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# *Against received opinion*: Recovering the original meaning of 'paradox' for populism and liberal democracy

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## Abstract

In philosophy and political theory, the term paradox is often used synonymously with antinomy, contradiction and aporia. This article clarifies the meaning of these terms through tracing their respective etymology. We see that antinomy denotes a deep-seated conceptual opposition, whereas contradiction and aporia represent alternative responses to antinomy. The former presents the antinomy as potentially resolvable at some future time, and the latter sees the antinomy instead as a constitutive impasse. By way of contrast, *para doxa* originally referred to a statement that is 'contrary to received opinion', but this idea has generally been subsumed – both in philosophy and more common place understandings – under the notion of aporia. This conceptual recovery enables a better understanding of key traditions in social and political theory, notably post-structuralism and Habermasian critical theory, which can be demarcated through their respective responses to the emergence of 'paradoxes'. However, the article also demonstrates the material significance of these philosophical categories through their application to contemporary democratic politics. I analyse the constitutive tension between liberalism and democracy as well as the emergence of populism and show how these conceptual tools provide new insights for understanding these most pressing political developments of our time.

## Keywords

antinomy, aporia, liberal democracy performative contradiction, paradox, populism

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## Introduction

This article revaluates the status of 'paradoxes' in social and political theory and has three interrelated objectives. First, I show how we can demarcate several contemporary strands of political thought through their characteristic responses to the appearance of paradoxes in politics and society. The standard definition of paradox in formal logic and philosophy is a set of acceptable statements which lead, with seemingly faultless reasoning, to an absurd conclusion. Thus, paradox refers to an inconsistency or lacunae in reasoning, but where there is a no obvious flaw in either the premise or the conclusion of a proposition or statement (Koons 1992; Olin 2003; Rescher 2001; Sainsbury 1995; Sorenson 2003). Given that the predominant impulse running through the western tradition has been to elaborate consistent principles that ought to provide rational foundations for critically evaluating political relations (Habermas 1990; Plato 1992; Rawls 1971), the appearance of social or political 'paradoxes' is generally perceived as a problem, and prominent theoretical approaches can be defined by the strategies they mobilise to contain them.

Theorists have sometimes dismissed paradoxes as banal or insignificant. For example, when Michael Oakeshott reflects on the fact that the 'law regulate [s] its own creation', he says this 'is not a [genuine] paradox but [only] a truism' (Oakeshott 1983, 139, fn, 5). As well as these strategies of containment, paradoxes are also begrudgingly accepted as indicative of inevitable dilemmas in politics, but this acknowledgment comes only with regret. For example, this is the implication of Kenneth Arrow's famous 'voting paradox', or the 'general possibility theorem' in social choice theory, which illustrates the impossibility of aggregating individually ranked preferences into a consistent community wide ranking (Arrow 1950, 328). However, the most significant strategy has been to try to redefine paradoxes as 'contradictions', which (unlike 'paradoxes') are potentially resolvable within the categories of reason, and thus present a more manageable predicament to the overarching goal of a rational validation of political relations. This is evident, for instance, in Rainer Forst's (2003) discussion of the 'paradox of toleration', that is, that every act of toleration implies some intolerance, which he goes to great lengths to resolve, and the most notorious version of this is Habermas's charge of performative contradiction against his post-structuralist critics, where they are said to fall into 'contradiction' because they implicitly invoke normative premises that they explicitly disavowal (see Khan 2019; Habermas 1987, 1990).

The alternative to these responses come from post-structuralist thinkers who typically invoke paradoxes not just as something inevitable but also as potentially productive. This is evident, for example, in Chantal Mouffe's account of the tensions between liberalism and democracy in terms of the 'democratic paradox', also William Connolly's (1998) and Bonnie Honig's (2007) reworking of Rousseau's (1987) famous paradox of the sources of political virtue (in order to have virtuous citizens you need first to have virtuous institutions and *vice-versa*), and Hans Lindhal's (2009) reflections on the origins of legal authority in terms of the 'paradox of the constituent power'. Post-structuralist thinkers use the term paradox to signify the constitutive ambiguity and uncertainty of social and political relations. Thus, the idea of 'paradox' provides a conceptual vocabulary for expressing the real-life constitutive openness of society and politics. Drawing on

Friedrich Nietzsche, these traditions seek to counter the philosophical mistrust of paradoxes, noting instead that the status of 'paradoxes' are as long-standing as philosophy itself, and with constitutive paradoxes forming a key element in pre-Socratic philosophy, for example, in Heraclitus's Doctrine of Flux, which is underpinned by a unity of opposites, or in the antimonies expressed by Parmenides's student Zeno of Elea such as the motion paradox. For these thinkers, paradoxes therefore point to something inherent in the human experience and thus mark the limits of logic and reason (Cargile 1995, 643).

Post-Habermasian critical theory and post-structuralism can therefore be demarcated on the basis on their contrasting responses to the challenges associated with 'paradoxes'. However, it is also evident in these introductory remarks that the meaning of the terms 'paradox' and 'contradiction' is at issue. This article therefore examines the distinctive connotations of these key terms. My second objective here is to demarcate more clearly between a series of related terms: antinomy, contradiction, aporia and paradox. Through tracing the distinct etymology of these terms, I show that there is a long-standing tendency in the western tradition to conceal the meaning of *para doxa*, which originally meant a statement that is 'against received opinion'. Indeed, this concealment is also evident in contemporary social and political theory, because a more accurate term for the ideas advanced by the post-structuralists would be the notion of 'aporia', which refers instead to an *impasse* between two seemingly valid principles or ideas. The aim here is therefore to recover the original meaning of *para doxa*, not to displace the idea of aporia, but rather to show that they each provide valuable, but distinct, insights for how we conceptualise political and social relationships. Indeed, the third objective is to demonstrate the material significance of these philosophical categories through their application to contemporary democratic politics. I analyse the constitutive tension between the values and institutions of liberalism and democracy as well as the emergence of populism with reference to these categories, and thus show how these conceptual tools provide new insights for understanding these most pressing political developments of our time.

