**Fake Democracy[[1]](#footnote--1): the limits of public sphere theory**

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**Abstract**

Liberal democracy has been eviscerated, hollowed out from within and emptied of liberalisms many promises that have failed to materialize. Meanwhile inequality has increased exponentially, ecological crisis beckons and the often unaccountable power of elites (in politics, media, finance, corporations etc) increases dramatically.  As citizens feel ever more cut adrift from the decisions that make their lives livable so global capital continues to prosper and shape politics. At the same time, the digital age gives us information abundance and unprecedented connectivity. This article will address the critical question: is public sphere theory adequate to the political, democratic and economic crises we now face?

Can a concept so undone really offer a critical perspective suggestive of democratic futures or is it rather holding us back, capturing us in the comfort zones of liberalism offering no more than fake democracy and in the process threatening to hinder critical theory’s ability to better imagine emancipatory futures?

**Keywords:** liberal democracy, public sphere, inequality, representation, austerity, trust

**Introduction: Captured by the public sphere**

Any discussion of digital media and communication and their roles in enhancing democracy and political participation frequently falls back on Habermas’ concept of the public sphere (1989). This is understandable as it is one of the few prominent theoretical frameworks that links the media and its practices directly to the exercise of democracy. This conceptual framing has increased in recent years (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013) with the internet in particular lending itself to discussions around whether or not the space now available online for mass use constitutes a fully functioning public sphere - a space where all debates can be aired and issues discussed in a deliberative and rational manner. A focus on the media side of the equation is problematic for many reasons, not least because it lends itself to a techno-deterministic interpretation – better media equals better democracy – and in doing so, it also takes our critical gaze away from the institutional arrangement of liberal democracy itself. Many approaches to the public sphere in the field of media and communications assume that if we have a fully functioning public sphere deliverable via the media then liberal democracy would be well served. But what if the political framework on which public sphere theory sits is rotten and on the verge of collapse, should we still build our hopes upon it and what do we miss noticing if we do?

**Liberal democracy undone**

Public sphere theory is premised on the concept of liberal democracy: a system of governance that delegates power to elected representatives who will duly do the bidding of those who voted for them. It presupposes a crucial stage in the democratic process: that voters will be fully informed via the means of publicity available to them and through processes of deliberation will reach a rational understanding of all relevant issues. These processes of deliberation will then form a consensus view that is responded to by policy makers and, hey presto, liberal democracy is seen to be done.

Of course, actually existing democracy often falls far short of this ideal with societies characterized more by political disaffection (Streeck, 2014) than a citizenry satisfied that they understand all of the issues they are voting on and when they do vote their views are taken heed of by their elected representatives. As Williams argued in ‘Democracy and Parliament’, all too frequently we find ourselves confronted with, ‘the coexistence of political representation and participation with an economic system which admits no such rights, procedures or claims’ (1982: 19).

Crouch has famously termed our current democratic decay as a continuing process of dissolution towards ‘post-democracy’, a state where ‘the forms of democracy remain fully in place’, yet ‘politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times’ (2004: 6). If we accept this analysis, it raises the question whether interpretations of public sphere theory are captured by a liberal democratic frame to the extent that they cannot imagine a world beyond the forms and structures of a liberal democratic system? And if so, can public sphere theory any longer claim its status as critical theory where the purpose of critical theory is understood as seeking human emancipation (Fenton, 2016)?

What both Crouch and Williams remind us is that how we experience liberal democracy is bound up with political economic configurations and institutional/organizational formations and structures that have developed in articulation with media technologies. Specific configurations are likely to lead to different types of knowledge production. Furthermore, we cannot understand one without the others. In the economic realm, austerity, unemployment, high personal debt, extreme poverty and inequality feature heavily across many liberal democracies. In 2014 Credit Suisse produced a report on Global Wealth they said that in 2013 the richest 70 million people had 41 per cent of the wealth of the planet, in 2014 the richest 70 million held 48 per cent. That’s a 7% increase in a single year – if that were to continue the richest 1% of the planet would have everything within 5 years and the poor would have nothing. We are faced with astounding and increasing inequality – we are almost becoming used to hearing about it. All around us we have analyses of how inequality damages our societies, our economies and our democratic systems (Picketty, 2013; Dorling, 2014; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009).

