Post Post-Cold War Democratic Theory

Julian Culp and Stephen W. Sawyer

Abstract: This article identifies three central axes in the contemporary constellation of democratic theory and practice: (1) redefining the roots of democratic power, or *kratos,* in response to new challenges to popular participation in democracy; (2) the rescaling of the *demos* given the growing dissatisfaction with liberal cosmopolitan approaches to global democracy; and (3) the de-parochialization of democracy within a multipolar world in light of democratic erosion in liberal democracies across Europe and the Americas. This article arrives at these axes by way of revisiting the relation of the two concepts constituting democracy's etymological roots—*demos* and *kratos*—in recent work in democratic theory. It concludes by urging to move beyond the post-Cold War social imaginary by exploring the question "What *demos* and *kratos* for the twenty-first century?"

Keywords: contemporary democratic theory, demos, de-parochialization, kratos, post-Cold War liberalism

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Echoes of the ancient Greek terms *demos* and *kratos* have been resounding among democratic theorists in recent years (cf., e.g., Brown 2015; Inerarity 2014; Jolly 2007; Maltais et al. 2019; Ronzoni 2017; Sawyer 2018, 2025; Spector 2021; Valentini 2014; Wills 2023). The return to these ancient words connotes both a growing dissatisfaction with our democratic present and an unflagging hope that democracy and democratic theory still have much to offer. In search of notions that stretch beyond modern European and American (in the broadest sense) experiments with liberal democracy and even post-Cold War democratization, employment of these expressions has shed new light on and profoundly reframed pressing political questions. These include the nature of popular participation, scales of citizenship and political belonging, as well as the place of the European and Atlantic experience in our democratic future. While historians of ancient Greece have convincingly argued that a better understanding of both *demos* and *kratos* may illuminate democracy in the past and present (cf., e.g., Cammack 2022; Ober 2008), contemporary interest in *demos,*

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 1 2/26/2025 21:44:47

demoi, and *kratos* have implicitly pushed democratic theorizing to investigate novel forms of popular rule. By explicitly placing these terms at the center of its investigation, this special issue seeks to offer an early perspective on some principal directions of democratic theory beyond the post-Cold War imaginary.

The issue brings together contemporary approaches that explore political ideals and institutional proposals, as well as empirical and historical work which seeks to understand democracy as a contextualized set of concrete challenges and responses to self-government. Hence at the core of these approaches is a revisiting of the defining elements of democracy and their relation to one another: *demos* and *kratos.* The articles belonging to the problems of popular participation are especially concerned with the "kratos-question" of how to reconceptualize people's ability to make and act on collectively binding decisions (Ober 2008). Articles following a revisionist cosmopolitan approach focus on the "demos-question" of who belongs to *the people,* and at what scale they may or should govern themselves. Finally, de-parochializing approaches consider how contemporary boundaries between *demos* and *kratos* must be reconsidered in the context of the exclusions, injustices, and ideologies that are being reconfigured in a world that has moved beyond the post-Cold War period, with a particular emphasis on perspectives from the Global South. Such a move beyond the principal narratives of the post-Cold War world therefore requires: (1) a reconceptualization of how *kratos* or the power to act collectively is transferred between government and governed, in and beyond the realm of elections; (2) revisiting the statist-cosmopolitan opposition by interrogating questions of the scale of the demos; and (3) envisioning the structural role of postcolonial conceptions of justice and political engagement in contemporary democracy.