## Recovering the etymology of antinomy, contradiction and aporia

In everyday use, the term 'paradox' refers to a riddle or conundrum that entails a self-contradictory proposition which contains two opposing statements**.** Paradoxes are fun to contemplate; they have a joke like quality, play with language and test our powers of reason (Northorp 1964, Dansei 2002). Consider the oldest recorded paradox by Eubulides of Megara who maintained that 'Epimenides the Cretan says that all Cretans are liars'. Minimally, this suggests some circularity in reasoning, or perhaps a more substantive enigma in the foundations of truth claims. Nietzsche's infamous assertion many centuries later that 'facts [are] precisely what there is not, only interpretations' has much the same effect (Nietzsche 1968, 44). However, the feeling of amusement suggests we don't take paradoxes too seriously. When they are taken seriously, usually alarm bells ring. Indeed, as we have said, many philosophers have exhibited anxiety about the status of paradoxes and this is because paradoxes problematise the goal and ideal of non-contradiction which is foundational for the philosophical disciplines of mathematics, logic, epistemology and ethics (e.g. Kant 1993; Russell 1996; Tarski 1969). Because of the importance of the

principle non-contradiction to the integrity of reason, and the role that mathematics and formal logic have played as exemplars of philosophical reasoning, philosophers typically see paradoxes as something to be resolved. To eliminate inconsistency, one part of a *seemingly* paradoxical statement must be deemed true whilst the other part must be shown to be false, as both parts cannot exist at the same time and in the same sense. Or, if the paradox cannot be resolved, then the strategy is instead to transform the 'paradox' into an unresolved 'contradiction' understood as a presently puzzling inconsistency but one which is potentially resolvable at some future time. Indeed, the idea of 'contradiction' appears to imply only a provisional or contingent, rather than a constitutive, threat to the principle of consistency and so the redescription of paradoxes as, 'as yet' unresolved 'contradictions' is therefore one of the most significant strategies in the western philosophical tradition.[1] To unpack this strategy further, we need to differentiate paradox and contradiction from two further related terms, antinomy and aporia, and in this section and the next I examine the meaning of these terms through a recovery of their respective etymology.

'Antimony' is an amalgam of two Greek words: *anti* (against) and *nomos* (the law). An antinomy denotes an acute opposition of one law to another, or a persistent incongruity between two divergent principles. The presence of antinomies poses a challenge to the philosophical ideal of non-contradiction and thus presents a threat to the self-sufficiency of reason (Russell 1996). Antinomies are therefore often presented as 'contradictions', a notion that accepts a given tension between two alternatives but also presumes the possibility of some future possible resolution. This is evident, for example, in Kant's infamous antinomies between infinity and finitude, pluralism and monism, determinism and freedom, and the existence or non-existence of the Supreme Being (Kant 1993, 317–340). On Kant's view, reason must be self-sufficient and so antinomies represent only the appearance of irreconcilability (Kant 1993, 149, 351). He treats the antinomies as current errors in reasoning that can potentially be overcome, and this has largely shaped the reception of antinomies in modern social and political thought. For Hegel, antinomies qua contradictions become the motor force of the dialectic; they remain open and unresolved in each instance of the *aufhebung,* but nonetheless a rational resolution is ascribed to the overall movement of the dialectic towards the realisation of the Universal or 'absolute knowledge' (Hegel 1977). Habermas's system is more open-ended, but we see below that he also presumes the ideal of a future-orientated resolution, in his account of modernity as a learning process, and in the idea that the antinomies between public and private autonomy can be resolved in historical time. However, it is important to note the conceptual slippage in this representation of antinomies *qua* contradictions. The notion of antinomy designates only the presence of an acute opposition between two contrasting principles and leaves open the question of how to respond to this predicament. Indeed, we might note with Amy Allen (2014) Théodore Adorno's contrast model, where Adorno aimed precisely to foreground the irreconcilable status of antinomies, that is, in his notions of 'negative dialectics' and the fundamental 'non-identity' between opposites.

Aporia is the Greek term for 'puzzle'. It is a compound of two Greek terms: *a* (without) and *porous* (passage). The etymology captures the sense of astonishment (*aporein*) that is associated with aporia, as they leave us not knowing which way to turn or how to proceed.

There is an important difference between aporia and antinomy. As we have seen, antinomy indicates the tension between two contrasting laws or principles, whereas aporia also represent a certain response to this underlying predicament. Rather than projecting a future resolution through the overcoming of 'contradictions', with 'aporia' the emphasis is instead on the sense of puzzlement that we experience when there is no definite path or direction to follow, and, as we will see in more detail below, it is above all this sense of perplexity that has come to be associated with the commonplace understanding of 'paradoxes'. Indeed, as Anthony Long has argued, there is a long-standing tendency in the western tradition which has subsumed the category of paradox under the notion of antinomy and/or aporia (Long 2006, 14).

The notion of aporia is evident in Plato's work to the extent that he retained the original Eleatic idea of philosophy as the cultivation of this experience of astonishment (Arendt 1978, 114). Similarly, in some regards, Aristotle also retained the original meaning of aporia as a constitutive impasse (Aristotle 2015b: Topic VI). This is evident, for example, in Book IV of his *Physics,* where he invoked the notion of aporia to describe the apparent obscurities in the passage of time, where 'time [simultaneously] is and time is [also] what is not' (Aristotle 2015a: Book IV; see also Politis 2004, 69). However, in both Plato and Aristotle, the notion of aporia also began to acquire a more instrumental value, that is, aporia became a tool the philosopher invokes to place an opponent's line of argument in doubt. This is evident, for example, in Plato's *Meno*, where Socrates leads Meno's slave into a condition of aporia, or perplexity, through the force of his method/style of questioning (*elenchus*). In this sense, aporia are used to designate something like a logical trap that shocks an opponent but thereby also incites a desire to discover a coherent and correct solution to a contentious argument (Plato 1976, 79–80). The idea of bewilderment that follows from the acknowledgment of an aporia is thus rendered instrumental for the more general philosophical quest for consistency and certainty. This interpretation of aporia was further consolidated in Aristotle, for whom the development of philosophy was associated precisely with the resolution of puzzles (Politis 2004, 68). For example, in Book III of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle identified fourteen puzzles and their respective solutions (Aristotle 1998). In Aristotle's work, the term 'paradox', rather than aporia, also comes to designate the idea of puzzles waiting to be resolved (Long 2006, 14).

