<center>The crisis of democracy in inter-war Britain[*]</center>

Britain has long been thought of as an exception to the instability and contestation of democracy in much of inter-war Europe. Between 1918 and 1939, after a war that the American president Woodrow Wilson had claimed was to make 'The world […] safe for democracy', democracy was supplanted by some form of authoritarianism in at least thirteen European states; and the economic and strategic significance of some of those states augmented the impression conveyed by raw numbers, that democracy in Europe was in retreat.[1] Amid this pattern of fragility and failure, Britain's retention and extension of its parliamentary democracy during the inter-war period has appeared to many historians of Europe as one of a handful of cases of democratic resilience and stability, perhaps naturally enough when the issue under consideration is that of constitutional forms.[2] Historians of inter-war Britain have unsurprisingly reached a similar conclusion, not only in relation to political forms and institutions but also in studies of political culture that have focused upon initiatives to promote civic participation or engagement, or other forms of associational activity. To historians pursuing these concerns it has appeared that, while democracy languished or failed over large parts of continental Europe, it was flourishing in Britain: 'when one probes deeper into the social and cultural history of the period', it has recently been claimed, 'one finds a democratizing impulse seemingly everywhere'.[3]

It did not invariably appear that way to contemporaries. The misgivings of conservative writers and politicians concerning the prospects for Britain's political democracy—particularly the Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin's oft-stated reservations as to the capacities of the new mass electorate—are a familiar feature of the historiography on

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[1] Quoted in John Milton Cooper, *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York, 2009), 386. The numbers given here are derived from Giovanni Capoccia, *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe* (Baltimore, 2005), 7 and 265n; they are higher if one counts states such as Albania and Hungary that, in Capoccia's words, held 'no minimally democratic elections' during this period (265n); and if one counts Russia.
[2] As it was in classic studies of the 'structural' factors behind the survival or failure of democratic regimes, most notably Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966); and, more recently, in Capoccia, *Defending Democracy* and Sheri Berman, *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe: From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day* (Oxford, 2019); see also Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, 1998), 23-4, 25. A notable recent exception to this tendency is Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, 2011).
[3] Helen McCarthy, 'Whose Democracy? Histories of British Political Culture Between the Wars', *Historical Journal* 55:1 (2012), 234.

the inter-war period.[4] But liberal and democratic-socialist writers—the legatees of the 'progressive movement' that had existed in Britain since the late nineteenth century—who might have been expected to celebrate and to foster a ubiquitous 'democratizing impulse', were instead lamenting the imminent or actual demise of democracy. '[F]riends and enemies of democracy alike know that in practice it is a failure', the Liberal political economist J.A. Hobson declared in 1921: '[…] disillusionment regarding the democratic experiment is wide and deep.'[5] By the mid-1920s the breadth and depth of this disillusionment were sufficient for H.G. Wells to proclaim to an audience at the Sorbonne that the 'Ascendancy of Democracy has culminated; and like some wave that breaks upon a beach, its end follows close upon its culmination.'[6] They were sufficient for the political scientist Ernest Barker to ask readers of the BBC's magazine *The Listener* in 1929, 'Is Democracy Dying?';[7] for Leonard Woolf to remark in 1931 that 'you only have to look at one of the political monthly or weekly papers or to read a serious book on politics, and you will see that there is a general feeling that democracy has failed or is failing';[8] and for Hobson, again, to observe in 1934 that 'democracy is in several countries displaced by dictatorship, and everywhere it is discredited.'[9]

The idea that Britain was embroiled in a European 'crisis of democracy'—to adopt a contemporary commonplace[10]—was a prominent feature of political commentary and argument after 1918, and one that has largely been overlooked in recent scholarship. Michael Freeden has identified a tendency during the 1930s to question the capacity of democracy to respond to the demands of 'modern' government, and other historians have noted discussions of the weakness or vulnerability of democracy during that decade.[11] Jon Lawrence has

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[4] Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999), ch.7, esp. 204-12.

[5] J.A. Hobson, *Problems of a New World* (London, 1921), 237.

[6] H.G. Wells, *Democracy Under Revision* (London, 1927), 13.

[7] Ernest Barker, 'Is Democracy Dying?', *The Listener* I:16 (1 May 1929), 591-2. Barker's answer was that democracy was in quite good health by historical standards, but that amid multiple contemporary threats its survival depended upon the strength of 'popular thought and will' – ibid., 592.

[8] Leonard Woolf, 'Is Democracy Failing?', *The Listener* VI:143 (7 Oct. 1931), 571.

[9] J.A. Hobson, *Democracy and a Changing Civilisation* (London, 1934), vii.