Narratives of Post-Cold War Democracy

The post-Cold War era opened with a "democratic paradox." On the one hand, a classical formulation suggested the dialectical movement advancing humanity's search for the best political arrangement ostensibly came to a halt in an "end of history" (Fukuyama 1989, 1992). From this perspective, while liberal democracy itself would continue to evolve, no meaningful alternative paradigm for politics appeared viable. Processes and patterns of democratization famously took center stage as journals like the *Journal of Democracy* and *Democratization* provided sophisticated accounts of the non-linear, indeed vexing, problems surrounding the spread and degeneration of liberal democracy across the world. In this context,

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 2 2/26/2025 21:44:47

leading democratic theorists and commentators as varied as Robert Dahl (1989), Larry Diamond (1996), Samuel Huntington (1991), and Amartya Sen (2003) examined democracy's "third transformation," while V-Dem, Polity data series, the Democracy index and Freedom House provided increasingly sophisticated measures on varieties and qualities of democracy around the world. The "third wave" therefore not only marked a shift in world politics but also gave rise to one of the most significant waves of democracy and democratization theorizing in the modern age.

Within the extraordinary diversity and sophistication of these works, a series of divergences shaped the vast literature on democratic theory. First, new models of democratization were deeply divided on the scale on which much of the early success of democracy had been based, the nation state. Works by post-Cold War cosmopolitanis in the late 1990s announced the demise of the nation state (Ohmae 1995) or at the very least, suggested it was not the most pertinent scale at which to investigate future transformations of popular rule (Habermas 2001; Held 1995; Höffe 1999). It was argued that processes of trans-nationalization had deepened the asymmetry between rule-givers and rule-takers. In a globalized economy in which international institutions vied with powerful multinational companies, the supposed weave between the authors and the addressees of (collectively binding) rules was frayed. Thus, one could no longer plausibly view nation states as communities of fate since those who shared such a fate now resided in different countries.

But instead of having become obsolete after liberal democracy's alleged victory, democratic theorizing took on a new importance in this context. It became necessary to assess "whether the nation-state itself can remain at the center of democratic thought." (Held 1995: ix). *Cosmopolitan democratic theorists* like David Held (1995, 2004, 2009) argued in favor of extending the *demos* to the global level to re-establish the symmetries between the rule-makers and the rule-takers. For democracy to thrive in the post-Cold War age, these works argued, it would need to be more local, more global, and less statist.

Though dominant, the push away from nation and state as the primary frames for thinking about democratization met with its own share of critics. Statist democratic theorists like Dahl (1989: 320) argued: "the danger is that the third transformation will lead not to an extension of the democratic idea beyond the nation-state but to the victory in that domain of de facto guardianship." (cf. also Dahl 1999). Other democratic theorists insisted that attempts to move beyond the nation were necessarily short-sighted. Pierre Manent (1998), for example, found a discomforting tension in the fact that many insisted that we had entered a moment in which the political form that would supplant the nation was not yet

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 3 2/26/2025 21:44:47

defined, even as we continued to build supra-national institutional and legal structures.

Debates on the scale of democratic theory and practice also necessarily shed new light on older problems of popular participation. The question of how the relationship between the governed and the governing could be calibrated while traditional modes of legislative elections were challenged as anti-national and anti-statist theory came rushing to the floor (Fraser 2005; Goodin 2007). In this context, a new focus on other modes of popular engagement took center stage. Here too it was at once the national scale which was being challenged as well as the idea that the state was first and foremost a monopoly of coercive force. In their stead, there emerged a vast investment in civil society as the most effective means of channeling popular power (Arato and Cohen 1992; Gordon and Stack 2007; Hoffman 2004; Lupel 2005; Michaels 2013; Sangeetha Tobin, Vissa, and Pillai 2012; Wapner 1995). Similarly, regional and international modes of governance conjoined with a new power beyond the state (Czempiel and Rosenau 1992; Rose and Miller 1992; Slaughter 2004) to demonstrate that the demise of the state hardly marked a demise in modes of coercive power in general, which in turn needed to be checked in new ways (Buchanan and Keohane 2006; Grant and Keohance 2005; Keohane et al. 2009).

