

# Postdemocracy and a Politics of Prefiguration

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## **Abstract**

This chapter explores how political anthropology can contribute to understanding, and challenging, the multiple forms of postdemocracy that have arisen in recent decades. Ethnographic research demonstrates how postdemocratic governance can be immensely harmful, as it is frequently underpinned by dynamics quite different to the beneficent principles it purports to embody. This discovery in itself can empower anthropologists to make important critical interventions. But political anthropology also clarifies how postdemocratic arrangements actually arise. It moves us beyond simplistic portraits of postdemocracy as grounded in ‘economic power’ or ‘a turn to expertise’, instead illuminating the complex processes by which different private (and public) interests gain leverage in both policy-making processes and citizens’ political aspirations. These insights do not just make for better causal explanations of political transformations. They are also a vital resource for activism, enabling us to explore alternatives to postdemocracy that are responsive to the concerns of the people we work with, rather than—or perhaps as well as—our own. The chapter illustrates these arguments with examples drawn from Brazil, the United States, and the author’s own research in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** post-political, postdemocracy, democratic rollback, corporate democracy, prefigurative politics, production of knowledge

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Imagine walking down the road in Boston, as anthropologist Jeffrey Juris (2012) once did, flanked on every side by protestors chanting ‘We are the 99%!’ A woman in a headscarf turns and looks you in the eye. ‘*You* are the 99%,’ she tells you. Disconcerted but intrigued, you wander to their headquarters, the #Occupy camp in Dewey Square—a bustling tent city thrumming with the energy of workshops and performances. Each evening, the camp plaza fills with hundreds of people for a ‘General Assembly’ where a complex process of consensus decision-making unfolds, facilitated via hand gestures and speakers’ stacks to ensure the process is as inclusive as possible. This assembly, occupiers tell you, embodies an alternative to the current political order where decisions are disproportionately influenced by the 1%. By taking part you are engaging in prefigurative politics: honing within your social movement alternative dispositions towards, and even alternative forms of, sociality and political practice, thereby embodying the change that you want to see in the world. You are, following Graeber (2013), embodying ‘democracy’.

Next, imagine living in the UK and being cajoled by your neighbour to join the local branch of Momentum: a grassroots movement seeking to democratically invigorate the country’s Labour Party in the wake of leftwinger Jeremy Corbyn’s 2015 election as Leader of the Opposition, with a view to creating ‘a more democratic, equal and decent society’.<sup>i</sup> Like #Occupy, Momentum is prefigurative. It seeks to ‘demonstrate on a micro level how collective action and Labour values can transform our society for the better’.<sup>ii</sup> And like #Occupy, it’s exciting. Yet something about each of these two movements confuses you.

*Why would your party or country need democratic revitalization? Don’t you already live in a democracy?*

Or perhaps you are not so naïve as to believe that you live in a true democracy any more. Perhaps you just find yourself wondering: *what went wrong?*

## **The Postdemocratic Moment**

In recent years, terms such as ‘postdemocracy’ and ‘the post-political’ have become increasingly widespread in the works of political theorists, geographers and sociologists. Terms of diagnosis, they are most classically associated with the writings

of Jacques Rancière (1995, 1998, 2006), Colin Crouch (2004) and Chantal Mouffe (2005), who use them to describe a transformation they have observed in the statecraft and political culture of ‘advanced democracies’ in Western Europe, North America, and the Asia-Pacific. Although such societies may appear to be democratic, and even present themselves as role models for emulation by ‘transitional democracies’ elsewhere, postdemocracy theorists argue that they are in fact becoming increasingly illiberal. While elections in postdemocratic societies may be regular, free and fair, they offer remarkably little capacity for citizens to steer the course of the political process. Parties vying for votes, it is suggested, have converged upon the centre-ground—certainly when compared to the ideological battles of Left vs. Right that characterised European politics in the mid-late twentieth century (Ramsay 2012: 223). With most major parties having embraced a ‘neoliberal consensus’, electorates essentially get to choose between various models of tax and spend. While the differences between those models are not insignificant, citizens have very few opportunities to voice *opposition* to a model of ‘regulatory statecraft’ in which economic growth is valorised as the primary indicator of political success and policy-making powers are increasingly delegated to technical bodies independent from the electoral process (Crouch forthcoming; Palumbo 2010). Moreover, numerous recent events demonstrate that even policies for which governments have been given a clear democratic mandate may be summarily discarded by politicians once in office.<sup>iii</sup> Such developments reflect a broader crisis of political *representation* at the heart of postdemocratic societies, in which popular opinion and the concerns of everyday life have far less bearing on government policy than the views of ‘experts’ and the demands of corporate lobbyists, contributing in turn to a public disengagement from politics. For political theorists who see widespread civic participation in political life and agonism—the vibrant clash of opposed views and interests—as lying at the heart of a well-functioning democracy, this is a matter of grave concern.

Such arguments may perhaps read less persuasively in 2017 (the time of writing) than they would have done in the 1990s and 2000s, when most of the seminal work on postdemocracy was published. In many advanced democracies, political voices which challenge the received wisdoms of neoliberal globalisation are now more dominant in mainstream politics than they have been for decades. In some cases these voices advocate forms of what Crouch (forthcoming) labels ‘egalitarian conservative

nationalism’, evident in the anti-globalisation of France’s Front National, or the ‘Make America Great Again’ protectionism of Donald Trump. In others, they advocate a radical politics of anti-austerity—seen in Greece’s SYRIZA, Spain’s Podemos, and the wellsprings of support in the UK and USA for Leftist figures such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. Yet theorists of postdemocracy note whilst alternative political visions may be emerging in the public sphere, this does not mean that they are readily achievable in practice. In the realpolitik of a postdemocratic world, many parties are forced to either ‘sacrifice sharpness of focus and campaigning zeal for the bland middle-ground strategies of postdemocratic politics in order to gain public office’ or ‘sacrifice the chance of wielding governmental power in order to maintain their uncompromising vision’ (Crouch 2016: 73; see also Dommett 2016). Even the apparent exception to this claim—Donald Trump—has, in the early months of his Presidency, encountered remarkable difficulties in delivering the policies for which he received an electoral mandate. His rise to power, meanwhile, has been predicated on such a ‘degradation of key democratic values’ (such as rational and truthful debate), and such contempt for classic democratic checks and balances (e.g. the press), that many commentators have interpreted his electoral success as a further evisceration of democracy (Chugrov 2017: 42; Giroux 2016; Giroux and Bhattacharya forthcoming; Hobson forthcoming).