The response in the UK to the 2008 global banking crisis has been austerity politics designed to reduce national debt. In England between June 2010 and March 2016 welfare reforms enacted reductions of £26 billion in UK social security and tax credits spending, with ‘deficit reduction’ being the primary goal of government (Tinson et al., 2016). Young adults (16-24) were particularly hard hit with ‘rapidly falling real wages, incomes and wealth’ (Hills et al, 2015:3). Poverty is also strongly linked with disability and ethnicity, with people from black and minority ethnic communities experiencing multiple forms of socio-economic disadvantage.

Austerity politics has meant that local authorities in England are dealing with a scheduled 40% cut in core funding from central government. And so councils and other public agencies have sought further to outsource and share services as a means of reducing costs and improving performance. An emphasis on out-sourcing has detached these services from democracy, depoliticizing decisions about public welfare and the public good. This is not a question of whether or not we have all of the debates at our disposal through a plural media operating in the public interest. Rather, it is a question of services being removed from the public realm altogether. Citizens are recast as consumers as collective decisions are transformed into questions of individual need and choice (Lister, 2001). If, as media scholars, we insist on seeing liberal democracy primarily through a communicative lens, we miss noticing how crucial democratic processes have been eviscerated in the face of austerity and neoliberal practices.

The politicians tell us that increasing inequality is a function of a new global economy that rewards skilled workers and the necessary consequence of an innovating and dynamic economy. Hacker and Pierson (2010) systematically demolish this rationale showing that the skewing of American incomes was due primarily to major policy changes relating to taxation that supports the mega-rich, trade policies and business regulations that support the market, and the weakening of the trade unions. Miller (2014) takes this a stage further noting that elite and corporate power often occur behind our backs. His argument stresses that power is built in places we don’t know about rather than we actively or even unconsciously consent to. So theories that see publics as holding a fundamental legitimating role in liberal democracies entirely miss the point that in fact our consent is now only needed in particular circumstances.

In the UK, the impact of these crises is particularly marked for working class and minority communities as well as for young people - whose experiences are also inflected by the ‘war on terror’, student fees, housing inflation, urban riots, and youth unemployment. An important question for liberal democratic theory is whether social stability and consensus politics can prosper where poverty and inequality are apparent across so many intersecting fault-lines: young and old, black and white, religious and secular. Prominent reports in the UK have observed, ‘[t]he need for change; the need to seek the voice of marginalized and disadvantaged people in decision-making processes is of undeniable and acute local, national and global relevance’ (RSA, 2017).

In the UK 2017 General Election the turnout was 68.7%, the highest in 25 years. Moreover, an estimated 57-72% of 18-24 year olds voted compared to only 43% in 2015[[2]](#footnote-0). The increase in young people voting was largely ascribed to social media and claimed as a sign of a fully functioning public sphere underpinning democracy in action. And it is true that many young people now get their news and information via social media platforms. But what this response failed frequently to mention is that young people have also experienced an unprecedented attack on their socioeconomic conditions; state support has been withdrawn and left many young people in poverty; employment is precarious, homeownership is increasingly an unrealizable dream for many and wages are low (Corlett, 2017). It is highly likely that these socioeconomic conditions played a large part in encouraging young people to vote alongside a Labour party manifesto that spoke explicitly to these concerns and indeed social media campaigns encouraging people to register and to vote. But it is far too simplistic to single out the latter as the sole or even main cause.

