant across most OECD countries.[75] In a new paper, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman identify three major trends:

> First, wealth inequality is high and rising fast in the United States: the top 0.1% share has increased from 7% in the late 1970s to 22% in 2012. Second, the wealth share of the middle-class has followed an inverted-U evolution over the course of the twentieth century: it is no higher today than in 1940. Third, the combination of rising income and saving rate inequality is fueling wealth inequality.[76]

These developments are more pronounced in the United States, but Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez observe that income inequality and wealth inequality have also been on the rise in Europe since the 1970s.[77] As noted earlier, this is contributing to a decline in voter participation, a loss of trust in politicians, and the growing influence of special interest groups. Beyond undermining and distorting core democratic institutions, this situation contradicts the basic idea of equality, which has long been fundamental to the way people conceive of democracy. This is a markedly different reading of democracy and capitalism to the overly sanguine one that prevails in democratic-peace research.

The rise of neoliberalism has been closely connected to deepening processes of globalization, which have further ramifications for democratic governance. More and more, decisions are being made outside of the confines of the state, with nonelected bureaucrats, experts, and bodies having a significant role in policymaking. States can be held hostage to the whims of the market, while transnational corporations have considerable leverage as a result of their ability to move to territories most conducive to their interests. Meanwhile, with the intensification and acceleration of communication, there is less space for debate and dialogue, features that are normally seen as vital for the health of democracy.[78] The corrosive effects of globalization on state capacity may be less evident in relation to traditional security issues, but these processes are consequential for the functioning and maintenance of democratic institutions and cultures. In this sense, globalization works to reinforce the other trends identified here that are reshaping liberal democracy. Held argues that there are significant disjunctures between traditional claims to state sovereignty and globalized practices regarding law, politics, security, identity, and the economy, which leads him to consider whether democracy also needs to expand beyond state borders.[79] James Bohman goes further in proposing that "a new kind of transnational democratization is essential to the project of an expanding democratic peace."[80] The democratic peace research program has little scope for considering such proposals, however, as they remain wedded to an essentially realist conception of international anarchy. Furthermore, the kind of normative project that Bohman is proposing lies

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well beyond the kind of scholarship neopositivists are willing to engage with. As a result, they are poorly equipped to consider the ways that globalization is reshaping the contours and capacities of states, with far-reaching for what democracy can mean. This reinforces the problem previously identified by Barkawi and Laffey, who observe that democratic-peace scholars are caught in a "territorial trap" that produces a "blindness to global social relations and their role in reshaping both the state and the international organization of force."[81] Collectively what this illustrates is that the manner in which the democratic-peace research program conceives of democracy, its relationship with capitalism, and its connection to wider processes of globalization leaves it with an increasingly incomplete and out-of-date understanding of how democracy interacts with the international sphere.

Rearranging Deck Chairs: Methodological Myopia at a Time of Democratic Decline

When work on democratic peace first emerged it contributed to the revitalization of liberal thought and represented an important contribution to the social sciences. Yet innovation has been replaced by stagnation, with Barkawi proposing that the democratic-peace research program has become "degenerative" insofar as it "no longer creates or explains novel facts."[82] An overriding concern with methodological rigor has resulted in an increasingly monochrome literature, divorced from the most significant debates surrounding democracy. This is a prime example of the larger trend towards methodological questions dominating in IR, something that senior scholars from a range of theoretical traditions have voiced misgivings about.[83] Reflecting on this state of affairs, Robert Keohane observes that

> the relentless pressure of more and more sophisticated quantitative methods continues . . . . All too often . . . they [methods] are used unimaginatively to address, in somewhat more precise ways, issues that are already well-understood, while new or more significant developments, since they seem less amenable to such methods, are ignored.[84]

Sanford Schram echoes this conclusion, suggesting that due to an excessive concern with method, "social science has diminished its ability to conduct research in ways that people can use to better understand and do something about what is happening in their society and economy."[85] What Keohane and Schram both point to is the limited value of work that remains defensible within the restricted parameters it sets for itself, but has little to contribute to the way we formulate and respond to fundamental questions in politics. This is certainly the case with democratic-peace research, which operates with an excessively narrow conception of how IR should be studied and what qualifies as valid scholarship. The result is the odd situation where the largest body of work on democracy in IR has remarkably little to say about democracy's contemporary fortunes and future place in the world.