Diagnoses of postdemocracy are not, however, restricted to ‘advanced democracies’. The example of Thailand is a case in point. When Thaksin Sinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party campaigned on a policy platform that promised national health insurance and a ‘Keynesian’ approach to public spending, he shot to power with a tremendous public mandate. Rather than accepting this, however, opposition groups who were unable to defeat TRT at the polls instead mobilized to ‘get Thaksin out of office by other means’—culminating, in 2006, in a military coup (Glassman 2007: 2038). Although less subtle than the creeping evisceration of popular sovereignty in Western nations, the Thai example demonstrates a fundamentally similar kind of process:

In the United States the circle has been squared by figuring out complicated means of transforming majority votes and majority opinions into losing candidates and losing political pro-positions. In Thailand,

where certain majority opinions were in some ways being expressed through state policies, the circle was squared through the more blunt and well-worn strategy of coup d'état (Glassman 2007: 2039).

Makinda (2004: 17-19) argues that since many African governments are currently 'kept honest by, and made accountable to, external authorities [external governments, institutions, and agencies] rather than their own people,' their citizens 'theoretically possess civil and political rights, but, in reality... lack the power and influence that ordinary people exercise in a developed country'. Such a situation, in his view 'is not a democracy but a post-democracy'. My own work in Indonesia (Long 2016) uses the term slightly differently, in the context of popular turns towards authoritarian strongman leadership, which political scientists have often framed as evidence of 'democratic rollback' or inadequate 'consolidation'. In my view they are better understood as 'postdemocratic' phenomena—because the choice to abandon democratic ideals and endorse authoritarianism is made after (and often because of) the experience of democracy. Yet whatever label one prefers, this too represents a tendency in contemporary politics worldwide to replace democratic commitments to representation and opposition with what Pabst (2016: 91) has described as 'novel forms of illiberal authoritarianism'.

As this brief overview reveals, it may be more appropriate to talk of 'postdemocracies' than of 'postdemocracy'. There are considerable differences between each of the aforementioned contexts, and these warrant detailed comparative analysis. Nevertheless, they all share a distinctive unifying feature. In each case, de facto sovereignty has been, or is in the process of being, stripped from (or surrendered by) the *demos*. This is not to say that popular sovereignty was ever a fully realized principle. Democratic states have always been able to betray their principles or override public opinion when they felt it was necessary to maintaining the integrity of their nation (Remmer 1995; Runciman 2013), and indeed there is a compelling line of argument which holds that it is not possible to realize true 'democracy' within the context of a state (Graeber 2013). From this point of view, the nomenclature 'postdemocracy' seems a nonsense; we have never been democratic (Mendieta 2015). Nevertheless, discernible changes can be observed in terms of the declining influence that public opinion is having on political decision-making, and it is that phenomenon

which stands at the heart of this chapter. I approach it with four questions in mind: why is this happening; what are its consequences; what, if anything, can political anthropology contribute to the existing debates on such matters in political theory and political science; and is postdemocracy a development on which anthropologists can, should, or must take a stance?

### **A Dilemma for Political Anthropology**

Postdemocracy presents certain difficulties for political anthropologists who want to write about it—difficulties that stem from the direction that anthropology’s intellectual trajectory has taken over the past forty years. Social anthropology, at least within the British tradition, had initially been conceived as an empirical science, the task of which was to document empirically observable social relations and practices, and derive from these data testable hypotheses about the laws that governed social life in diverse societies (see e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Yet in the late twentieth-century, this vision of the discipline came under heavy fire. Postcolonial, black and feminist interventions revealed that, although ethnographers often wrote in a style that suggested they were detached, ‘objective’ observers, they were actually nothing of the sort (see e.g. Asad 1973; Gerrit Huizer and Mannheim 1979; Harding 1987; Harrison 1991). Anthropologists’ gender, race, and associations with colonial power, critics argued, had enabled them to access certain kinds of data whilst precluding them from accessing others; their accounts might not be inaccurate, but they were certainly ‘partial’ (Clifford 1986: 7). Anthropological knowledge, in other words, was not absolute but *situated* – what one could know depended on what one was able to know from the confines of a given subject position (Haraway 1988).

Such interventions did not only encourage anthropologists to become more self-conscious in their research and writing, they also led to the politics of knowledge becoming a dominant theme within anthropological research. As Foucault (1980: 80) observed, the 1960s and 1970s had been marked by an ‘increasing vulnerability to criticism of things, institutions, practices, [and] discourses’. Dominant, systematising and formal bodies of knowledge were being contested by newly insurrectionist ‘subjugated knowledges’—a term he used to refer to, firstly, the details and tensions

that had been glossed over and concealed within mainstream theories, and, secondly, ‘knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task’. It was through the ‘reappearance of this knowledge, of these local popular knowledges, these disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work’ (1980: 82). Having been subject to such criticism themselves, anthropologists came to reconceptualise their research as a tool by which further criticism could be accomplished. By conducting ethnographic studies with marginalised populations, anthropologists could tap directly into hitherto subjugated knowledges, using what they learned to challenge received wisdoms and call institutionalized forms of knowledge into question. Meanwhile, anthropological research with experts and elites could shed light into the means by which official, legitimate knowledge was constructed and maintained, shedding light on its blind-spots and revealing the partiality of its perspective.