[10] See, for example, Moritz Julius Bonn, *The Crisis of European Democracy*, (New Haven, 1925); C.D. Burns, *Democracy: Its Defects and Advantages* (London, 1929), ch.1 ('The Crisis'); Harold J. Laski, *Democracy in Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1933); C.D. Burns, *The Challenge to Democracy* (London, 1934), ch.1 ('The Crisis'); William E. Rappard, *The Crisis of Democracy* (Chicago, 1938), esp. ch.1 and 202-15. Rappard's view that 'the crisis of democracy was […] discussed in Great Britain mainly because it was noticeable elsewhere' (215) is at odds with much of the evidence discussed in this article.

[11] Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided: A Study in British Political Thought, 1914-1919* (Oxford, 1986), 330-39; Andrzej Olechnowicz, 'Civic leadership and education for democracy: The Simons and the Wythenshawe estate', *Contemporary British History* 14:1 (2000), 3-26, at 15-17; Brad Beaven, *Leisure, citizenship and working-class men in Britain, 1850-1945* (Manchester, 2005), chs.4-6.

remarked upon the decreasingly 'democratic' character of direct interactions between politicians and electors, and several historians have claimed that Britain's political culture between 1918 and 1945 was marked by widespread political disengagement.[12] But in general, recent scholarship on inter-war Britain has evinced an assumption that the transition to universal adult suffrage was accompanied by a process of 'democratisation' in political, quotidian, and artistic culture. This democratisation thesis, as it might be termed, was influentially formulated in D.L. LeMahieu's *A Culture for Democracy* (1988), which argued that an emergent commercial culture and the responses it stimulated among intellectual or 'cultivated' elites coalesced into a 'common culture' that provided the underpinning for formal political democracy.[13] The emergence of a democratic or democratising culture in inter-war Britain has since been explored, with varying emphases, in studies of popular writing initiatives, leisure, social science and selfhood, citizenship, and associational culture.[14] The nature of the democracy that cultural artefacts and activities supposedly displayed is not always clearly articulated in these studies; but even where it is, or where (as in the case of initiatives for promoting citizenship) it can perhaps to some extent be taken for granted, its relation to discussions of the nature and condition of democracy in contemporary political thought and argument receives limited attention. As Ross McKibbin has pointed out, after 1918 people in Britain 'lived in what nearly all agreed was a democracy', but 'They were not […] necessarily agreed on what democracy meant and should mean.'[15] In their neglect of this disagreement, historical accounts of democratisation in inter-war Britain could be said to be histories of political culture with important aspects of the politics, or more specifically of the political thought and argument, left out.

This article attempts to remedy that omission by reconstructing the terms in which democracy could be said to be fragile or, as some put it, in 'crisis' in inter-war Britain; and

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[12] Jon Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War', *Past and Present* 190 (2006), 185-216, at 185; Kevin Jefferys, *Politics and the People: A History of British Democracy since 1918* (London, 2007); Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson & Nick Tiratsoo, *England Arise! The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995), but see also the critical appraisal of the latter work in James Hinton, '1945 and the Apathy School', *History Workshop Journal* 43 (1997), 266-273.

[13] D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988), 3-4.

[14] Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The democratization of writing in Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Sandra Dawson, 'Working-class consumers and the campaign for holidays with pay', *Twentieth Century British History* 18:3 (2007), 277-305, at 282, 303; James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford, 2010); id., *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford, 2013); Pat Thane, 'The Impact of Mass Democracy on British Political Culture, 1918-1939', in Julie V. Gottlieb & Richard Toye, eds., *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender, and Politics in Britain, 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), 54-69; Helen McCarthy, 'Parties, Voluntary Associations, and Democratic Politics in Interwar Britain', *Historical Journal* 50:4 (2007), 891-912, esp. 909-12; McCarthy, 'Whose Democracy?'.

[15] Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), v.

by demonstrating the relevance of this discursive tendency to other aspects of political culture during that period. (It does not argue or assume that democracy in Britain actually *was* fragile or in crisis, which is a separate issue and beyond the scope of this essay.) In doing so it focuses primarily upon the spheres of formal political thought, commentary, and argument: that is, not upon activist cultures or popular politics but upon the 'intellectual setting' of politics that has recently been the focus of increased historical interest amid a convergence of the so-called 'new political history' with histories of high politics.[16] Proponents of democratisation have generally focused upon initiatives and activities that appear to evince *popular* enthusiasm for democracy; but in many cases, such as the activities of pressure groups and voluntary organisations or of schemes for political education, the focus is not upon the demonstrable effects of those initiatives among their participants—which were sometimes fairly limited—but more narrowly upon the objectives and activities of the organisers.[17] Consequently, as Helen McCarthy points out, 'the political subjectivities of ordinary voters' have typically remained outside the scope of claims for the democratic character of inter-war political culture.[18] It is therefore of some significance to establish the contexts of assumption and refutation in which initiatives to promote democracy were situated: if one (or more) of those contexts established the credibility of claims that democracy was in retreat or facing a possibly terminal crisis, the extent to which such initiatives support a characterisation of British political culture as straightforwardly 'democratic' would appear to be more limited than has generally been recognised, and the assumption that twentieth-century Britain followed a trajectory of democratisation that set it apart from developments elsewhere in Europe may require significant reconsideration.