We might think of Jacques Derrida's work as a sustained effort to restore the original sense of aporia. Derrida has sought to wrestle back the notion of constitutive *impasse* from its misrepresentation as a merely a logical conundrum and its normalisation within the tradition. On Derrida's reading, aporia are not like jigsaw puzzles awaiting resolution, but rather constitutive impasses that leave the subject of knowledge 'not knowing where or how to proceed' (Derrida 1983, 12; Derrida 1998).[2] Derrida sought many varied ways to express the inherently aporetic status of philosophical self-grounding (Gasché 1986). Derrida's deconstructive method is seen as developing a 'new transcendental aesthetic, a theory which aims at originary constitution, but also at the same time a critique of…origins' (Gasché 1986, 156). The Derridean notions of *différance, iterability, trace* and *supplementarity* have the function of both 'grounding and ungrounding at the same time' (Gasché 1986, 148, 161). They articulate the 'uncrossable path' or *impasse* that is characteristic of our reflections on the limits of language and reason (Derrida 1983, 16;

Beardsworth 1996, 32). As is well known, Derrida also associated this 'experience of the im/possible' with conditions of responsibility. On Derrida's account, the aporetic structure of ethical life – with respect to the gift, mourning, hospitality, forgiveness and justice – leaves the subject in a condition of undecidability; that is, not knowing which pathway to choose in respect of some specific decision, but where a decision is nonetheless required (Derrida 1983, 16). On his reading, the ordeal of the undecidable is an 'interminable experience' because no ethical decision can be rationally justified or calculated in advance with recourse to predetermined principles. Moreover, without recourse to fully grounded principles every genuine decision, rather than a predetermined principle or logic, contains an element of surprise, in the sense that it generates something 'which cannot be anticipated' (Derrida 1983, 37). In other words, the decision taken in the undecidable terrain reframes the relationship between the opposing social/political principles in each ethical dilemma in new and unexpected ways.

Importantly, this stress on the open-ended productive quality of 'paradoxes' (aporia) is not exclusive to post-structuralism and a comparable claim can also be found in some examples of analytical philosophy. For instance, this is evident in Wilhard Quine's understanding of antinomy which he also refers to as 'paradoxes'. For Quine, an antinomy is an intractable 'paradox that produces a self-contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning' and has a valid 'argument to sustain it' (Quine 1976, 53–5). In contrast to logicians and mathematicians such as Alfred Tarski (1969) who saw antimonies as a 'symptom of a disease', Quine accepts that antinomies point to radical inconsistencies, but, he says, they are not to be understood as errors in reasoning or unresolved contradictions. For Quine, antimonies point instead to the limitations in 'some tacit and trusted pattern of reasoning [which] must be made explicit and henceforth avoided or revised' (Quine 1976, 53–5). In other words, for Quine, antinomies also have a generative quality in the sense that they 'can bring on the crises in thought' (aporia) so that a 'revision of our existing conceptual framework is required' (Quine 1976, 53–5).

## Recovering the original meaning of *para-doxa*

Thus far, this comparative etymology has shown 'antimony' to be a persistent incongruity between two contrasting principles, whereas paradox as an unresolved contradiction and aporia represent two elementary responses to this predicament, where the former points to the possibility of a future anticipated resolution (thus upholding the principle of consistency and the ideal non-contradiction) and the latter points instead to the sense of puzzlement where, caught in the grip of an antinomy, we don't know which way to turn or how to proceed. We have also noted, that is, this latter response has come to be associated above all with the idea of 'paradoxes',[3] and below I will show that this understanding of paradoxes *qua* aporia is evident, for example, in the prevailing post-structuralist analyses of liberal democratic institutions and values. However, before we turn to the material and political consequences of these contrasting concepts drawn from the history of philosophy, we first also need to recover the original meaning of paradox. Again, the term is a compound of two Greek words - *para* meaning beyond/against and *doxa* meaning opinion and thus implies a statement, that is, 'contrary to received opinion'. The etymology is

important because *doxa* is closely associated with the realm of politics and highlights the tensions between politics and philosophy that were played out in the context of 5th Century BCE Athens. Platonic philosophy sought above all to distinguish the self-consistency of reason from mere *doxa* (Long 2006, 13, 14), and this placed the philosopher in tension with the conventions of the *polis*, that is, the space of the agonistic exchange of opinions. Taken literally, this means that philosophy was itself a form of *paradox*, that is, the teachings of the philosophers were contrary to received opinion. This is exemplified in Plato's account of the Forms in *The Republic*. As is well known, Plato sought to establish transcendent principles of justice that ought to provide the basis for a philosophical mode of political rule. The details of Plato's theory of the forms were clearly against the established or the received opinion of his contemporaries, and he also took conventional *doxa* as the target of his critique. His philosophy was therefore, in this double sense, against received opinion.