Having styled itself as a critical discipline committed to putting diverse forms of knowledge into agonistic dialogue, however, anthropology faces a dilemma when it comes to writing about postdemocracy. On the one hand, any anthropologist who shares this mainstream disciplinary ethic cannot but be opposed to postdemocracy, an authoritarian political form that subjugates and stifles oppositional forms of knowledge in the name of consensus managerialism. On the other hand, existing scholarly conversations on postdemocracy tend to pin their flags to various pre-determined and normative models of democracy in ways that anthropologists may not be comfortable advocating. These models will, after all, contain their own problematic assumptions and blind-spots that are in need of critique, whilst the discipline’s emphasis on description and analysis at the expense of normative debate means that relatively few anthropologists have been versed in the intellectual art of adjudicating between multiple, flawed, political systems.<sup>iv</sup> It is consequently all too easy, when thinking through one’s materials, to fear that one ‘stands for nothing’, that one is becoming an apologist for postdemocracy, or, alternatively, that one is lapsing into pro-democratic imperialism. Seminar audiences may challenge the anthropologist of postdemocracy to declare ‘their politics’, or enquire as to ‘whose side’ they are really on. I speak from experience: it can be an awkward business.

In this chapter, I seek to reclaim that awkwardness as productive source of insight by developing a dual strategy of critical engagement. While stopping short of proposing

a preferred model of political organization, I show how political anthropology is uniquely placed to prove the shortcomings of postdemocratic governance. Ethnographic research demonstrates clearly that postdemocracy can be immensely harmful, and moreover reveals that it is frequently underpinned by dynamics quite different to the beneficent principles it purports to embody. This allows anthropologists to develop critical interventions that might help rein in postdemocracy's worst excesses, if not transcend it altogether. On the other hand, by engaging empathetically with postdemocratic actors, their motives and concerns, the ethnographic encounter often enables political anthropologists to develop much more nuanced understandings of why postdemocracy takes hold in particular settings than the grand narratives peddled by political theorists. These insights do not just make for better causal explanations. They are also a vital resource for activism, enabling us to explore alternatives to postdemocracy that are responsive to the concerns of the people we work with, rather than—or perhaps as well as—our own.

### **Corporate Postdemocracy**

For Colin Crouch (2004), a key factor underpinning the turn to postdemocracy has been the rise of what he calls 'the global firm', i.e. the increasing political influence of multinational corporations following the transition to post-Fordist regimes of accumulation (Harvey 1990). Corporations, he argues, have been able to strong-arm governments into developing policies that favour their own interests rather than the wishes of the *demos*. The clearest examples of this are cases where governments capitulate to perceived or actual threats of capital flight, abandoning policies that may be popular with the citizenry—from generous labour protections to the imposition of 'corporate death penalties'<sup>v</sup>—in order to maintain profitable levels of corporate investment. As Stark (1998: 76) notes, this can be a particularly acute concern for developing nations in the Global South, where the appetite for foreign direct investment also forces governments to develop economic (and other) policies that will be endorsed by major financial institutions and thereby be considered 'low-risk' and 'attractive' by investors. Such developments have led some anthropologists to propose that we are living in times where *de facto* sovereignty—the capacity to kill, discipline or punish with impunity—now resides not with the state, let alone the



*demos*, but rather with corporations and the market (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). Given that relocation is often, however, extremely costly to a corporation (Crouch 2004: 34) anthropological perspectives could allow us to better understand the rhetorical and cultural processes by which the threat of capital flight comes to overshadow government decision making, in short the mechanisms by which capital's claims to sovereignty get ratified by its audience (Rutherford 2012).

However, it is also important not to overstate this particular dimension of postdemocracy. In most cases, private interests are recognised ahead of public mandates not because of bullyboy ultimatums but as a result of extensive lobbying. Though structural factors contribute to this—not least because corporations can typically invest considerably more resources into lobbying than civil associations can (see also Barley 2010)—lobbying activities only prove successful insofar as they become compelling to government actors working within a dominant paradigm of an economized public good (Bear and Mathur 2015). Thus, in a world where, as anthropologists Holston and Caldeira (1998) have argued, the multiple goals of an 'ideal' democracy<sup>vi</sup> frequently stand in tension with each other and invariably proceed at differential rates, corporate power draws its force in part from a broader cultural commitment to prioritizing socioeconomic dimensions of democratic citizenship over political dimensions. I emphasise the *cultural* character of this commitment here to highlight that it is not inevitable; alternative visions of the public good might prioritise different aspects of democratic citizenship very differently. But public servants give emphasis to the socioeconomic because, in the particular historical and geographic conditions in which they are operating, it feels right for them to do so, and because they imagine (not incorrectly) that economic growth is also a priority for many citizens. Postdemocratic practice is facilitated, even legitimised, by the values and systems of meaning that are in broad circulation within contemporary societies. Anthropological studies have an important contribution to make in accounting for such a situation—explaining, for instance, how important the democratization of consumption has become to many citizens' sense of self-worth, linkage to, and equality with others (Douglas and Isherwood 1996; see e.g. James 2014). However, even when such attitudes predominate, the fact that corporations depend so heavily on lobbying activities means that it would be quite wrong to conceptualise the state as a mere 'instrument of capital' (cf. Harvey 2007). Lobbying is a risky business. It can

fail. Governmental and bureaucratic compliance with any given corporate demand is far from assured. In other words, while corporate lobbyists may have a disproportionate opportunity to have their voices heard, the decision to act on those voices emerges not only out of contextually specific cultural logics but also out of relational dynamics that warrant detailed ethnographic investigation.