This essay argues that such claims were a commonplace of inter-war political thought, commentary, and argument, and its first three sections are occupied with a reconstruction of them and of the conditions for their credibility. (In carrying out this reconstruction I shall follow the tendency of historians of 'democratisation' to focus primarily on the British nation; but I shall also register some of the more prominent instances in which contemporaries perceived the absence or reverse of a 'democratizing impulse' in imperial government and politics.) Democracy could mean many things to people who warned of its

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[16] Susan Pedersen, 'What is Political History Now?', in David Cannadine, ed., *What is History Now?* (London, 2002), 42.
[17] As an example of the limited success of such initiatives among their intended beneficiaries, see Véronique Molinari, 'Educating and Mobilizing the New Voter: Interwar Handbooks and Female Citizenship in Great Britain, 1918-1931', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15 (2014), 17-34, at 19.
[18] McCarthy, 'Whose Democracy?', 238.

weakness or of its being in 'crisis' in inter-war Britain. In the loosest and simplest sense it was the antonym of dictatorship, of fascism, or of totalitarianism. In some formulations it was a liberal democracy of representative institutions based on a wide (and, from 1928, universal) adult franchise; in others, an ideal of active citizenship oriented towards the production of a common good, the lineages of which lay in the languages of republican political thought. In yet another, more pejorative, sense, democracy denoted or implied a levelling principle or tendency, a predominance of 'numbers' over 'knowledge' in the vocabulary of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century progressivism, which imperilled the cultural standards and leadership that seemed essential if a mass electorate was to be fitted for democratic citizenship – a sense that almost automatically carried an implication of crisis. In practice these senses were seldom clearly articulated or distinguished, and their usages were not mutually exclusive: all of them could be combined in a single utterance, even by commentators who attempted to leaven their account of the weakness or embattlement of democracy with some measure of optimism concerning its prospects, as many of those examined in this essay did. The end of the 1930s, however, saw the increasing prominence of another sense of democracy in which it was identified with a form of negative liberty: democracy in this sense was a political system that left its citizens the widest scope to pursue their own ends and objectives, a development that responded to the seeming impossibility of realising a cohesive popular will or common good in a mass democracy, and to the immediate threat of 'totalitarianism' – but which also established a set of constraints and prohibitions that fundamentally shaped the 'intellectual setting' of British politics during and after the second world war. These developments are explored in the final section of the essay, where I also return to the question of whether, and in what sense, twentieth-century Britain can be said to have been 'democratic'; and suggest that answers to this question might be enriched through an engagement with the political theorist Sheldon Wolin's notion of 'fugitive democracy', which offers a way of accounting for the inherent tensions and vicissitudes of democracy as a formal political system and as an ideal of political life.

I

The idea that Britain was implicated in a European 'crisis of democracy' after the Great War proceeded from an assumption that the British nation *was*, at least nominally, a democracy. Such an assumption had become increasingly widely held since the second Reform Act of 1867, and had frequently been accompanied by expressions of ambivalence or foreboding

towards 'democracy' as a system of government or as an element of the political nation.[19] In inter-war Britain the passage of the Representation of the People Act of 1918, which inaugurated universal manhood suffrage and enfranchised women over the age of thirty subject to property, marriage, and academic qualifications, appeared a decisive watershed: in its aftermath, as McKibbin has observed, a widespread belief that Britain had become a democracy was one of the distinguishing features of the post-war years.[20] Yet in the arenas of formal political debate and commentary it was accompanied by a marked lack of confidence as to the resilience of parliamentary democracy. This lack of confidence was exacerbated by the first election to be held under the new franchise established in 1918, which, in its unseemly haste and unusual party alignments under the 'Coupon' issued to supporters of the wartime Coalition, succeeded in producing vastly disproportionate support for the government and was widely believed to have diminished the legitimacy of the ensuing parliament.[21] (The 'Coupon election' also initially strengthened Lloyd George's already highly-centralised premiership to a degree that his opponents often likened to dictatorship, and that some of his bypassed colleagues occasionally viewed as a departure from constitutional proprieties).[22] Immediately after the election a series of challenges to colonial rule in Ireland, India, and south-west Asia also laid bare the tensions between Britain's equivocal commitment to self-government and its sometimes brutal treatment of individuals and organisations that demanded it too soon. At Westminster, the new parliament had scarcely been elected before the efficacy of the institution itself was called into question, resulting in a Speaker's Conference on devolution whose recommendations were not implemented after their publication in 1920.[23] In that year the future Labour prime minister Ramsay MacDonald described Parliament in its existing form as 'a mere tool of a capitalist dictatorship or a mere plaything in the hands of demagogues and party managers', a criticism that registered a much wider ambivalence within the Labour movement towards