Within these debates over global civil society and multilevel cosmopolitanism, the spread of democracy generated a new round of questions on the place of Europe and North America as a normative and historical center of democratic theory. As the most pertinent questions of democratization took place in postcolonial societies across the Global South, there was also a move to *de-parochialize* democracy studies that sought to displace the Eurocentric, historicist mode of thinking that supported these dominant (and dominating) approaches. Challenging the historicist ideal that political historical developments took place in Europe first and only then, afterwards, in the rest of the world (Blaut 1993, Chakrabarty 2000), postcolonial scholarship as well as comparative political thought proposed various alternatives to what they regarded as Eurocentric historicism (De Sousa Santos 2014; Dussel 2011; Mbembe 2001). They emphasized the need for first creating mutual understanding across differing (cultural) traditions of political thought (Dallmayr 2004), for recognizing the non-Western roots of democracy (Bernal 1991; Sen 2003), and for creating the conceptual and theoretical space necessary to accommodate the variegated social political trajectories of *multiple* political modernities (Chakrabarty 2000; Eisenstadt 2000). To illustrate, postcolonial scholars like Ranajit Guha (1983), for example, provided alternative conceptualizations of the formation of the *demos,* by emphasizing the role of the

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 4 2/26/2025 21:44:47

peasants in overthrowing colonial rule in India and thus leading the way to national popular sovereignty.[1] Yet this de-parochializing approach also opened the possibility of fundamental contestations of not only liberal but also democratic political ideals. Hence it questioned the core assumption of the statist and cosmopolitan approaches that (liberal) democracy represents *the* most important, or even necessary, mode of legitimizing the exercise of political authority in modernity (cf. Tongdong 2020).

These three concerns—re-scaling, re-empowering, and de-parochializing—emerged as powerful, overlapping, and clashing *topoi* of democratic theory. However, "recent shifts in the structures, technologies, and modes of the globalization inherited from the post-Cold War world" (Sawyer 2022: 1) have only exacerbated the tensions between these approaches, amplifying them to seemingly irreconcilable positions. It is the underlying argument of this special issue that while these debates remain pertinent, the terms according to which they have been posed and the means for responding to them has shifted. It would seem that the there is little purchase left in the claim that twenty-first century globalization would overcome the nation as the dominant mode of economic and political organization and that a focus on civil society as a dominant force in organizing popular action has fallen upon difficult times. Similarly, the shift from postcolonialism to de-colonization suggests that a non-European approach to democratic theory is no longer a challenge but a central and structural feature of the way we must analyze democracy in the future.

In this special issue, we attempt to provide fresh perspectives on these three questions and in so doing contribute to gaining perspective on the current state of democratic theory beyond the post-Cold War imaginary. We explore three central issues to the political and theoretical approaches that have emerged in this period: *(1) a reconsideration of modes of popular participation, and especially new approaches to the role of elections in democratization and participatory politics* via the articles of Simone Chambers, Annabelle Lever, and Peter Stone; *(2) a renewed interest in the role of nations in shaping a liberal cosmopolitan approach of global democracy* through the articles by the Barbara Buckinx, Miriam Ronzoni, and Sandra Seubert; and *(3) a de-parochialization of Western history and theory of democracy* by way of the articles proposed by Jamila Mascat and Marcos Nobre.

Re-empowering Kratos

One set of articles (Chambers; Lever; Stone) focuses on the question of how to conceive *kratos,* defined as the ability to make and act upon collectively

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 5 2/26/2025 21:44:47

binding decisions (Ober 2008), within democracy. Over the past two decades, this strand of theorizing has been concerned with the growing distance between "average citizens" and elites (Brown 2017; Crouch 2004, 2019; Gilens 2014; Habermas 2015; Mouffe 2006). According to Crouch and others, responsible for this distancing are "neoliberal" practices that entail an increased marketization if not economic colonization of politics. These practices include the increasing professionalization of politicians, the adoption of private sector techniques by state bureaucracies in the form of new public management, as well as the increasing influence of lobby groups that wrest power from citizens in favor of wealthy private actors. Distance between citizens and public actors has, in turn, instigated a sense of political apathy and lack of engaged political participation, especially among those sectors of society that used to belong to the working classes. In recent years, this real and perceived distance between the rulers and the ruled has been magnified, resulting in a populist backlash against those who rule (Mounk 2018; Müller 2016).