However, Plato also sought to establish rational grounds for his *para-doxical* claims, with a set of principles that are supposedly beyond contestation, and which therefore serve to adjudicate the range of possible opinions. As such, his understanding of philosophy, which established the basis of the subsequent tradition, does not capture the full significance of the original definition of paradox. This is because as Gilles Deleuze has stressed, to find yourself genuinely opposed to received opinion is to counter *both* 'common sense' (i.e. established convention) *and* 'good sense' (i.e. the fixed principles of reason or philosophy) (Deleuze 1990, 75). Common sense tries to fix the meaning of an event or phenomenon within the conventions of established linguistic practice, whilst 'good sense' – or reason – tries to predetermine the future sense/meaning of the event (Deleuze 1990, 76). On Deleuze's reading, genuinely *para-doxical* statements therefore disrupt and problematize each of these efforts to contain the multiple senses and potentialities that inhere in phenomena (Deleuze 1990, 77, 2001). Arguably this was the intention of the original meaning of paradox, as it was expressed in the earliest pre-Socratic writings of Greek philosophy and there are other post-Platonic philosophers who are also attentive to this intensified sense of contingency. For example, despite their emphasis on the importance of logic and reason, the Stoic theory of the sayables (*lekta*) similarly emphasised that every proposition contains an incorporeal and intangible element. This aspect is inherent in every event, subsists in the proposition, but is never fully captured by concepts or the categories of linguistic expression (Deleuze 1990; Sellars 2006, 62). In other words, the original definition of paradox does not point to puzzles or dilemmas, nor to the antinomy of philosophy's self-grounding or a Derridean *aporetic undecidability.* Instead, 'paradoxical' statements denote modes of expression that scandalise received opinion, in both its conventional and philosophical forms, and in so doing attest to the multiple senses that inhere in phenomena and which press reason and language from the outside.

This emphasis on foregrounding the multiple lines of potentiality inherent in *sensory experience* also invites an analogy with the aesthetic realm, where it is widely acknowledged that we recurrently see the manifestation of creative interventions that point beyond present possibilities and open new vistas for looking at the world. Famous examples from modern art include Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain' or Tracey Emin's 'My

bed'. Paradoxes are more identifiable, acceptable and receptive in the arts and literature where critique through the power of words and/or images evokes emotions that appeal to the imagination. Genuine paradoxes, such as Elizabeth Costello's holocaust analogy the key protagonist in James Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, provoke shock and disbelief by drawing into question existing practices. Through acts of subversion, para-doxes try to open spaces for discussion that are seemingly closed and thereby also draw attention to the multiple potentialities and senses that inhere in events and phenomena. Paradoxes can shock. They can be outrageous and scandalous because they make us feel uneasy by disturbing and unsettling some aspect of our belief system or by challenging our opinions and more importantly the common sense and good sense of our time. They can play a significant part in enlarging our understanding and imaginaries by initiating disputes, debates and deliberation around a topic or issue. As evident in these examples from art and literature, paradoxes provoke widespread disagreement about their significance, and, in turn, about what does or does not count as a legitimate artwork.

It also seems evident that this original understanding of *para-doxa* has an important role to play in democratic politics. However, this emphasis on a statement that is 'contrary to received opinion', one that opens new possibilities through interventions that de-stabilise both established patterns of common-sense and the good sense of philosophy, is not what most theorists have in mind when they discuss the 'democratic paradox'. Instead, as we will see in a moment, when authors such as Mouffe (2000) and Honig (2007) refer to constitutive paradoxes, they emphasise instead something closer to the original idea of aporia or impasses. In the remainder of this article, I therefore look more closely at the material and political import of these different categories – antinomy, contradiction, aporia and para-doxa – first, through a reworking of Habermas and Mouffe's respective accounts of the tensions between liberalism and democracy, private and public autonomy, and then through evaluating more recent discussions about the impact of populism on these institutions (Habermas 2016). I will show that new aspects of these debates can be brought to light through this clarified account of the meaning of these respective terms drawn from the history of philosophy, and especially from the recovery of the original meaning of *para doxa*.

## Liberal democracy in the mode of antinomy, contradiction, aporia and para doxa

There is a long-standing acknowledgment in political theory that liberal democracy is a contingent amalgam of two distinct historical traditions (Macpherson 1977; Manin 1997), and this tension is manifest in a series of contrasting principles, such as freedom and equality, negative and positive liberty, and private and public autonomy (see, for example: Berlin 1958; Macpherson 1977; Manin 1997). Habermas, Mouffe and Honig agree on this underlying description of the fundaments of modern 'democracy' (Mouffe 2000; Habermas 2001a; Honig 2001). Drawing on C. B. Macpherson, Mouffe describes modern political institutions as a historically contingent combination of two distinct traditions each representing different political values:

> On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are…equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty (Mouffe 2000, 3).

Habermas likewise stresses the contrasting principles of individual liberty and popular sovereignty which he invokes to illustrate the difference between modern and ancient democracy and with reference to the changing status of law (Habermas 2001a, 766–767). In the classical conception of democracy, 'the laws of a republic express the unrestricted will of the united citizens', and this ensured a positive conception of liberty which guaranteed public autonomy (Habermas 2001a, 766). However, modern law guarantees a negative conception of liberty, which is concerned with the private autonomy of the citizens understood as bearers of rights (Habermas 2001a, 766). These tensions are further expressed in the contrasting legitimising principles of popular sovereignty and the rule of law (Habermas 2001a, 766).

Based on the etymological and conceptual reconstructions in the previous section, we can see that this constitutive tension is best described in the first instance as the underlying *antinomy* of liberal democracy, that is, that modern 'democratic' institutions are underpinned by two-opposing laws or principles. In Habermas' terms, under conditions of modern democracy, the principles of public and private autonomy are 'co-original' (Habermas 2001a, 767), and Mouffe and Honig are in full agreement on the constitutive status of this underlying tension.[4] However, we also saw in the previous section that Habermas and the post-structuralist can also be distinguished on the basis of their characteristic responses to underlying antinomy, with Habermas redescribing constitutive tensions as potentially resolvable 'contradictions', and Mouffe and Honig depicting them instead as constitutive 'paradoxes', but which they actually present in terms that are closer to the original meaning of 'aporia', that is, as constitutive impasse. Here, we see that these differences are manifest also in their respective accounts of the tensions between liberalism and democracy.