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[19] Robert Saunders, 'Democracy', in David Craig & James Thompson, eds., *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013), 142-167, esp. 152-63.

[20] McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, v.

[21] Richard Toye, '"Perfectly Parliamentary"? The Labour Party and the House of Commons in the Inter-War Years', *Twentieth Century British History* 25:1 (2014), 1-29, at 10.

[22] Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George's Premiership: A Study in "Prime Ministerial Government"', *Historical Journal* 13:1 (1970), 130-57, esp. 130-1, 143-4, 148.

[23] Ronald Butt, *The Power of Parliament* (London, 1967), 105-10. Maurice Cowling also claims that the Rothermere press launched a series of attacks on Parliament in mid-1919, amid Rothermere's wavering support for the Coalition – Cowling, *The Impact of Labour, 1920-1924* (Cambridge, 1971), 49.

parliamentary democracy that found its most vigorous expression in the advocacy and use of 'direct action' immediately after 1918.[24]

Although direct action and wider outbreaks of industrial unrest after 1918 were briefly thought by Lloyd George and other leading ministers to pose a serious threat to parliamentary democracy,[25] in practice their impact was limited and their efficacy decisively undermined with the collapse of the 'triple alliance' of miners, railway workers and transport workers in April 1921, amid economic conditions that weakened organised labour.[26] More fundamental reservations over the prospects for democracy in Britain were expressed in terms of doubt over whether the newly-enlarged electorate possessed the qualities required for democratic citizenship. Such reservations were a common motif of writing on a 'crisis of democracy' in inter-war Europe, as Mark Mazower has observed.[27] In Britain they were a prominent, and perhaps unsurprising, feature of conservative political speech, notably in Stanley Baldwin's concern 'to make democracy safe for the world' after 1918.[28] Similar sentiments were also, however, strongly expressed across the entire spectrum of 'progressive' opinion. The brief post-war vogue enjoyed by guild socialism was partly founded upon what G.D.H. Cole claimed was its capacity to realise a fuller conception of democracy than parliamentary forms alone could produce;[29] but Cole's fellow guildsman Ivor Brown complained in 1920 that 'the mass of the people' had yet to attain the moral and intellectual qualities required by democracy, and by the end of the decade Cole himself had recanted what he described as the 'politically-minded person's utopia' of guild socialism on the grounds that 'Democracy is only a good system of government for people who are democratically minded'.[30] As Stuart MacIntyre has pointed out, during the 1920s Labour

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[24] J.R. MacDonald, *Parliament and Democracy* (London, 1920), 53. On the political purposes that may have been served by MacDonald's expression of this sentiment see Toye, '"Perfectly Parliamentary"?', 10-11.

[25] Kenneth Morgan states that Lloyd George and Balfour thought a national miners' strike, in particular, 'would menace the very foundation of democratic government' and that 'alarmist talk filled the air [within government] until the late autumn of 1919' – Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918-1922* (Oxford, 1979), 49.

[26] The limitations of 'direct action' are noted in Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, 68 and in Toye, '"Perfectly Parliamentary"?', 9; the effect of worsening economic conditions upon the bargaining position of organised labour is noted in Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity*, 73.

[27] Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 20-25;

[28] Quoted in Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, 205. See also Baldwin's remark to the future earl of Halifax (Lord Irwin) quoted in Clarisse Berthezène, *Training Minds for the War of Ideas: Ashridge College, the Conservative Party and the cultural politics in Britain, 1929-54* (Manchester, 2015), 13.

[29] See G.D.H. Cole, 'National Guilds Movement in Great Britain', *Monthly Labor Review* 9:1 (1919), 24-32, esp. 31. The emphasis placed upon democracy by Cole and his associates was not universally endorsed within the guild movement: see Marc Stears, 'Guild socialism and ideological diversity on the British left, 1914-1926', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 3:3 (1998), 289-306, at 299.