Based on historical comparisons with other cases of democratic regression, some scholars have interpreted these populist movements as a threat to the very existence of liberal democracy, primarily because of their illiberalism (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Forst 2019). Placing the focus on problems of illiberal democracy, however, suggests that the current problem with democracy is that it is insufficiently liberal. Such an approach sits uneasily with the thrust of neoliberal critiques of contemporary democratic decision-making (Novak and Sawyer 2021; Sawyer 2016) and leaves aside the fact that regimes that have claimed the mantle of illiberal democracy, such as Hungary, are at root, deeply anti-democratic.

As a result, other scholars have interpreted the contemporary crisis of democracy less through its illiberalism and more through the properly democratic lens of redefining kratos (cf. Merkel 2014), especially in the United States (Brown 2017), with several theorists engaged in intensified debates on how to improve democratic rule and decision-making (Abizadeh 2021; Destri 2023). One especially prominent proposal has been that of *Open Democracy* by Hélène Landemore (2020). Landemore raises important questions on contemporary conceptions of *kratos,* seeking to overcome the distance between rulers and ruled through the proposal that lotteries should be used to select political representatives. In defense of this view, Landemore states that this would ensure greater political equality since all citizens would have an equal chance of being randomly selected to fulfill a political office. In addition, Landemore argues that the realization of her proposal would increase diversity, because the random selection would also pick citizens from sectors of society that are less

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 6 2/26/2025 21:44:47

culturally, economically, and politically privileged and which hence tend to be excluded from the exercise of (representative) public offices.

Two articles to this special issue, "Political Equality: Voting, Sortition, and Democracy" by Lever and "Popular Rule without Popular Sovereignty?" by Stone address randomized selection. Both recognize the importance of finding better ways of democratic *rule,* yet both are also skeptical that lottocratic selection procedures of the kind suggested by Abizadeh or Landemore are sufficiently democratic. On Lever's view, which focuses on Abizadeh, this is because weighted random selection cannot be squared with the egalitarian critique of elections, while the formal equality created by unweighted randomization may leave vulnerable minorities at greater risk of majority oppression than election. A commitment to self-government, then, requires attention to citizens' claims as candidates for electoral office, rather than the replacement of elections by randomization in whole or in part. Similarly, Stone also turns to a particular understanding of the *demos* to defend his critique of Landemore's proposal of a new *kratos.* Stone maintains that a *demos as a whole* must necessarily express a collective will. This collective, expressive dimension of the *demos,* Stone maintains, is better captured by the practice of voting rather than lotteries that appeal to the idea of equality among individuals.

The article "Populism, Popular Sovereignty, and Popular Rule" by Simone Chambers, problematizes the rise of populism, recognizing populist political parties and movements as a threat to national democracy. Focusing on the question of how to conceive of government by the people, she criticizes the equation of democratic with majority rule. According to Chambers, this understanding of *kratos* is too narrow. She therefore makes the case for a deliberative understanding of *kratos,* according to which the rule of the people should unfold through communicatively fluid forms of opinion- and will-formation. While voting and majority rule should continue play an important role, they should be complemented by various types of political deliberation. Thereby the people are neither simply the majority of a polity nor subject to the moralized ascription of a peoplehood to one of its majority groups. Rather, governance is subject to the always fallible result of an open-ended, complex process in which both deliberation and voting are central.