*Example 1: The Tax Alliance, USA*

In 1999, Denise Benoit, a sociologist, conducted ethnographic fieldwork with a women-only policy discussion group that she calls the 'Tax Alliance'. A small, exclusive group, membership is restricted to female workers in either government or business who spend over 90 per cent of their time working on tax issues. Public sector workers are admitted automatically, but private sector employees (a mixture of corporate-government relations officials, trade association representatives, lawyers, and consultants) faced long waiting lists if they wanted to join. In addition to monthly meetings where 'useful information' about what business and government are planning is reciprocally exchanged the Alliance also holds an annual retreat at a luxury hotel and spa.

The retreats work to dissolve any sense of difference between public and private sector workers. From name badges that omit any details of participants to professional affiliations to comic 'rituals', such as the 'Sequins Only banquet' (in which retreat participants dance around in 'goofy costumes' and share sexualized humour), retreat activities establish a sense of shared 'sisterhood', uniting government and corporate personnel in what Alliance members describe as 'the tax family'. However, in order to justify this all-female event as worthwhile to sceptical male colleagues, Alliance participants also work hard to ensure that 'substantive' issues are intensively discussed.

This combination of activities brings several benefits to the corporate sector. It gives them a heads-up on forthcoming policy directions, but more importantly it grants them access to government. A legislative aide

describes how, in her busy schedule, she is more likely to respond to a phone call from a corporate lobbyist she knows through alliance activities than to members of the public or civic associations. ‘Relationships I have in the Tax Alliance sort of precipitate some of my business relationships’, she explains, ‘I know your issues, why don’t you come on in, two minutes and you know we can be out the door.’ The friendship, female solidarity, and professional familiarity that is fostered by Alliance activities gave corporate lobbyists disproportionate access to time-poor government officials, in ways that could be crucial in influencing policy.

(drawn from Benoit 2007: 76-101)

*Example 2: Promoting Brazilian Sugarcane Ethanol*

As public concerns about climate change have driven governments in the global North to explore alternative energies to fossil fuels, opportunities have emerged for Brazilian sugarcane ethanol, a type of ‘biofuel’, to become a global commodity. This prospect, however, is strongly opposed by environmentalist groups in the United States and Europe, who worry that sugarcane ethanol releases large amounts of greenhouse gases when burned and that its production could contribute directly and indirectly to deforestation of the Amazon.

In order to counter such concerns, and convince Northern policy-makers to endorse their product, sugarcane industry professionals sought to enlist the support of scientists at the Brazilian Biofuel Institute. Although there was resistance at first, the scientists’ interests gradually aligned with those of the sugarcane business. Scientists and industry representatives shared a common sense of frustration at North Americans’ and Europeans’ ignorance regarding Brazil’s geography, which they felt had led the risks of deforestation to be overstated. The greenhouse gas argument was equally problematic: it represented double standards (since the countries that expressed concern about biofuel emissions were spending billions of dollars a year on crude oil), seemed unfair (since Brazil as a whole was a

carbon sink), and entirely ignored the social benefits that a booming sugarcane ethanol industry could bring. Some scientists even suspected that Northern ‘doubts’ over ethanol reflected a desire to impede Brazil’s growing global influence.

Co-operating with industry leaders gave Brazilian scientists increased access to data, but it also helped them to communicate their knowledge to Northern policy-makers and international scientific communities in ways that would not have been possible had they been acting alone. As in Benoit’s example of the Tax Alliance, they drew on various forms of corporate hospitality and relationship building to influence policy outcomes, eventually encouraging the state of California to reclassify Brazilian ethanol as an advanced biofuel—though not all endeavours have been so successful.

The case reveals how economic actors—and the scientists they mobilize—can be driven by concerns that are far more complex than the profit motive. These include the desire to contribute to national development, sincere conviction that sugarcane ethanol is an environmentally sound fuel choice, and frustration at the skewed terms of an international debate which disproportionately reflects the (inaccurate and/or ethically problematic) concerns of actors from the global North. Scientists’ and sugarcane lobbyists’ use of quintessentially postdemocratic measures can be seen as a strategy by which they attempt to get their voices heard and their knowledge shared in arenas where they would otherwise be institutionally silenced.

(drawn from Newberry 2015)

Taken together, these two examples suggest that political anthropology has a vital role to play in moving discussions of postdemocracy beyond simplistic conceptions of ‘expertise’ and ‘economic power’, illuminating the complex processes that determine how and why different private (and public) interests gain leverage in policy-making

processes. Ethnographic studies of this kind remain limited in number, but should be encouraged—not least because they can reveal how postdemocratic tendencies are symptomatic of other, more deeply embedded problems affecting governance. Example 1 showed how the time poverty of legislative aides was a fundamental block to civic groups being able to influence taxation policy; Example 2 showed how global biofuel policy conversations are structured in ways that delegitimize or marginalize scientific knowledge produced in the global South. Neither of these problems would be straightforwardly addressed by the structural solutions conventionally proposed as remedies for postdemocracy—such as curbs on corporate lobbying, or increased regulation of the private sector (e.g. Crouch 2004: 105-110). Indeed, in the biofuel example, such measures may even make the underlying problem even worse. While ethnographic research may not always offer immediate solutions, its commitment to understanding social worlds—even those of corporate lobbyists—from their inhabitants' points of view can nevertheless complicate the conversation in ways that will ultimately prove productive in thinking about how to attain more just and considered forms of governance in our interconnected world.