[30] Ivor Brown, *The Meaning of Democracy* (London, 1920), 170; G.D.H. Cole, *The Next Ten Years in British Social and Economic Policy* (London, 1929), 160.

leaders tended to interpret the party's electoral disappointments by reference to a belief, rooted in positivist and evolutionary social theory, that the electorate constituted a 'mass' whose political consciousness had yet to acquire the qualities required for full democratic citizenship.[31] J.A. Hobson viewed the principal reason for (what he claimed was) the failure of democracy after the war as 'the unreality and incompetence of a popular will', which in turn was due to educational standards that 'the enemies of Democracy' purposefully lowered.[32] In 1921 L.T. Hobhouse identified as foremost among the 'three great difficulties' faced by democracy 'the moral situation', wherein a general neglect of the public interest was reinforced by the predominance of passion over reason, and of force over justice: he concluded that the only remedy was 'a complete reversal of the prevailing standards of judgment', the prospects for which were at best uncertain.[33] By the early 1930s Hobson, for his part, was willing to suggest that 'the common sense of the people' might form the basis for a revival of democracy, although he also noted that even this residual form of democratic subjectivity was not currently exhibited by the 'large stratum of humanity whose crude inert mentality keeps them normally below the level of active common sense', and warned that 'in its uneducated form' it was not adequate 'to make the popular will an effective instrument for government.'[34] The liberal lecturer and commentator C.D. Burns opened his 1929 study of democracy by noting that 'The abilities of the common man may not be such as to warrant a belief in the democratic ideal'; but argued that the full development of those abilities had hitherto been constrained, and that a process of education might bring them forth in sufficient measure to make democracy viable.[35]

This widely-shared assumption concerning what Beatrice Webb called 'the will-lessness of the electorate' may appear as a weak form of the ideal of tutelage whereby the denial of self-government to subjects of colonialism was commonly justified – an ideal that was reinforced by the League of Nations' system of trusteeship, which arranged for the government by 'advanced nations' of 'colonies and territories […] inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world'.[36]

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[31] Stuart MacIntyre, 'British Labour, Marxism and Working Class Apathy in the Nineteen Twenties', *Historical Journal* 20:2 (1977), 479-496, at 484-5.
[32] Hobson, *Problems of a New World*, 238; 239.
[33] L.T. Hobhouse, 'Democracy and Civilization', *Sociological Review* XIII (1921), 125-135, at 135.
[34] Hobson, *Democracy and a changing civilisation*, 78-80 (at 80); 82; 100.
[35] Burns, *Democracy: Its Defects and Advantages*, 17; ch.IX ('Education for Democracy').
[36] 'Mrs. S. Webb' [*sic*], 'Diseases of Organized Society—II. The Drawbacks of Democracy', *Listener* VII:158 (20 Jan. 1932), 82; 'The Covenant of the League of Nations (including Amendments adopted to December, 1924)', The Avalon Project, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School (https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp#art22, accessed 16 Jun. 2021).

However, concerns about the British electorate's readiness for democracy differed from those by reference to which self-government was circumscribed or denied in Britain's colonies and mandates, in at least two respects. First, wide and then (in 1928) universal adult suffrage was established in inter-war Britain, so that the ostensible problem was that of bringing the subjective qualities of the electorate into alignment with the prior democratisation of political forms – whereas in Britain's colonial empire and mandates the notional sequence was reversed, in varying degrees. Second, tutelage could be envisaged almost as an indefinite arrangement—as Moritz Bonn observed, many of its exponents 'were in no hurry to relinquish their self-allotted task of leading a backward race from the depth of utter darkness to the heights of dazzling light'—whereas by the mid-1930s complaints of the weaknesses of the *domestic* electorate could also be accompanied by a benevolent acknowledgement that it was showing signs of maturity, usually when it behaved in an agreeable fashion.[37] For example, when the general election of 1931 produced an overwhelming majority for a National Government in which his Conservative Party was the dominant partner, Stanley Baldwin declared that 'Democracy has justified itself in the most striking fashion', and he was thereafter inclined to suggest that the assimilation of the new electorate to the political nation was underway – although the supposition that democracy needed to 'justif[y] itself' signals the extent to which its viability and efficacy remained in question.[38]

Political thought and argument in inter-war Britain therefore confronted what James Kloppenberg has identified as one of the 'paradoxes of democracy': the idea, which has been a long-standing feature of democratic thought in modern Europe and America, that the success of democracy as a political system requires people to exhibit subjective qualities that they will not spontaneously develop or acquire, and with which they must therefore be instilled.[39] Elements of this idea were present in Conservative misgivings over the prospects for mass democracy, although its paradoxical quality was less pronounced when democracy was viewed as an unfortunate necessity rather than as an inherent good. A stronger version of it had long been a feature of British progressivism, but it had previously been resolved by what was held to be the quasi-scientific certainty of individual and societal progress, the effect of which would be that a natural development of the capacities of the electorate, partly through its responsiveness to moral and intellectual leadership, would make democracy