Re-scaling Demos

In itself, the demos is not wedded to any particular scale. Historically and contextually, *demoi* have operated on multiple scales of collective action. Cosmopolitan democratic theorizing of thinkers like David Held (1994,

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2024.110201 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 7 2/26/2025 21:44:47

2004, 2009), Jürgen Habermas (2006), Ottfried Höffe (1999), Daniele Archibugi (2008), and Celine Spector (2021) among others have proposed different types of inter-, trans-, and supranational conceptions of global democracy.[2] The guiding idea of these articles has been that there is a universally valid principle of personal autonomy, according to which individuals should only be subjected or affected by those laws or policies that they could not reasonably reject, and that due to economic, cultural, and political globalization this principle demands the institutionalization of some form of global democracy. Nonetheless, this approach has consistently run into an infeasibility problem, that of the democratic deficit, that is, the limitations of global institutions to be sufficiently inclusive and responsive to popular pressures and too weak to acquire the output legitimacy necessary for robust democratic institutions (Scharpf 2003). As a result, there has been a shift toward more non-ideal or gradualist methodologies. Democratic theorists such as John Dryzek (2008), Rainer Forst (2012), Jonathan Kuyper (2014) as well as Mark Warren and Melissa Williams (2014) have considered ways in which transnational politics and international regimes could be rendered *more democratic,* especially through transnational deliberation, while still falling short of realizing any of the ideal institutional arrangements of global democracy. Similarly, Adrian Little and Kate MacDonald (2013) have identified key democratic *values* like accountability and considered to what extent these values could be realized to a greater extent, for example in the domain of global business regulation.

The articles to the special issue offer their own consideration on re-scaling the *demos,* emphasizing democracy's need for engaged and vigilant citizenship at multiple territorial levels. Like other recent (neo-) republican conceptions of inter- or transnational democracy, they reject cosmopolitan proposals for "federalist" global democracy (cf. Philip Pettit 2010, 2014, 2016; James Bohman 2007). In such federalist proposals individuals would be politically represented as equals at the global level and collectively appoint a federal government that would enjoy sovereignty vis-à-vis individual states (cf. Cabrera 2004). From the republican point of view, such an individualist, federalist democratic conception would lack sufficient civic control and monitoring by vigilant citizens (cf. Buckinx and Ronzoni). Yet rather than abandoning the power of a *demos,* they seek to reframe its relationship to the nation. Buckinx, Ronzoni, and Seubert make compelling multi-scalar argument for a citizen-centered, inter-, trans-, and supranational conception of democracy. These proposals argue that extending the *demos* beyond the nation-state is possible, while insisting that the right kind of *kratos* of such an *extended demos* necessarily requires active, empowered citizenship.

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 8 2/26/2025 21:44:47

Buckinx' understanding of global democracy in her article "Prospects for Globally Vigilant Citizenship" is internationalist in nature. While she problematizes the domination that global public institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank can exercise in global politics, she holds that states rather than individuals are best positioned to contest and control the potential exercise of arbitrary interference of such global public institutions. Engaged vigilance of global citizens may be realizable in the future, especially if adequate educational policies of global citizenship education are put in place (cf. Culp 2019). In the short- and medium-term, however, Buckinx argues, states are the only actors in global politics whose "voice" can turn into influence regarding the decision-making of global public institutions. Yet rather than drawing the conclusion that this would render obsolete citizens' engagement and undermine the critical discussion of global politics, Buckinx argues that citizens should control and monitor the ways in which their states participate in and cooperate with global public institutions. In this way, globally vigilant citizens can put pressure on their states to promote and defend cosmopolitan democratic values. The control of global public institutions by "cosmopolitan states" that are held accountable by globally vigilant citizens would thus count as a democratic improvement in a non-ideal world.

In her article "How Should Republicans Conceive of Solidarity Beyond Borders? A Demoicratic Model" Ronzoni also accepts the centrality of states in global politics and does not envisage the participation or representation of individuals at the international or global level. Instead, she holds that global democracy must be some form of *international demoicracy,* in which states democratically decide upon the most important principles and rules of the global order (cf. Culp 2014). Creating and defending principles and rules of global order is necessary, on Ronzoni's perspective, because otherwise public international institutions and transnational private actors can exercise uncontrolled power and thus dominate both states and individuals. A rule-based international order is thus in the interests of all states and their citizens because it is the presupposition of functioning national democracies that they are not subject to inter- and transnational forms of domination (cf. also Habermas 2001).