A liberal democracy depends on citizen participation in systems of representation. Such aspirations and norms have been challenged (e.g. Mair, 2013) as political elites remodel themselves as a professional class, as non-democratic agencies and practices proliferate and as inequality increases. Putting our faith in the internet as our democratic saviour avoids addressing the many ways in which liberal democracy has been hollowed out but it also ignores the many ways in which digital practices replicate inequalities. In the UK almost all of the wealthiest people use the internet, but this falls to 58% among the lowest income group (those earning less than £12,500) (Dutton et al, 2013). The UK prides itself on being one of the most digitally advanced governments in the world. Digitalization is said to “maximize customer benefits while increasing cost savings” (Public Policy Exchange, 2017). In an age of austerity politics and policies this ‘customer’ mentality exposes a major intent behind the online drive as an explicit push for efficiency gains over genuine public engagement and in the process large sections of society are cut adrift.

The picture is similar in the US, with 93% of those in the income bracket of $100,000 plus using the internet compared to only 48% of those earning less than $25,000 (File and Ryan, 2014). Just as patterns of inequality are replicated in access to health care and educational attainment (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), so they map onto access to technology (Pew Research Center, 2015). The digital divide is still a reality: internet users are in general younger, more highly educated and richer than non-users, are more likely to be men than women, and are more likely to live in cities (Blank, Graham and Calvino, 2017). Blank and Groselj (2014) point out that usage of the internet is similar for all of us except when it comes to news and information when there are clear correlations to educational attainment and social class. Maybe it should come as no surprise then that in the UK 2017 general election the Labour Party saw the largest increase in vote share since 1945 with an increased turnout of 18-24 year olds many of whom access their news and information via social media; that most people with a degree voted Labour, and these votes were also concentrated in urban areas. But we should not be duped into thinking that this then means democracy is well served.

Tilly (2007) developed an international comparative account of the macro-conditions associated, over the past centuries, with democratization. Defining democracy within a liberal frame as process (2007: 13): ‘the extent to which the state behaves in conformity to the expressed demands of its citizens’ – to be judged by the ‘breadth’ and ‘equality’ of the democratic process, its ‘protection’ from arbitrary state interference, and its basis in ‘mutually binding consultation’, he isolated three macro-conditions:

1. The integration of trust networks into public politics;
2. The insulation of public politics from categorical inequality, and
3. The reduction of major non-state power centres’ autonomy from public politics (2007: 23).

The macro-conditions Tilly identifies are a baseline guide for whether or not liberal democracy has any chance of functioning adequately. In terms of trust in public politics the picturehas never been bleaker. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2017), between October 2016 and January 2017 trust in UK government fell from 36% to 26%; in business from 45% to 33% and in the media from 32% to 24%. Tilly points not to trust per se but to the extent to which trust networks (such as our friends and family) are part of the deliberative processes of a public politics. Here, the picture is bleaker still. Britain also has a significant ‘trust gap’ of 19% between ‘informed publics’ (‘in the upper income quartile, university educated and with a declared interest in politics and the media’) and those with an income of less than £15,000. Moreover both groups have less trust in government this year than they did last year. Amongst the least affluent it has hit a new low of just 20%, but it has also fallen significantly amongst the wealthiest, from 54% in 2016 to 38% in 2017. Disenchantment with the political system is not new. The Hansard Society’s 2016 Audit, undertaken before the Brexit referendum, found formal political participation had increased overall - with voter turnout in the 2015 general election at 65%, the highest since 2001, and more people claiming to be strong supporters of a political party (41%) than at any time since 2003 – but inequality had also increased: ‘there is now a 37 percentage point difference between the certainty to vote levels of those in social classes AB and DE, an increase of six points in 12 months’ (Hansard Society, 2016, p.6).

At the same time, overall confidence in the system, and especially in people’s ability to influence decisions, is low:

‘Only a third of the public think the system by which Britain is governed works well (33%) with those living furthest from Westminster most likely to be dissatisfied. Just 35% believe that when people like themselves get involved in politics they can change the way the country is run. Only 13% feel they have some influence over decision-making nationally although 41% would like to be involved in decision-making. More people (46%) would like to be involved in local decisions but just 25% currently feel they have some influence at the local level.’