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[37] Bonn, *Crisis of European Democracy*, 18.
[38] 'Nation—Not Party: Lessons of the Election', *The Times* 29 Oct. 1931, 12.
[39] James T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (New York, 2016), Introduction ('The Paradoxes of Democracy'), esp. 6-7.

workable.[40] That certainty was dispelled by the Great War, with its 'revelations of the irrationality and brutality of "civilized" peoples' which, Hobson later observed, had gradually undermined progressive hopes for the 'forces of freedom and co-operation to win their destined supremacy in human self-government.'[41] Hobhouse never fully regained his pre-war confidence in reason and progress, and the 'complete reversal of the prevailing standards of judgement' which he saw as the precondition for democracy remained for him a distant prospect.[42] For others the solution lay in some kind of minoritarianism, wherein the progress of reason and civic responsibility was devolved upon educated elites. Hobson's proposals for the strengthening of the popular will required the creation of 'intelligent minorities' in 'every social environment' to perform a regulatory function upon 'the minds of the uninformed and less intelligent majority', supported by a wider programme of educational reform.[43] Burns advocated a form of 'Education for Democracy' that depended upon eradicating 'the existing suspicion of exceptional ability among common men' which he claimed was a relic of earlier, non-democratic societies.[44] In 1934 the liberal politician Sir Ernest Simon and the feminist social reformer Eva Hubback founded the Association for Education in Citizenship, which sought to make good the deficiencies of the new electorate as a democratic citizenry (and occasionally engaged in uneasy collaborations with the Bonar Law Memorial College established by the Conservative Party in 1928 as part of its efforts to counter 'Bolshevist' influences).[45] But Simon warily observed in an essay heralding the establishment of the A.E.C. that instruction in self-government was a somewhat contradictory enterprise. 'It is easy for authoritarians to teach obedience' he observed; but 'it is extraordinarily difficult for lovers of freedom living in the world of today to teach their creed.' Somehow, though, the problem would have to be resolved: 'If our teachers fail in this task', Simon warned, 'the look out for democracy is indeed gloomy.'[46]

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[40] Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge, 1978), 144-5.
[41] J.A. Hobson, 'Thoughts on Our Present Discontents', *Political Quarterly* 9:1 (1938), 47-57, at 47, 48.
[42] Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L.T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1979), 245-253; Freeden, *Liberalism Divided*, 44.
[43] Hobson, *Democracy and a changing civilization*, 107.
[44] Burns, *Democracy: Its Defects and Advantages*, 181; 208.
[45] Berthezène, *Training Minds*, 142-3, 145. On the political purpose of the Bonar Law Memorial College, see E.H.H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002), 135-6.
[46] E.D. Simon, 'Education for Democracy', *Political Quarterly* V:3 (Jul-Sep. 1934), 317.

The Association for Education in Citizenship could appear as a manifestation of the 'democratizing impulse' that has been found 'seemingly everywhere' in inter-war Britain, and Hubback and Simon have been identified as exemplars of 'inter-war democratic idealism'.[47] Simon, for one, was certainly not without some degree of optimism concerning the prospects for democracy, but he presented the A.E.C. as a response to the 'grave danger' that it was facing from authoritarianism in Europe; and he recognised that the A.E.C's *modus operandi*—to instruct people in how to exercise self-government—stood in an awkward relationship to the basic principle of democracy.[48] That awkwardness was manifested on a larger scale in discussions of the role of expertise in democratic government – a long-standing concern of progressive politics in western Europe and America, the urgency of which was heightened after 1918 amid misgivings over the supposed limitations of newly-enlarged electorates, and over the breadth and complexity of business that expanded post-war states had to transact.[49] Even the most sanguine responses to this predicament—some of which echoed the call for universal scientific education that John Dewey voiced in his celebrated debate with Walter Lippmann—registered its force and, in several cases, tacitly raised the same 'extraordinarily difficult' issues that Simon acknowledged were attendant on the work of the A.E.C..[50] Harold Laski, for example, declared it to be self-evident that 'the contours of any subject must be defined by the expert before the plain man can see its full significance', and suggested that the role of 'the plain man's judgement' in politics was to constitute a kind of negative popular will that would merely set 'the limits of possible action in society' – a residual function that would still require the plain man to be subjected to an intensive ethical education.[51]

The idea that the requirement for expertise in government would work against the development of democracy therefore proceeded from the same pattern of assumption concerning the unfitness of the electorate for self-government that we have seen was present

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[47] Thane, 'Impact of Mass Democracy', 58.