In his influential essay, 'Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?' Habermas challenges the 'allegedly' paradoxical status of the underlying antinomy of private and public autonomy, presenting instead a broadly dialectical account of this underlying contradiction, predicated on the possibility of an anticipated future resolution (Habermas 2001a, 768). This emphasis on resolution through the 'dimension of historical time' is based on a practice-orientated understanding of modern constitutionalism which makes the 'founding act into an on-going process of constitutional making that continues across generations' (Habermas 2001a, 768). This process 'is not immune to contingent interruptions and historical regressions – [but nonetheless] can be understood in the long run as a self-correcting learning process', whereby modern citizens come to appreciate that 'the laws of the republic…set limits on the people's sovereign self-determination' and 'the rule of law requires that democratic will-formation not violate human rights that have been positively enacted as basic right' (Habermas 2001a, 774, 766). Habermas recognises that these opposing principles can conflict; for example, in Tocqueville's and Mill's accounts of the 'tyranny of the majority',

where the principle of democratic sovereignty is imposed on the rights of minorities. Nevertheless, from his perspective, these outcomes can be avoided as democratic citizens become cumulatively proficient in the exercise of democratic authority in 'the course of applying, interpreting, and supplementing constitutional norms' (Habermas 2001a, 771). This account resonates with Habermas's optimistic view of the Enlightenment and his moral cognitivist theory. For Habermas, modern citizens are seen as increasingly capable of thinking in terms of 'post-conventional morality', where they can evaluate their traditional values in the 'light of good reason', such that morality is uncoupled from localised conventions and progressively replaced by general principles of legitimacy such as those embodied in liberal democratic constitutional states (Habermas 2001b: 132, 152).[5]

Central to Habermas description of the tensions between liberalism and democracy in these terms is his aims to establish a normative principle to differentiate legitimate from illegitimate forms of democratic will-formation. In short, on Habermas's account: only those expressions of collective self-determination that respect individual rights can claim legitimacy in this overall movement of the underlying 'contradiction'. However, from the post-structuralist perspective this is, in effect, to redescribe liberal constitutionalism as a normative foundation for modern democracy, and this undercuts the constitute openness (*aporia*) of future possible democratic mobilisations. As Honig sees it, Habermas 'puts the two principles [of liberty and equality] into a harmonious non-zero-sum relation and unifies them into a single normative justification of liberal democracy' (Honig 2001, 793). When Habermas 'characterizes his hoped-for future in progressive terms, he turns the future into a ground. It's character as a future is undone by progress' guarantee' (Honig 2001, 797). This underestimates the futural openness of democratic politics because as Honig states

> in what sense can the people be said to have free authorship...if they [are] bound to a progressive temporality in and out of which constitutional democracy in its full, unconflicted expression is required to unfold (Honig 2001: 795)

By way of contrast, Mouffe (2000) depicts democratic politics instead – in broadly Derridean terms – as a perpetual open-ended (re)negotiation of the constitutive tension deriving from the liberal democratic antinomy. On her account, struggles recurrently appear over conflicting interpretations of the contending values of liberalism and democracy, but there can be no reconciliation, not even as a regulative ideal (Mouffe 2000, 4, 5; 1995, 501). Instead, we only ever see the emergence of temporary and precarious iterations, or in Mouffe's terms, 'hegemonic' configurations of the constitutive *impasse* between the contending principles.

We can see then that the categories outlined in the previous section help us to better understand the material implications of these contrasting accounts of modern 'democratic' institutions. Habermas and the post-structuralists share an understanding of the constitutive *antinomy* of liberalism and democracy. Habermas effectively describes this tension as a *contradiction*, which is to be resolved over time, and this rendition is designed to ensure the non-violation of individual liberties as a normative criterion of legitimate

democratic will-formation. By way of contrast, Mouffe and Honig describe the underlying tension between liberalism and democracy as the 'democratic paradox', but the term *aporia* better fits their description, because they underscore the constitutive impasse between the two principles, which can only ever be expressed in temporary open-ended articulations. The key difference then is in the degree of openness and contingency they each see in the forms of politics that might emerge from the liberal democratic antinomy. In short, the Habermasian approach stipulates in advance the legitimacy of the forms of politics that can emerge from within the parameters of liberal democracy, whereas the post-structuralist emphasis on constitutive 'paradox' (really aporia) allows for a greater sense of openness in the forms of possible emergences. Indeed, Mouffe and Honig draw on Derrida precisely to underscore this greater sense of openness, because his recovery of the original meaning of aporia was designed to displace the ideal of future resolution characteristic of dialectical approaches. However, as Habermas sees it, this is at the cost of any normative criteria for identifying legitimate and illegitimate instances of democratic will-formation. Strikingly however, neither of these approaches invoke the original meaning of paradox, 'against received opinion'. However, the analysis of modern democracy can, I think, be further enhanced through the introduction of this idea and I first illustrate this here with reference to the impact of the new social movements and the recent politics of decolonising the curriculum.

The notion of *para doxa* outlined in the previous section seems particularly apt for understanding the repeated emergence of the various new social movements from the late 1960s. A common feature of a wide range of movements – including environmentalism, second wave feminism, anti-racism and the struggles of gay activists – is that they have advanced claims that are against the majority opinion, that is, what counts as 'normal' or given, at the time of their articulation. This is encapsulated in the idea that 'the personal is political' which emerged within feminism, but which could be related more generally to these movements as they have each successfully politicised issues and concerns which were otherwise taken-for-granted, or not seen as the object of legitimate democratic contestation. Consequently, we can also see how the social movements have opened new potentialities in democratic politics, which is the second characteristic of the idea of *para doxa* outlined above. Indeed, the social movements have generally been welcomed by post-structuralist theorists for these reasons, and this is exemplified by Connolly who has stressed how the movements disrupt the existing configurations of identity and difference and thus provoke plurality and debate (Connolly 1991). As I see it, these insights are strengthened through the recovery of largely forgotten connotations associated with the original meaning of paradox because these movements clearly assert the power of political imagination by exposing 'received opinion' to their seemingly provocative and counter intuitive claims.[6] Indeed, a similar phenomenon is evident in the recent politics of decolonising the curriculum. This effects a conceptual shift in numerous academic disciplines to reveal the exclusion of minority voices, and the explicit and unconscious biases, built into the received opinion about the status of established curricula. These efforts have had numerous precursors over the globe, for example, black activists, scholars, student and civil rights movements, spanning several decades of efforts to shift the epistemological bias of the dominant western worldviews, revealing the privilege of