(Hansard Society, 2016, p.6)

Liberal democracy is beholden to the mechanism of representation but few now feel represented by their elected government or able to do anything about it. Yet still we allow ourselves to be blinkered by the shroud of ‘democracy’. This is the backdrop against which the EU referendum turnout of over 72% took place, bringing to the surface deep divisions of class as well as generation that ‘cannot be divided from the economic dislocation that has taken place since the 1980s’ (Dorling et al 2016). Studies by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Goodwin and Heath, 2016) and the Resolution Foundation (Corlett, 2017) both found that low skilled and working class voters in the most deprived regions were more likely to vote Brexit. The outcome of the referendum for the UK to leave the European Union came as a shock to many people – including those who voted for it, but it spoke to great swathes of society who felt abandoned by globalization and forgotten by a ruling elite all too willing to see their communities decimated and their social infrastructures weakened. One response to the large turnout in the EU Referendum has been to say that democracy has been enacted. However, this assumes that a binary decision of ‘in’ or ‘out’ offers a response that will satisfy the injuries of decades of neoliberalism. As Unwin argued, ‘people in the overlooked and too often ignored parts of the country … voted leave because they weren’t satisfied with what they have. And they didn’t feel able to change things’ (2016:4). In the aftermath of the referendum little attempt has been made to understand or address underlying structural inequalities across the UK. Instead globalization has continued ‘to be treated as an immutable economic fact rather than something that can be shaped politically’ (Lister, 2001:431). Liberal democracy is predicated upon the individual subject as a fully formed citizen and the sovereign state. On close inspection both are currently found wanting. A fully formed citizenry cannot emerge if categorical inequality is the starting point.

Tilly (2006) states that liberal democracy requires the reduction of major non-state power centres’ autonomy from public politics. In other words, private corporations should be accountable to the public via political mechanisms. Global media corporations are some of the largest existing non-state power centres around and are massively implicated in fake democracy as both subject and object of a socio-economic restructuring that favours the upward transfer and concentration of property and wealth (Fenton and Calabrese, 2015). In the UK the Leveson enquiry exposed the sordid entanglement of political and media elites who dine at the same tables, are educated at the same institutions and share the same corporate values and ideological agendas (MRC, 2017). A media that refuses public accountability in the name of freedom while subjugating all areas of mediated activity to market logic and competition through ever-more commercialization, privatization and restructuring (Fenton and Freedman, 2017). Put this alongside the astonishing market power of Google and Facebook who may claim to be exercising corporate responsibility in the face of fake news, but this distracts from the far larger problem that their very ‘structure and economics […] incentivize the spread of low-quality content over high-quality material. Journalism has a civic value – journalism that investigates power, or reaches undeserved and local communities – is discriminated against by a system that favors scale and shareability’ (Bell and Owen, 2017:10). The corporate algorithm belies transparency and accountability.

**Conclusion: In search of what democracy could become**

When sections of the public no longer think that change is possible then liberal democracy has failed. Where governments no longer carry out manifesto pledges then liberal democracy has failed. When elite interests prevail and the political system no longer works for the mass of ordinary people then liberal democracy has failed. When people feel that they are dispensable, that their lives no longer matter and they do not need to be listened to, then liberal democracy has failed (Fenton, 2016). What do we get instead? We have seen the wholesale rejection of established parties throughout the world – in France with the collapse of the traditional political parties in the 2017 Presidential elections, in the US with the election of Trump, in the UK with the increased popularity of Jeremy Corbyn and an anti-austerity politics– each a different form of disavowal of the institutionalized normative practices of their supposedly representative governmental systems. In the face of such democratic degeneration should we insist on holding fast to public sphere theory that is so dependent on the mechanisms of liberal democracy that have so evidently failed? And if we do, are we also part of the great pretence? How much longer can we fake democracy in the name of critical theory? We need new theoretical insights capable of addressing the complexities of power in the digital age. It is time to reinvent our democratic futures and search out what democracy could become.

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1. The term ‘Fake Democracy’ is taken from an article by Fenton and Freedman, ‘Fake Democracy, Bad News’ (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Precise data on the ages of voters was not available at the time of writing. The range of 57-72% offered here is based on a variety of estimates from different polling agencies. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)