It appears that democratic-peace scholars can no longer see the proverbial forest from the trees. Coding and correlation are debated *ad infinitum*, while little attention is given to growing economic inequality, voter alienation, a decline in traditional parties, rising populism, and a wide array of related trends that raise serious doubts about the health of established democracies. Democratic-peace research has remained largely oblivious to these trends, yet as shown here, these developments are directly relevant for structural and normative arguments. Engaging with these issues means overturning the unexamined assumption that states at the heart of the zone of peace will remain democratic. Not only does such a linear conception of history fail to correspond to democracy's much more uneven past, it overlooks the possibility that established democracies may disappear, weaken drastically, or undergo great change. The collective failure to seriously consider the possibility that the Soviet Union might collapse should serve as a warning against such comfortable thinking.[86] Perhaps the Trump presidency might finally prompt democratic peace scholars to begin taking democratic decline more seriously.

The argument made here points towards a different way of studying democracy's role in international politics, but the conclusions can be adapted to match with the dominant mode of democratic-peace research. For example, Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder have argued that the zone of peace does not extend to transitional democracies, which may actually be more war-prone.[87] This logic could be extended to considering democracies in decline, asking whether they will behave more like transitional or established democracies. On this point, Leonardo Morlino has developed a sophisticated framework for measuring the quality of democracies, classifying them in relation to rule of law, accountability, participation, competition, responsibility, freedom, and equality.[88] This allows him to distinguish between a range of imperfect democracies: inefficient, irresponsible, passive, stuck, illegitimate, reduced, unequal, and minimal.[89] Connecting this to work on democratic peace, it could be worth considering whether some failings or weaknesses in democracy are more consequential than others for international behavior. These are just some examples of the way a more complex—and more empirically accurate—account of democracy and its role in international politics could be developed. It is not sufficient, however, to simply expand the remit of neopositivist scholarship by adding a few new research questions. There is a need for greater openness to work that commences from different ontological, epistemological, and methodological positions.

It is important to keep the door open for dialogue, but given that the democratic-peace research program has

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shown a persistent disinclination to engage with alternate approaches, one must have limited confidence that this will change drastically anytime soon. Here it is necessary to highlight the problematic aspects of democratic-peace research precisely because it is held up as an exemplar of good scholarly practice, reinforcing the dominance of neopositivism. As I have argued, there are serious limitations and significant downsides that come from this state of affairs. It has resulted in a body of work increasingly detached from reality, with little to say about the most pressing issues facing democracy today. The most acute example of this disjuncture is the question of how democracy and capitalism relate. Within democratic-peace research the major debate at present is whether capitalism is a more powerful explanatory factor than democracy for the dyadic peace. Proponents hail the positive role played by markets, while opposing sides disagree with each other over various methodological matters. Meanwhile, scholars, pundits, all the way through to regular voters are instead questioning whether capitalism in its contemporary neoliberal guise is undermining or even destroying democracy. Separate from the issue of whether or not trends associated with neoliberalism are relevant for the specific arguments being made, this massive gap between scholarly practice and public discourse illustrates the limits that come from adopting such a narrow perspective of how politics should be studied.

Those who have examined the transmogrification of democracy since the 1970s are pessimistic about what these changes portend. Wendy Brown warns that the ascendance of neoliberalism "imperils the ideal, imaginary, and political project of democracy,"[90] while Streeck determines that "the clock is ticking for democracy as we have come to know it."[91] Even if these conclusions are overly bleak, they reflect the difficult situation in which democracies now find themselves. In this regard, Flinders concludes his survey of the problems facing established democracies by wondering, "whether we have the political imagination to re-imagine democratic institutions and processes and through this breathe new life into politics."[92] This is a task that scholars much actively contribute to in their dual role as citizens.[93] Perhaps the dual shocks of Brexit and the Trump presidency may encourage a more active engagement with these pressing problems. What is clear is that there is limited value in continuing to mechanically praise democracy's pacifist tendencies at a time when populism, economic inequality, frustration, and fear are increasingly the most prominent features of established democracies. A more pluralist approach to studying democracy in international politics would have space for conceiving of it as a deeply historical and normative project that we collectively participate in and contribute to. Writing at the lowest ebb of modern history, Reinhold Niebuhr beautifully conveyed this idea of democracy as an open, variable, and perpetually incomplete political project, describing it as "a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems."[94] Embracing this perspective suggests a form of scholarship very different from what currently prevails in democratic-peace research, but ultimately it is one more attuned to the contested nature of democracy and arguably better equipped to engage with the challenges it now faces.