so-called impartial educational curriculums and the power relations they reproduce (Quinjano and Ennis 2000; Morreira et al. 2020). Decolonisation has sought to reform curricula to make them more inclusive of diverse/intersectional epistemologies, and this dovetails with the Black Lives Matter movement has similarly sought to expose the hypocrisy operating in, for example, the institutions and practices of community policing, by revealing the many ways in which black people continue to experience the adverse effects of structural racism.[7]

As I have said, this emphasis on *paradoxa* is meant to complement rather than replace the more typical stress on the idea of *aporia*. Mouffe has cited the new movements as one of the key drivers of her more general account of democracy in terms of repeated (aporetic) articulations of the liberal democratic antinomy, as the new movements extend the principles of liberty and equality to new unforeseen areas of social life (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: Chapter 4). These two accounts are not incommensurate, because it is through their opening up of new possibilities by challenging received opinion (*para-doxa*), that the new social movements also reiterate the *aporetic* relationship between liberalism and democracy in new and surprising ways. However, the post-structuralist emphasis on openness and contingency comes under closer scrutiny in the present context where we see the emergence of democratic mobilisations, not in the open, expansive, inclusionary forms of the new social movements or decolonisation, but rather in the more unified and potentially authoritarian forms of contemporary populism. In the final section, I examine once again the status of the liberal democratic antinomy considering the philosophical categories outlined in this article, but this time with reference to the emergence of populism.

## Populism and *para doxa*

The question of the status of the liberal democratic antinomy has become pertinent again in the context of the recent eruption of populist movements in many parts of the world. This is evident in right- and left-wing versions in North and South America, from Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro to Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales and similarly in Europe from Hungary's Viktor Orban to Podemos, Syriza, and La France Insoumise. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) have developed an influential account of populism which they present as a genuinely democratic form of politics, mobilising a popular will, but one which nonetheless presents a hazard to the liberal side of the liberal democratic antinomy (2017). Several authors have responded to this claim by effectively refuting the widely shared view of a constitute tension between the principles of liberalism and democracy. Scholars such as Stefan Rummens (2017), Urbinati (2013, 2014, 2019a, 2019b) and Jan-Werner Müller (2017) converge on the idea that modern democracy encompasses liberalism as one of its own internal moments, and so, on this account, there really is no underlying antinomy between these alternative institutions and values. This assertion is designed to refute the idea that populism can claim any democratic credentials because, on this account, by threating constitutionalism and individual liberties populists also undermine democracy. In this final section, I show how the categories outlined in this article – antinomy, contradiction, aporia and paradox – can further enlighten this debate,

once again demonstrating the material implications of these concepts, as they help us better understand this most pressing real world political phenomena.

Taking their inspiration partly from Mouffe and Honig, Mudde and Kaltwasser have described populism, both in its right- and left-wing versions as having an ambiguous status with respect to the institutions of liberal democracy. On their account, 'populism can work as either a threat to or corrective for democracy' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 79). Populism can be seen as democratic because it empowers 'groups that do not feel represented by the political establishment' and by 'politicising issues that are not discussed by the elites but are considered relevant by the silent majority', such as 'immigration in western Europe or the policies of the so-called Washington Consensus in Latin America' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 18, 19, 82, 84). As they see it, left-wing populists in particular illustrate the progressive side of populism, because they have 'successfully politicised the dramatic levels of inequality in their countries'. (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 84). However, Mudde and Kaltwasser nonetheless present populism as a form of 'democratic extremism' because populists represent a threat to liberalism, in the sense that 'by claiming that no institution has the right to constrain majority rule, populist forces can end up attacking minorities and eroding those institutions that specialise in the protection of fundamental rights' (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 1–2, 82, 84, 95). Indeed, right-wing populist leaders especially have invoked the values of popular democratic self-determination, whilst flagrantly disregarding the importance of liberalism. These movements have also presented a more general challenge to the rule of law, evident, for example, in the recent American and Brazilian Presidential elections where the unsuccessful candidates refused to accept the results, thus undermining established constitutional practices of a peaceful transition of power (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019).

However, for Müller, this account of populism as a form of 'democratic extremism' is a problematic conclusion, one that unwittingly plays into the hand of the populists, because it implies that populists can indeed invoke the principles of legitimacy associated with democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and collective self-determination, whilst nonetheless rejecting the principles of liberalism (Müller 2017, 56). On the face of it, Müller defends something closer to Habermas' view, that is, that any genuinely legitimate form of democratic mobilisation must also respect the liberal principle of individual rights. However, Müller and others – including Abts and Rummens (2007) and most significantly Urbinati – have gone much further than this, and in their various critiques of populism have found it necessary to reject the very idea of an underlying antinomy between the principles of liberalism and democracy. Instead, the claim is that the liberal notion of individual rights and the protection of negative liberties are somehow already inherent within the principles and practices of 'democracy' (Urbinati 2008, 2013, 2019a, 2019b; Müller 2017). These claims are meant to deny populist leaders any claim on democratic legitimacy. Nevertheless, these arguments seem to me to be inaccurate and misleading, and so I first show how the notion of *para doxa* helps us to remember the fundamentally antinomic relationship between liberalism and democracy, before applying this analysis also to the impact of populism.