Seubert's article "Constituting European Citizenship: Struggles for Political Empowerment in the EU" shifts scales from the global to the regional *demos* within the European Union. Building on the work of Habermas (2012) and others, she argues that this regional demos is jointly constituted by both *individuals and states* as a mixed constituent power. Seubert's article pursues a normative reconstruction of the commitment to such a doubly constituted European and supranational *demos,* arguing

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 9 2/26/2025 21:44:47

that it represents an actually existing *demos,* which has already been extended beyond the nation-state. Like the perspectives provided by Buckinx and Ronzoni, Seubert also focuses on citizen participation and tries to identify how EU citizens could engage more effectively in European politics and thereby improve the democratic quality of the European Union. Therefore, she unfolds the already quite comprehensive legal status of EU citizenship while also analyzing European political practices of active EU citizenship. These contemporary legal and political realities clearly transcend a state-centric perspective of the EU and highlight the supranational nature of the European *demos* in which both states and individuals play a structural part.

De-parochializing Democracy

The third set of articles to the special issue falls within the fields of de-parochializing and comparative democratic and political theory (cf. Weiss 2020, Williams 2020). These fields have as their goal to de-center the Euro- or Western-centrism that is still prevalent in contemporary Western political and democratic theorizing. The goal is thus to replace or supplement the standard, Western canon with a turn to cross-cultural, comparative, or simply "non-Western" political theorizing. Oftentimes adopting a Gadamerian dialogic epistemology, such theorizing aims at identifying what is politically right through dialogue (cf. Gadamer 1989/1960). Hence, it opposes Huntington's (1996) claim that different cultures would necessarily clash and views cultural opposition as a point of departure for generating novel insights.

Such de-parochial or comparative theorizing helps to imagine and cultivate democratic cross-cultural and inter-civilizational arrangements (cf. Dallmayr 2004; Jung 1989; Parel 1992; Warren and Williams 2014). In the words of Anthony Parel (1992: 12), the goal is to "deepen one's understanding of one's own tradition and engender understanding and respect for the traditions of others." This strand of theorizing at once seeks to transcend the nation-state as a central reference point due to the transnational and global nature of key contemporary political challenges at the same time that it recognizes the key role nation-states have played in decolonization movements and searches for citizen autonomy. Thus, comparative, or de-parochial, theorizing adopts an *engaged* perspective (cf. March 2009), pursuant of the practical goal of finding political ideas that are right for us within a world characterized by moral disagreement and cultural conflict. Scholars of Confucian political thought like Bai Tongdong (2020) have, for example, presented a meritocratic understanding of political authority that questions democracy's commitment to political equality.

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 10 2/26/2025 21:44:47

Along these lines Nobre suggests that we need to let go of some of the most basic ideas of conventional (Western) democratic theories. Otherwise, he argues, we are unable to properly grasp the transformations of political life that several democratic societies are presently undergoing. This is because if we continue to assess contemporary political developments against possibly outdated ideas of what constitutes democratic decision-making, then we will not only lack political imagination for truly democratic innovations but also think in terms of a false alternative. This false alternative is that we will either move back to a (bygone) democratic system, or we will necessarily slide into an authoritarian political regime, as if there would be no space for a democratic form of politics different from how the standard (Western) theories have been conceptualizing (representative) democracy over the past decades. Nobre therefore calls for "questioning the founding assumptions of the dominant literature on the crisis of democracy" because they "should be accompanied by a change of the terms in which democracy itself is understood so that its social and institutional potentialities can emerge." His article thus shows clearly the relevance of leaving the beaten, Western track in conceiving democratic theory and practice.