[48] Simon, 'Education for Democracy', 314. It has similarly been suggested that efforts to promote citizenship through the reform of working-class leisure were partly responding to a perceived vulnerability of democracy: see Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship*, 133-7, 156-66, 187-9.

[49] On the lineages of the tension between democracy and expertise (or 'knowledge'), see James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (Oxford, 1986), 267-77.

[50] On Dewey, see Tom Arnold-Forster, 'Democracy and Expertise in the Lippmann-Terman Controversy', *Modern Intellectual History* 16:2 (2019), 561-592, at 576-7. For wider discussion of the tension between democracy and expertise, see G.E.G. Catlin, 'The Next Step for Democracy', *The Realist* I:2 (1929), 3-17; Alfred Zimmern, 'Democracy and the Expert', *Political Quarterly* I:1 (1930), 7-25; Harold J. Laski, *The Limitations of the Expert*, Fabian tract 235 (London, 1931); Catlin, 'Expert State *versus* Free State', *Political Quarterly* III:4 (1932), 539-551.

[51] Laski, *Limitations of the Expert*, 4; 13; 14.

in political commentary and theory, in Britain and in Europe, after 1918. That perceived unfitness, allied to the unprecedented complexity of business by which 'modern' states were thought to be confronted, also lay behind demands for representative institutions to be subordinated to executives which Mazower has shown were a general feature of discussions of a 'crisis of democracy' throughout Europe by the mid-1920s.[52] In Britain, as we have seen, concerns over the 'efficiency' of Parliament had been voiced across all parties and affiliations since 1918, and by the end of the 1920s they had come to focus on the failure of successive governments to address the structural unemployment that had followed the war.[53] As was the case elsewhere in Europe, in Britain this criticism could be cited in support of proposals to strengthen the executive (as it was, notably, by Lloyd George and by the group of 'progressive Conservatives' who advocated greater State involvement in industry);[54] but it could also be cited in support of proposals to strengthen the *legislature*, by means of various schemes of procedural reform or of geographic or functional devolution. Winston Churchill advanced a much-discussed proposal for an 'Economic sub-Parliament […] with fearless detachment from public opinion' in his Romanes Lecture of 1930, and in 1931-32 a House of Commons Select Committee conducted an inquiry into the functioning and public standing of Parliament – the recommendations of which were again disregarded by the government of the day.[55] The common concern of these initiatives was to rescue political democracy from a disrepute or debility of which it was widely agreed to be at risk by the early 1930s: 'If democratic government is to survive,' Laski declared in 1930, 'it must discover means of restoring to the individual citizen his personal initiative and responsibility' through radical measures of geographic and functional devolution that would make representative institutions responsive to the wills of individuals.[56]

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[52] Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 16-20.

[53] See, notably, the oft-cited remarks of David Lloyd George quoted in 'Drastic Action to Fight Unemployment', *Guardian* 13 June 1930, 11; Ramsay Muir, *How Britain is Governed: A Critical Analysis of Modern Developments in the British System of Government* (London, 1930), esp. 2-9, 195-203; H. Sidebotham, 'The Inefficiency of Parliament', *Political Quarterly* I:3 (1930), 351-361; Walter Elliot, 'The Inefficiency of Parliament (II): A Reply from the Floor of the House', *Political Quarterly* I:3 (1930), 362-367; Winston L. Spencer-Churchill, *Parliamentary Government and the Economic Problem* (Oxford, 1930); Mrs. Sidney Webb [*sic*], *A New Reform Bill*, Fabian tract 236 (London, 1931); Eustace Percy, *Democracy on Trial: A Preface to an Industrial Policy* (London, 1931), ch.IV; Herbert Samuel, 'Defects and Reforms of Parliament', *Political Quarterly* II:3 (1931) 305-318; John Strachey & C.E.M. Joad, 'Parliamentary Reform: The New Party's Proposals', *Political Quarterly* 2:3 (1931), 319-336; W.G.S. Adams, 'Has Parliamentary Government Failed?' in Mary Adams, ed., *The Modern State* (London, 1933).

[54] Daniel Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning: The Debate on Economic Planning in Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1997), 75-7.

[55] Churchill, *Parliamentary Government*, 16; Butt, *Power of Parliament*, 130-44.

[56] Harold J. Laski, 'The Recovery of Citizenship', in Laski, *The Dangers of Obedience & Other Essays* (New York, 1930), 59-90, quotation at 59.