### **Market Solves?**

Crouch (2004: 39-43) also identifies several less direct ways in which the rise of 'the firm' has influenced contemporary governance. These are centred on a growing admiration for the corporate sector and the values it is purported to represent—expertise, efficiency, and competitiveness—while the public sector is envisaged as sluggish and incompetent. Postdemocracy, in other words, often involves a cultural shift regarding what makes for good decisions—enforced by widely circulating anti-populist discourses which stress that, on important matters such as the economy or environmental change, citizens should defer to government-recognized experts because 'the people' themselves lack 'qualification to rule' (Rancière 2011: 3; for examples, see Katsambekis 2014; Swyngedouw 2010). This has led not only to a decreased interest in public consultation but also a renewed interest in outsourcing aspects of public welfare provision to corporate actors, as this is believed to be a superior means of delivery. We see here, once again, the pursuit of a particular form of 'disjunctive democracy' (Holston and Caldeira 1998), in which one of the goals to

which an ‘ideal’ democracy might aspire (the answerability of a government to its citizens) has been downplayed in favour of another (perceived benefits to service provision). The advantage of political anthropology’s approach to such matters is that, rather than dismissing these visions of the polity out of hand (efficiency, after all, has its virtues; pure representation is not without its limits<sup>vii</sup>) we can think more deeply about the ethical commitments that make them attractive and use ethnographic research to examine the degree to which these are realised in practice.

*Example 3: Education in Durham County, North Carolina*

In the 1980s, conservative politicians in North Carolina realized the poor quality of their local schools was thwarting their ambitions for economic growth. Without good schooling, it would prove difficult to attract businesses or relocating professionals to the region. They therefore suggested that business leaders should take a primary role in the formulation of educational policy.

One man who did so was John, the white leader of Durham’s chamber of commerce, and parent to a school-aged child. This boy felt ambivalent about his schooling—he was thriving in those classes for which he had been placed in the ‘academically gifted’ stream, but reported that his learning was impeded by ‘disruptive students’ when he was assigned to ‘regular’ classes, in which a significant number of pupils were from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and racial minorities. John was ‘bothered’ by his son’s experience, which found echoes in the tales of parents in the chamber, and this motivated him to use his position to get involved on a ‘system-wide level’. He and other members of the chamber’s Public Education Committee decided to take action to address the levels of ‘disruption’ in the school, proposing ‘alternative classroom settings’ for ‘kids who disrupt so that ‘those who want to learn can learn’.

This culminated in the provision of an ‘alternative school’ for which chamber members led fund-raising efforts. ‘Disruptive’ students—overwhelmingly poor, black, male youth—were sent to this institution,

which lacked textbooks, pupil desks, windows in its classrooms, and had ‘a decidedly penal feeling’ due to the constant presence of police officers on site. Worse still, the new school, which was located in a poor, black, neighbourhood, took up space that had previously been used by the community development volunteer coalition.

Only after several years did a local judge intervene to demand the institution be re-examined. Tellingly, in the ensuing controversy, African American political activists indicted the white majority school board, the white superintendent, and the white-controlled public school system with condemning black youth to quasi-incarceration; the role of the chamber and of private business interests went unmentioned and undetected.

(drawn from Bartlett et al. 2002; Holland et al. 2007)

Several lessons can be drawn from this example. As the researching anthropologists concluded, by privileging the voices of business leaders (who are, of course, as this example shows, never *just* business leaders), the ‘personal, parental interests of middle-class, predominantly white chamber members were translated into new policy and institutions affecting black youth with minimal public involvement’ (Holland et al. 2007: 100). Moreover, this resulted in a worsening of educational inequality, diminishing the ‘disruptive’ students’ chances of being able to enjoy the very benefits to socioeconomic citizenship that the postdemocratic measures had been implemented to achieve.

But we can also see that the disastrous outcomes that Bartlett et al. (2002) describe arose as a result of social actors pursuing what they genuinely believed to be in the public interest. Believing educational success to be equally available to everyone, John was driven by a vision of ‘fair play’ that allowed him ‘to mistake white privilege for a greater willingness to work hard, and “disruption” for an individual’s free choice within a meritocratic institution’ (Holland et al. 2007: 100). Involving more poor, black voices in the debate—or even anthropological voices (see e.g. Fordham 1993; Lei 2003)—would quickly have complicated such assumptions. The same is true for public perceptions of postdemocratic measures. As the researchers write, ‘because we

think of schools as meritocratic institutions, business involvement with school issues is interpreted as socially progressive, when in fact steering of issues frequently results in *less* social mobility for subordinate race and class groups' (Holland et al. 2007: 97). By doing ethnographic fieldwork, and capturing the experiences and voices of those whose perspectives would normally go unheard, political anthropology can expose the situatedness and potential blind-spots of the ideologies underpinning postdemocratization. Political anthropologists can even use those insights to advocate for change. This is the power of what Marcus and Fischer (1986) famously labelled 'anthropology as cultural critique'. In playing this role, moreover, anthropology reveals itself to be a fundamentally democratic discipline which, though by no means committed to majoritarian principles of representation, liberal models of democracy, or democratic *statecraft*, nevertheless believes in the importance of paying critical attention to as wide a variety of perspectives, and as great a multiplicity of expertises as possible in the pursuit of human flourishing. This is why postdemocratic developments, which silence the voices of the many in favour of the opinions of the few, must, even when well-intentioned, be something to which anthropologists are opposed.