A decolonial perspective that challenges fundamental assumptions of Western democratic and political theory is also central to Mascat's article. By drawing attention to the enduring importance of reparations for the injustices perpetrated by Western states and governments, Mascat questions that justice can be achieved, whether domestically or globally, without compensating, rectifying, or reconciling past injustices. This is because, Mascat argues, the central dimensions of contemporary injustices—including economic, epistemic, and racial injustices—can only be properly grasped through the lens of a decolonial approach that moves the past colonial injustice of the Western powers to center stage. To lend further support to her argumentation, Mascat highlights contemporary grassroot activist movements that aim at decolonizing universities, museums, and public spaces.

Mascat's de-colonial article is of pivotal relevance for properly assessing the statist and cosmopolitan approaches to re-thinking both *demos* and *kratos.* Regarding, first, the statist approach to reinforcing national rule, Mascat puts into question that it is enough to focus on which system of *kratos* is the most democratic. This is because from the point of view of Mascat's de-colonial perspective, *any* of the contemporary Western systems of democratic rule *fails to* ground the legitimacy of the national Western political authority—whether through voting, lot, or deliberation—if the historical record of injustice vis-à-vis the Global South remains insufficiently addressed. Second, the cosmopolitan approach of extending

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 11 2/26/2025 21:44:47

the *demos* also appears as excessively forward-looking and uncritical from Mascat's de-colonial perspective. This is because it is not at all clear that democracies' desirable features from which the Western countries have benefitted in the modern period – including at least some degree of government accountability and autonomy – could have been achieved in the absence of the injustices that the Western countries have perpetrated. And what is more, the cosmopolitan theorists would also have to argue as to why the political project of extending the *demos* (whether internationally or globally) is of greater importance than first repairing past injustices within the already given, even though fundamentally unjust, political system.

These challenges, and those presented in the other articles of this issue, are meant to be a point of departure. Just as the renewed usage of the terms demos and kratos have been symptomatic of an ambition for renewal, our attempt to gesture toward new directions in post post-Cold War democratic theory seeks to both invest in the promise of democracy while maintaining a critical approach to its theoretical and historical possibilities.

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Julian Culp is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Fellow of the Center for Critical Democracy Studies at the American University of Paris, France. His most recent publications include "Three Rawlsian Rationales for a Cultural Turn in Digital Citizenship Education" (*The Review of Politics,* forthcoming) and *The Cambridge Handbook of Democratic Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). He is also the author of *Democratic Education in a Globalized World* (Routledge, 2019), and *Global Justice and Development* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). E-mail: jculp@aup.edu; ORCID: 0000-0001-9316-9160.

Stephen Sawyer is the Ballantine-Leavitt Professor of History and Director of the Center for Critical Democracy Studies at American University of Paris. He is the author of *Adolphe Thiers. La contingence et le pouvoir* (Armand Colin 2018), *Demos Assembled: Democracy and the International Origins of the Modern State, 1840–1880*

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Democratic Theory 11-2 Winter 2024.indb 12 2/26/2025 21:44:47

(University of Chicago 2018) and *Demos Rising: Democracy and the Popular Construction of Public Authority in France, 1800-1850* (University of Chicago, 2025) E-mail: ssawyer@aup.edu; ORCID: 0000-0002-5372-2678

NOTES

1. Like the statist and the cosmopolitan approach to democratic theory, the de-parochializing approach also has several important forerunners. For example, Mahatma Gandhi (1909) denies that Western civilization—which he criticizes as hedonistic, materialistic, and, above all, a-religious—can enable national self-rule (*hind swaraj*), given that such self-rule presupposes virtuous citizens and virtue requires religious practice.
2. Cf. Archibugi (2008, 102–105) for a useful overview of different conceptions of global democracy. See also the important discussions of David Miller (2009), Allen Buchanan and Robert Keohane (2006), Matthias Koenig-Archibugi and Christian List (2010), and Robert Goodin (2010) on the possibility of a global demos.

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