In *Me the People*, Urbinati describes liberal democracy as a 'pleonasm' (Urbinati 2019b, 10). In other words, there is no need to designate modern democracy as 'liberal

democracy' because modern representative democratic institutions necessarily include individual freedoms as an internal moment. For Urbinati, the emphasis on 'liberal' is thus an unnecessary addition and we can convey what is most significant in modern institutions simply with the idea of 'democracy'. Instead, on Urbinati's account, depictions of populism in terms of 'authoritarian democracy' and 'illiberal democracy' are misleading (Urbinati 2019b). By threating individual liberties and the rule of law, populists are not just illiberal but also anti-democratic. For Urbinati, 'democracy without individual liberty – political *and* legal – [simply] cannot exist' (Urbinati 2019b, 11). In support of this claim, she stresses how individual liberty was also a characteristic of ancient direct democracy. Citing Joseph Ober, Urbinati says that whilst predating the emergence of liberalism, ancient democracy was nonetheless a 'practice of liberty in action and in public' that was 'imbued with individual liberty' (Urbinati 2019b, 12).

In response to Urbinati's claim that private autonomy is internal to democracy, Kaltwasser has recently reiterated Honig's account of the tensions between liberalism and democracy (Kaltwasser 2022). Indeed, a sense of the underlying antinomy between the two traditions is essential to his and Mudde's account of the ambiguous quality of populism in respect of (liberal) democratic institutions. I agree with the importance of underscoring this constitutive antinomy for understanding contemporary politics, and this can be reiterated with a brief set of reflections on the historical emergence of these contrasting traditions and principles. Indeed, we could say that what became sedimented as the liberal democratic antinomy was first the product of various struggles that were 'paradoxical' in the etymological sense of the term, that is, they were 'against received opinion'.

The struggles for the democratisation of representative government in the 19th Century were clearly predicated on *para doxical* demands. The idea that ordinary working people were competent to participate in government was anathema to the aristocratic presumption of rule by a property-owning male elite. In Britain, for example, the struggle by reformist movements, such as the Chartists, to extend the franchise to working men were provocative and scandalous and they were not conceded until the claims became organised to gain mass support which shifted the imaginary of ordinary men and women about their 'natural' place in society and politics (Femia 2001). The 1832 Reform Act extended the franchise to more men, but it was not until 1917 with the Representation of the People Act that all men over the age of 21 were entitled to vote. Similarly, only after decades of struggles and militant action by different factions of the Suffragettes did the second Representation of the People Act in 1928 extend the franchise to women. Again, this took the form of a struggle to shift the taken-for-granted assumptions about the role of women in society, countering the received opinion that women's interests were naturally represented by their fathers and husbands. These paradoxical struggles successfully democratised liberal representative government over the course of the latter half of the 19th and into the 20th Century, thus fundamentally altering relations between citizens and representatives (Macpherson 1977). In other words, it is important not only to reiterate that liberal democracy is a political system underpinned by an antinomy, but also acknowledge that the democratisation of liberal institutions emerged out of struggles that were initially against received opinion (paradoxical).

Urbinati's reduction of the contrasting values of liberal democracy to internal moments within democracy is therefore both conceptually and historically problematic. Indeed, she naturalises the term 'democracy' by erasing its historical conditions of emergence. Her historical reconstruction cuts across Habermas own account of the development of modern political institutions. Following Hegel, Habermas equates ancient democracy exclusively with the notion of public autonomy and claims that the ancients had no legitimate space for the articulation of private freedoms (Habermas 2001a). Instead, Habermas associates the emergence of modern private autonomy with the Protestant Reformation and the religious and political struggles of early modern Europe (Habermas 1987; Jürgen Habermas 2001). Although the classical Athenians had an appreciation of private freedom, as is evident, for example, in Pericles famous funeral oration, they cannot be said to have had a developed account of negative liberty and their democracy was characterised exclusively by 'the collective capacity of a public to make good things happen in the public realm' (Ober 2008, 6). Urbinati's claim that personal autonomy was an inherent feature of ancient democracies is thus an example of what Quentin Skinner would call an anachronistic reading of the present back into the past (Skinner 1969). Furthermore, Urbinati's suggestion of a basic compatibility of liberalism and democracy draws attention away from the hegemonic role of liberalism in the development of modern institutions. Not only does she gloss over the way in which modern democratic rights were only won after a hard-fought struggle against the values of 19th Century liberalism, as outlined above, but she also underestimates the ways in which contemporary democratic institutions and practise are being eroded by a resurgence of liberalism in the form of 'neo-liberalism', which typically hands power to unaccountable technocratic elites, thus 'undoing the demos' (Brown 2015).

I agree with Mudde's and Kaltwasser's account of the democratic qualities of populism. Notwithstanding the challenges that populists present to liberal constitutionalism, they are correct to stress that populism needs to be understood as democratic, in the sense that both left- and right-wing populists have mobilised forms of popular sovereignty around issues that are typically kept of the mainstream agenda by established political parties and elites. It has also been widely documented that populism tends to 'reignite democratic competition via polarisation' (Kalyvas 2022, 3). In other words, populist discourse is very often manifested through a binary division of the people vs the 'corrupt elite'.[8] On face value, these characteristics seem to suggest that populism is 'paradoxical' in the manner outlined in this article, that is, populists can be construed as articulating views that are against the received opinion of mainstream political debate. However, here we need to be more cautious, because unlike the movements for democratisation in the 19th century, and unlike the new social movements of the mid to late 20th century, and indeed unlike contemporary movements for decolonising the curriculum: contemporary populist movements tend to position one *established* minority view against the *established* majority opinion. This is evident, for example, in the widely cited example of the referendum in the UK in 2016 on continued membership of the European Union, where populists successfully mobilised and augmented Eurosceptic sentiments which had been circulating as a minority view across the political spectrum ever since Britain joined the

then European Economic Community EU in 1973. Populism, in other words, tends to give expansive voice to the existing common sense of some minority of citizens.