### **Renouncing Democracy**

The discussion so far has concerned cases where democracy has been gradually hollowed out. We have seen how social actors who, on various levels, may remain committed to 'democracy' as an ideal nevertheless act in ways that could be seen as 'undemocratic'—or at the very least in tension with democracy's commitment to representation and opposition. In this next section, however, I want to explore cases where commitments to ideals of representation are not just overridden or compromised, but actively and deliberately abandoned by people who once embraced them. This is a phenomenon that has been witnessed across a number of so-called 'transitional democracies'—i.e. nations that adopted a structure of liberal democratic statecraft as part of the 'third wave' of democratisation. In a phenomenon that political scientist Larry Diamond (2008a) has variously termed 'democratic rollback' and 'democratic recession', an initial embrace of democracy has given way to a renewed desire for authoritarian leadership amongst the populace. This can be



evidenced in various ways. Barometer surveys of political attitudes might report growing percentages of a populations expressing dissatisfaction with democracy or, more likely, a preference for authoritarian alternatives—such as a strongman leader or a one-party system (see e.g. Chang et al. 2007). Alternatively one might track the improved fortunes and levels of support for ‘authoritarian’ politicians and policies in actual political systems.

The interpretive challenge, however, is to understand precisely what is driving such patterns. Political scientists tend to explain them in terms of citizen dissatisfaction with democratic governance: an analytical approach inspired by classic rational choice theory. Authors such as Diamond (2008a) and Chang et al. (2007) have suggested that, when faced with disappointing levels of socioeconomic performance, or angered by the high levels of corruption believed to permeate democratic structures of government, citizens are drawn towards non-democratic alternatives. They see how ‘authoritarian’ governments such as those in China and Singapore have been able to foster economic growth, and they may also look back with rose-tinted spectacles to the developmentalist authoritarian regimes under which they previously lived. Such feelings may only be compounded in circumstances where democratisation appears to have made a country beholden to the interests of international aid agencies and Western donors. On the basis of such an analysis, political scientists have often recommended what is essentially a structural solution. By tying development aid to democratic consolidation, they suggest, it may be possible to stamp out corruption, improve governmental performance, and win citizens back round to democracy as a political system (e.g. Davidson 2009; Diamond 2008a).

In positing that socioeconomic aspects of citizenship have overtaken concern with political aspects, however, this argument—much like Holston and Caldeira’s conception of disjunctive democracies—assumes that citizens nevertheless retain a residual commitment to democracy as a political form. This may not always be the case. Democracy as a political system produces particular kinds of political personhood and forms of citizenship. Although these vary from context to context, they often share basic features: one is individualized, one’s voice carries equal weight to everyone else in society, one is able (and even expected to articulate ones own interests and desires, but is also expected to be deliberative and considerate of others’

points of view. A key finding of anthropological studies of democracy is that while these modes of personhood may be embraced in some sociocultural contexts (Banerjee 2014; Witsoe 2011), in others they may be rejected, and seen as being in deep tension with local ideas about personhood, authority, and how decisions should be made (Ferme 1998; Hickel 2015).

There is a risk here of framing analysis in the heavy-handed terms of ‘cultural values’, as if certain cultural contexts are simply ‘incompatible’ with (liberal) democracy. But given that ‘cultural values’ are themselves dynamic and constantly emergent (Stewart 1996), a more helpful approach, to my mind, is one that asks how such incompatibilities are produced, sustained, or indeed transcended (Ahmad 2011). Such an enquiry can help to move us beyond the literature’s preoccupation with institutional democratic consolidation, revealing additional factors that inform the postdemocratization of citizens’ political horizons.

*Example 4: Postdemocratic Sentiment in Indonesia*

When I returned to Indonesia’s Riau Islands Province in 2011, five years after my first spell of long-term fieldwork, I was struck by how radically many people’s attitudes towards democracy had shifted. Islanders who had previously been committed democrats, enthusiastically experimenting with membership of political parties and participating in demonstrations now professed themselves to be deeply disillusioned, even anti-democratic. Some were holding out hopes for a return to authoritarianism or the arrival of an Islamic caliphate; others had disengaged from the political process entirely, considering the cultivation of small businesses a more worthwhile use of their time. Though not universal, a significant minority of Riau Islanders appeared to hold such views.

Concerns with corruption and—especially—socioeconomic performance were widely cited as reasons for citizens’ dissatisfaction with democracy, seemingly corroborating Diamond’s ‘democratic recession’ hypothesis. But inconsistencies gradually began to emerge. The same people who condemned democracy for ruining the economy would at other times

reflect gratefully on how democratization had ushered in a time of economic prosperity—and yet they still wanted nothing more to do with ‘democracy’. Thanks to the relationships cultivated by long-term fieldwork and the opportunities ethnographic research gave me to engage with people in a variety of contexts, I was able to develop a more sophisticated understanding of what underpinned their postdemocratic sentiment.

Postdemocrats were often people whose experiments with democracy had somehow failed. They were people who had initially envisaged a democratic future where they could express themselves, fight for justice, influence policy, or use their roles as gatekeepers to secure vital resources for their communities in exchange for votes. They were not, then, people whose ‘values’ were ‘incompatible’ with democracy. But when they had actually tried to do these things, the results had not been as they had hoped. A woman who had initially viewed democracy as an opportunity to secure resources for her ancestral community came to see it as a site of moral peril after an electoral candidate failed to fulfil promises she had made on his behalf whilst campaigning, implicating her in a web of deceit and sin. One young man had been excited about using his democratic voice to depose a corrupt official. But when his demonstrations were successful and this woman lost her job, he was racked with guilt over what he had done. The experience led him to consolidate his sense that his desires were dangerous and destructive, and needed to be controlled or hemmed in. Several of my older male informants, by contrast, had struggled to cope with having their opinions disregarded in the democratic marketplace of ideas, and now harboured fantasies of Indonesia becoming a military or theocratic state in which ‘the correct approach’ (which typically meant *their* approach) would be taken every time. Democracy had lost its appeal.