Notes

1 This article was completed before the election of Donald Trump. It is unclear what his presidency will entail, but early signs suggest that many of themes discussed here—especially in terms of democratic crisis and decline—will become more pertinent.
2 Cohen 2016.
3 Hegre 2014, 10.
4 Dafoe, Oneal, and Russett 2013, 213.
5 Hobson 2015.
6 Ish-Shalom 2013.
7 Russett 1993, 138.
8 Rosato 2003; Gowa 2011.
9 Hayes 2012.
10 Maoz and Russett 1993.
11 Gartzke 2007.
12 For a slightly different perpective, Ish-Shalom regards democratic peace and capitalist peace as separate subsets of "free world theory"; Ish-Shalom 2013, ch. 6.
13 Dafoe, Oneal, and Russett 2013, 201–2.
14 Lake 2013, 579–80.
15 Ray 2003; Chernoff 2004; Harrison 2010; Ungerer 2012.
16 Emphasis original; Lake 2013, 580.
17 Kurki 2008, 267.
18 Barkawi and Laffey 1999, 2001.
19 Smith 2007.
20 Smith 1994.
21 Steele 2010; Sterling-Folker 2015.
22 Barkawi and Laffey 1999; Barkawi and Laffey 2001; Geis, Brock, and Müller 2006; Geis, Müller, and Schörnig 2013; Hobson et al. 2011; Ish-Shalom 2013; Mann 2005; Rasmussen 2003; Smith 2007.
23 Oren 1995; Barkawi and Laffey 1999; Ish-Shalom 2013; Hobson 2011, 2015.
24 Kurki 2008, 271.
25 O'Donnell 2007; Runciman 2013.
26 Hobson 2016.
27 Flinders 2016.
28 Poznansky 2015, 817.
29 Polity IV Project 2014.
30 Skelton 2011.
31 Bartels 2008.
32 Phillips 2002.
33 Runciman 2013, 297.
34 Manin 1996, 236; see also Rosanvallon 2008, 13.

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35 Blais and Rubenson 2013, 96; Gray and Caul 2000.
36 Mair 2013, 76.
37 Bartels 2008, 285.
38 Gilens 2012, 105–8.
39 Gilens and Page 2014, 577.
40 Phillips 2002, pt. 3
41 Skocpol and Jacobs 2012.
42 Mayer 2016; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016.
43 Cole 2016.
44 Solt 2008.
45 Fukuyama 2014, 11–12.
46 Mair 2013, 1.
47 Coggan 2013, 4.
48 Della Porta 2013, 24.
49 Tormey 2014, 110.
50 Rosanvallon 2008, 190.
51 Mudde 2004, 544.
52 Moffitt and Tormey 2014, 393–94.
53 Moffitt 2016, 76–77.
54 Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, 21–22.
55 Mogato 2016.
56 Offe 2011, 447.
57 For a comprehensive account by a leading democracy scholar, see Norris 2011.
58 Zakaria 2013, 24.
59 Russett and Oneal 2001.
60 Gartzke 2007; Mousseau 2009, 2013; Schneider and Gleditsch 2010.
61 Barkawi and Laffey 1999.
62 MacMillan 2012.
63 Kurki 2013.
64 Offe 1983.
65 Owen 1994.
66 Kurki 2013, 12.
67 Polanyi 2001.
68 Berman 2012, 80.
69 Streeck 2014, 19.
70 Mousseau et al. are one of the few to distinguish between market economies, contrasting "free market capitalism" and "social-market capitalism." In doing so, however, they miss the extent to which the free market capitalism model ultimately relies on considerable state intervention, while downplaying the other features of the social-market model. What separates the free market and social-market versions of capitalism is not the role of the state in providing a contract friendly environment; this is something they both effectively share. Rather, the latter is distinguished by the manner in which the state intervenes and limits the market to preserve political and social stability. And this is precisely what has undergone change with the rise of neoliberalism, a development Mousseau et al. do not consider; Mousseau et al. 2013; Mousseau 2009.
71 Gartzke 2007; McDonald 2007.
72 Offe 2011, 452.
73 Manent 2014, 136.
74 Brown 2015; Flinders 2016, 188.
75 Kenworthy and Pontusson 2005.
76 Saez and Zucman 2016, 36.
77 Piketty and Saez 2014.
78 Scheuerman 2001.
79 Held 1995, 135.
80 Bohman 2006, 138.
81 Barkawi and Laffey 1999, 413.
82 Barkawi 2015, 827.
83 Mearsheimer and Walt 2013, 446; see also Oren 2016.
84 Keohane 2015, 419.
85 Schram 2012, 530.
86 Foa and Mounk 2016, 5–6.
87 Mansfield and Snyder 1995.
88 Morlino 2011, pt. 3.
89 Ibid., 250–53.
90 Brown 2015, 201.
91 Streeck 2014, 5.
92 Flinders 2016, 200.
93 Ish-Shalom 2013, 204–18; Rosanvallon 2008, 316–18.
94 Niebuhr 2011, 118.

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