More generally, this appeal to established minority opinion is true of both right-wing populism, which typically mobilises around nativism and notions of national self-determination, and left-wing populism which reiterates well established forms of socialist collectivism against the hegemony of neo-liberalism. Neither of these alternatives effect a conceptual shift in ways of thinking, seeing and doing in the same way as the other examples of democratic movements I have cited in this article, each of which have been characterised by much more imaginative alternatives to both the ordinary common sense of the times and the supposed 'good sense' of established institutions. Similarly, also the binary quality of populism – that is, the focus on us vs them – does not capture or encourage the multiple lines of potentiality that we identified with moments of genuine *para doxa*. So, to conclude, the notion of *para doxa* helps to reveal the *limitations* of populism. Populism is surely democratic, but not authentically paradoxical, in the sense that it does not allow for new and different ways of seeing existing phenomenon.

## Conclusion

This article has clarified the distinctions between a series of key terms in philosophy: antinomy, paradox as an unresolved contradiction, aporia and paradox. Through tracing their respective etymology, we have seen that an antinomy refers to a deep-seated conceptual opposition, whereas paradox as an unresolved contradiction and aporia represent two characteristic responses to antinomy, the former presenting the antinomy as potentially resolvable at some future point, and the latter seeing the antinomy instead as a constitutive impasse. By way of contrast, paradox originally referred to a statement that is 'contrary to received opinion', but this idea has come to be subsumed – both in philosophy and more common place understandings – under the notion of aporia, that is, as a constitutive impasse between two opposing ideas or principles. The recovery of these categories facilitates a better understanding of the differences between Habermasian critical theory and post-structuralism, with the former characteristically treating antinomy as contradictions and the latter celebrating 'paradoxes' but describing social and political relations more in line with the idea of constitutive impasse. I have also shown how these categories have important material implications. This has been illustrated here with reference to their respective accounts of the key antinomy between liberalism and democracy, and I have demonstrated how the analysis of liberal democratic politics can be further enhanced with reference to the notion of *para doxa*, with the new social movements and examples of decolonising the curriculum providing an exemplary cases of how liberal democratic institutions have been augmented through the mobilisation of claims that are 'against received opinion'.

We have seen that Habermas and the post-structuralists share the idea that liberal democracy represents a historically contingent amalgam of the antinomic principles of private and public autonomy. Their disagreement is on how to depict the type of politics that emerges from within this underlying predicament. However, in the recent literature on the emergence of populism, there is an effort to repudiate the reality of the underlying antinomy of liberalism and democracy. This is meant to deprive populist movements of

any claim to democratic legitimacy. If the principle of private autonomy is internal to democracy, rather than a distinct principle associated with the separate tradition of liberalism, and if populist movements present a threat to individual freedoms, then populism is inherently anti-democratic rather than just illiberal. In response, I have invoked the notion of *para doxa* to show that modern democracy emerged from movements that were against the received opinion of 19th Century liberalism. This history underscores not only of the inherent antinomy between democracy and liberalism (contra Urbinati and others), but also reminds us of what is at stake in authentically paradoxical moments in democratic politics, where genuine alternatives emerge that open new possibilities of seeing and doing through challenging received opinion. Contemporary populism, on the other hand, at first appears to have these same paradoxical qualities, but in fact takes the form of a binary of opposition of one established minority view vs. the majority view of the mainstream political elite.

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## Notes

1. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (pen name Lewis Carroll), Wilhelm Quine and Graham Priest are exceptions because they see the value of paradoxes within mathematics and formal logic. For example, Bertrand Russell's set theory paradox led Gottlieb Frege to reconstruct the foundation of mathematics (Russell 1996).
2. The etymological sense of the term *aporia* as constitutive impasse is more readily accepted in literary theory to refer to a figure of speech where a speaker expresses (or feigns) doubt, uncertainty or speechlessness. For example, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: 'to be or not to be'.
3. This tendency is evident across the disciplines of mathematics, philosophy and social and political theory. See, for example: Sorensen (2003) who conflates contradiction with paradox when he discusses Heraclitus and Marx and Hegel (xii-xiii); Rescher (2001) who uses paradox interchangeably with antinomy and aporia; Pettit who also equates paradoxes with antinomy (Pettit 2002).
4. Co-originality is also acknowledged in the republican tradition of thought. For example, Quentin Skinner has argued that in the work of Machiavelli and other republican writers there is a recognition of the need for the citizens to ensure their individual liberty through active participation (Skinner 1998, 84).
5. It is important to qualify this depiction of Habermas as a dialectical thinker. This is not in any strong Hegelian sense, and Habermas explicitly rejects the idea that history is driven forward by the movement of *Geist* or a hidden 'cunning of reason'. He nonetheless falls back upon a gentle mode of teleology with his assertion that the inner tensions of modern politics work inexorably – through societal learning processes – towards ever-closer reconciliation. For a fuller discussion, see Khan (2019).
6. Habermas likewise stresses the role of the new movements, but again his account is less receptive to the element of novelty they embody. On his account, the new movements are evaluated with

reference to the co-original principles of public and private autonomy: either they embody and thus advance these principles, or they withdraw into a more particularistic realm of identity politics and thus represent a regression from the overall positive movement of modern constitutionalism (Habermas 1981).

7. My emphasis here on para-doxa shares a certain resemblance with Jacques Rancière's account of the politics of 'disagreement' and his notion of 'subjectification'. Rancière similarly stresses moments of provocative intervention, at work in both politics and aesthetics, which interrupt the current distribution of social space and the established linguistic conventions, and which lead to what he calls a new 'partition of the sensible' (Rancière 1999). One key difference, however, is that Rancière presents these interruptive moments as a binary division and, he says, they reveal the demos – the part that has no part – as 'identical to the whole' (Rancière 1999). These formulations are insufficiently attuned to the ways in which para-doxical statements open diversity; both in terms of bearing witness (with Deleuze) to the pluri-potentiality inherent in sense and phenomena, as well as more specifically giving rise to counter statements and debate.
8. For the exemplary account of populism in these terms, see the work of Ernesto Laclau (Laclau 1977, 2005).

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