(drawn from Long 2016)

In this example, a sense of incompatibility with democracy had arisen because the very projects of self-making that had initially driven Riau Islanders to embrace democracy had failed or backfired in deeply unpalatable ways. Although the self-making ambitions that my informants held were clearly influenced by ideologies of authority, self-control and gender that had circulated widely under, and sometimes prior to, Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime, it was also clear that they were deeply personal. This finding has several important implications.

The first is methodological. It was only as I got to know people well that they would share the stories of their lives with me; sometimes telling me about their aspirations and hopes themselves quite explicitly, but more often making a series of throwaway remarks through which I could gradually assemble a sense of their motivations and concerns via a process of interpretation. This in itself points to one of the most important contributions that anthropologists can make to discussions of political life. Anthropologists are not just conduits for local knowledge, or pipelines through which the voices of marginalized people can be brought into academic debates within contemporary centres of power—although, as noted earlier, this is certainly an important aspect of our work. Anthropologists are also producers *of* knowledge, developing portraits of people and situations in which—if successful—one's research participants might both recognize themselves and come to understand themselves in new ways. By drawing out truths that other people don't (yet) know that they know, an interpretive political anthropology offers new lenses through which to think about familiar issues, driving both scholarly and political debate forward in productive new directions.

This is certainly the case with postdemocratic sentiment in the Riau Islands. A quick, superficial survey of why enthusiasm for democracy was waning would doubtless pick up on the usual stereotypical answers: 'The economy's getting worse!'; 'All this corruption!'. These were widespread narratives, uncontroversial and easily peddled—perfect vehicles through which to express dissatisfaction with the status quo, but not necessarily reflective of the true roots of that dissatisfaction. The deeper subjective concerns that animated my informants' political imaginations were not the kinds of things that one would immediately reveal to strangers conducting a political questionnaire, nor necessarily motives that could be confidently identified and

articulated by subjects themselves. Ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological interpretation thus both have crucial roles to play in capturing these more implicit motivational dynamics, and broadening debates over why postdemocratic sentiment should be on the rise.

This in turn has practical implications for discussions of whether and how the democratic recession should be ‘stemmed’ (cf. Diamond 2008b). As noted earlier, these currently focus on the consolidation of democratic institutions. But if my analysis is correct, whilst such developments would no doubt be welcomed by postdemocratic Riau Islanders, they are not necessarily going to win them back to democracy’s cause. For that to happen, there would need to be either a profound shift in Riau Islanders’ conceptions of the sort of person that they ought (and want) to be, or the emergence of new modes of democratic practice that offer more satisfying experiences of living with others in the world. The insights borne of anthropological perspectives and fieldwork, in other words, do not just illuminate the causes of things. They can also be suggestive of productive new directions for activism and intervention.

### **Conclusion: Political Anthropology for Postdemocratic Times**

At a time when authoritarianism is on the rise even in countries that have historically declared themselves its enemy, decisions about how to describe, analyse, and explain such a trend are strategic as much as they are intellectual. Publishing books with titles such as *Post-democracy* (Crouch 2004) or *Democracy in Retreat* (Kurlantzick 2013) has a similar rhetorical effect to #Occupy activists declaring that they—and passers-by—are ‘the 99%’. These are arresting, alarming, provocations that discomfort those for whom ‘democracy’ and principles of popular sovereignty remain orienting normative ideals. As Ward (2009: 73) notes, whatever objections might be posed to the implicit temporality at the heart of the postdemocracy concept, the term has value in showing ‘how “thin” democracy has now become’.

While this may be true, the classic narratives that accompany diagnoses of postdemocracy and democratic recession—usually accounts, one way or another, of

‘the political being entirely subordinated to the economic’ (Mendieta 2015: 204, on Crouch)—may not be the most helpful way to think about contemporary forms of political life. This is not because they are untrue. Indeed, they reveal something very telling and, to many, shocking about our current situation. But this very capacity to shock could be a weakness as much as a strength. As Gibson-Graham (1996: 125) notes, Leftist accounts that denounce the terrible effects of capitalist activity can inadvertently reify ‘capitalism’ as an unstoppable force, whilst alternative representations could allow us to see capitalist organisations as ‘fragile... spread out and potentially vulnerable’, nurturing hope in the possibility of positive change and inspiring new forms of activist strategy. Thinking in close ethnographic detail about how ‘postdemocratization’ occurs, both within the practice of statecraft and within citizens’ political aspirations, thus does more than add nuance to the existing work on postdemocracy in political science and critical theory. It also affords hope, offers new ways of thinking about how problematic tendencies in contemporary political life might be addressed, and invites consideration of measures that would supplement or even substitute for structural solutions.

Studies of postdemocracy will always require the insights into the realpolitik of contemporary governance afforded by structural, political-economy approaches. When corporations, international financial organisations, or foreign donors exert significant control over a polity’s economic prospects—or, as in the case of Thailand, military and monarchical leaders have a *de facto* monopoly on the use of violent force—the *demos* has such little bearing upon the decision-making of a government held to ransom that it can hardly be considered sovereign. In such cases, anthropologists have a lot to learn from political scientists and relatively little to contribute—beyond, perhaps, analysis of how such dynamics play out in the context of their own fieldsite.

But in many cases, the influence private interests exert over governmental decision-making is far from guaranteed. Rather than a straightforward matter of ‘financial clout’, influence is an emergent outcome of particular practices within matrices of relationships; it can only be fully understood if its emergence is documented and analysed ethnographically. To get to the heart of postdemocracy, in other words, requires more than the insights afforded by political theory and political science. It

also requires a political anthropology. Moreover, while legislative curbs on corporate lobbying seem a distant prospect, ethnographic work can identify intermediate measures that might help redress what Crouch (2004: 46) terms the ‘democratic balance’ and not lead to private interests overriding civic concerns quite so dramatically. These could be as simple as changes in working hours to allow legislative aides more opportunity to engage with the public, or the promotion of new strategies by which civic groups try to cultivate relationships with those in power. The tools and tactics of postdemocracy, in other words, could themselves be democratised.

That this approach was, in a way, adopted by Brazilian biofuel scientists and sugarcane lobbyists reminds us of a second main conclusion: that while postdemocratic tendencies have many negative effects, the people whose actions at their heart are complex ethical subjects, and even corporate activity may be driven by concerns that are far more varied and subtle than the ‘profit motive’. Many of these concerns could themselves be claimed as ‘democratic’. For Brazilian sugarcane industry professionals and scientists, they include national development, enhanced social wellbeing, and environmental justice. Business leaders in North Carolina doubtless thought they were contributing to a ‘democratic’ America, fighting against regional inequality by ensuring that local ‘kids who wanted to learn’ had the same opportunities to succeed as those in other parts of the USA. Indeed, a recent argument by Appel (2014) emphasizes that even bankers—who work in a profession often seen as the epitome of greed and self-interest—may be motivated by a desire to contribute to the democratisation of consumption and home ownership via the creation of new financial instruments such as derivatives. These people are not enemies but (potential) interlocutors. The problem is that when they become *de facto* sovereigns and political decision-makers, their actions may exacerbate inequalities and suffering in ways that they neither anticipate nor perceive. The challenge facing academics and activists who wish to develop a more participatory form of politics is to find ways in which such people’s energy and expertise can be harnessed, whilst allowing their ideas to be put into dialogue with alternative perspectives and to acquire authority through consensus rather through the positionality of their originator. This is not a straightforward process, although the #Occupy movement, in which working groups such as ‘Alternative Banking’ can discuss alternative, more equitable economic models, whilst ultimately remaining answerable to a General Assembly (see Appel

2014), provides a promising prefigurative model. In the meantime, anthropologists can make an important contribution by refraining from simply denouncing private sector activity as ‘corporate’—an analytical strategy that simply invites the defensive response that many people consider economic stability and growth to be very important—and instead highlighting how personal and situated the ‘expertise’ of business actors can be, calling attention to the perspectives and experiences that have been excluded by postdemocratic hierarchies of knowledge. While a receptive audience is by no means guaranteed, especially in a world dominated by knowledge paradigms that tend to dismiss ethnographic evidence as anecdotal, political anthropology has the capacity to disrupt the prevailing consensus and move discussions forwards in productive ways.

A similar conclusion could be drawn from my final, Indonesian, example: although here political anthropology’s contribution comes not just from the exposure of subjugated knowledges but the production of new—anthropological—knowledge via the unique opportunities afforded by long-term fieldwork. I showed how both academic and policy approaches to ‘democratic consolidation’ have something to gain by engaging closely with the deep subjective concerns that animate citizens’ changing relations with ‘democracy’ as a political ideal. Rather than assuming democratic participation to be a near-universally accepted social good or dismissing certain cultures as irredeemably authoritarian, a layered and contextual ethnographic approach reveals the ways in which citizens might find democracy to be *both* desirable *and* harmful, opening up possibilities for thinking about, and perhaps supporting, ‘democratic’ reform on their terms rather than our own.

Studying postdemocracy thus requires anthropologists to envisage their practice as one of double-sided critique, using the privileged perspectives afforded by immersive ethnographic research to expose and interrogate the latent assumptions embedded within the paradigms and principles that dominate both the contemporary drifts towards postdemocratic polities *and* current efforts to account for such transformations via grand narratives of ‘postdemocracy’, ‘the post-political’, or ‘democratic recession’. By habilitating hitherto subjugated forms of knowledge, as well as advancing their own, political anthropologists can and should strive for more reflective and inclusive processes of policy decision-making, as well as advocating



for explanatory models in the social sciences that, whilst acknowledging the constraints on thought and action posed by structural inequalities, embrace and seek to understand the messy complexity of how political horizons are shaped at every level from statesperson to citizen. In this regard, anthropological writing and intervention can itself be seen as a form of prefigurative politics, capable of fostering inclusiveness, representation and, where necessary, currents of agonistic opposition in an increasingly austere and postdemocratic world.

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Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.peoplesmomentum.com/about> (accessed 21 March 2017).

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.peoplesmomentum.com/about> (accessed 6 November 2015). Since November 2015, the reference to a ‘micro level’ has been cut from the principal Momentum website—perhaps because it was being read in ways that suggested a lack of ambition. However, the idea that Momentum’s actions will embody and demonstrate the vitality of its politics remains intact.

<sup>iii</sup> Notable examples include the UK Conservative Party’s U-turn on child tax credits when in government (2015), the UK Liberal Democrats’ U-turn on university tuition fees when in coalition (2010), and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’s capitulation to the high-austerity terms of a bailout from the European Central bank, despite the Greek population having decisively voted to reject such an arrangement in a national referendum (2015).

<sup>iv</sup> In my experience, those anthropologists who do have a facility with normative political argument have typically acquired this via their personal involvement in and engagement with the world of politics (whether as part of their fieldwork or outside the academy altogether) rather than as part of their professional training as anthropologists. Critical medical anthropologists, whose training equips them with an epidemiologically informed notion of the public good, are a partial exception.

<sup>v</sup> On which, see (Dale 2011).

<sup>vi</sup> Holston (2008: 311) defines these as extending justice and equality to the civil, socioeconomic, legal, and cultural aspects of citizenship, as much as to political aspects.

<sup>vii</sup> As Remmer (1995) notes, states *cannot* be unswervingly representative of fluctuating political opinion: this would lead to such degrees of political buffeting that they would quickly become unstable.