The risks to liberal democracy in Britain appeared to many commentators to be exacerbated by the financial and political crises of August 1931, when Ramsay MacDonald's second Labour government failed to agree on a programme of economies to restore confidence in sterling and was replaced by a 'National Government' – led by MacDonald, but with predominantly Conservative and Liberal support. The appearance that a democratically-elected government had been unseated to meet the requirements of finance-capital prompted vociferous protests, in which even such a relatively moderate figure as Christopher Addison, a member of MacDonald's Labour Cabinet and formerly a Liberal cabinet minister under Lloyd George, was moved to denounce the new administration as a 'banking dictatorship' (a remark which the *New Statesman*—itself no supporter of the National Government—judged to be 'really only to a limited extent justified').[57] After the election of October 1931, in which Labour was reduced to a rump of fifty-two MPs, the liberal intellectual Gilbert Murray declared in a letter to the *Guardian* that 'the electoral system […] has utterly broken down' and 'The whole Labour party […] practically disfranchised', leaving it with no effective means of expression within the constitution.[58] When collective Cabinet responsibility was suspended the following year to facilitate the introduction of tariffs, the *New Statesman* claimed that it amounted to 'the destruction of [the] constitution', and remarked that the rationale for this procedure—that MacDonald was 'indispensable' as leader of the National Government—'spells the end of democracy and of reason in politics. It is the way in which democracy has broken up in one country after another in Europe.'[59] The latter point was made even more strongly shortly afterwards by the legal scholar William Ivor Jennings, who declared that 'all the recent developments' in the National Government's policy and administrative reforms 'lead towards Fascism'.[60]

Jennings was not alone in discerning intimations of fascism or, more broadly, 'dictatorship' in the actions and tendencies of British governments during the 1930s,[61] but it was the National Government's use of executive powers that appeared to present the most immediate challenge to parliamentary democracy. (This appearance may have been

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[57] 'Comments', *New Statesman* 29 Aug. 1931, 242.

[58] Gilbert Murray, 'Dangers Ahead: The Government and the Tories' (letter), *Guardian* 9 Nov. 1931, 16.

[59] 'Constitutional Niceties', *New Statesman* 30 Jan. 1932, 112-13; 113.

[60] W. Ivor Jennings, 'The Constitution Under Strain', *Political Quarterly* III:2 (Apr.-Jun. 1932), 194-205, at 204.

[61] See, for example, 'Reflections on the Crisis: A Symposium', *Political Quarterly* II:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1931), 457-84, at 467-9, 477; 'A "Monstrous Proposal"', *Guardian* 16 Apr. 1934, 8; 'Menace of Sedition Bill', *Guardian* 28 Apr. 1934, 13; H.N. Brailsford, *Property or Peace?* (London, 1934), 59-60, 62-3; W.A. Rudlin, *The Growth of Fascism in Great Britain* (London, 1935), esp. ch.V; and, more broadly, G.D.H. & M.I. Cole, *The Condition of Britain* (London, 1937), 428-36. See also below, n.94.

facilitated by the recent publication of Lord Hewart of Bury's widely-discussed book *The New Despotism*, which presented an alarmist criticism of similar practices as a general tendency of post-war government).[62] In this strengthening of the executive at the expense of the elected legislature Britain followed a pattern of development that had been visible across Europe since the mid-1920s, and which had produced a kind of slide from democracy into authoritarianism.[63] Yet as in other European polities, the apparent weakness of democracy in Britain could make such a development appear the lesser of the available evils: Laski, for example, complained that 'our Government has become an executive dictatorship tempered by the fear of Parliamentary revolt', yet suggested that a future Labour government 'would […] build upon the amplitude of [the] precedent' set by the National Government, by making extensive use of the same executive instruments.[64] Shortly afterwards he became a leading supporter of discussions within the Socialist League, a new radical body within the Labour Party, of the coercive methods to be used by a future Labour government once in office.[65] Those methods were strongly advocated by Stafford Cripps, who in early 1933 aired proposals for the suspension of elections, use of emergency powers, and restraint of the judiciary and of parliamentary debate – and serenely observed that in certain circumstances 'it would probably be better and more conducive to the general peace and welfare of the country for the Socialist Government to make itself temporarily into a dictatorship'.[66] (In the same volume Clement Attlee, then the deputy leader of the Labour Party and in the midst of a brief flirtation with the Socialist League, declared in an essay on local government that 'The important thing is not to do things with the most scrupulous regard to theories of democracy or exact constitutional propriety, but to get on with the job', and acknowledged that measures amounting to 'autocracy' would be necessary before a 'return to the full exercise of democracy as soon as the Socialist State is in being'.)[67] The success initially enjoyed by the League was such that the General Secretary of the T.U.C., Walter Citrine, was moved to denounce the devaluation of parliamentarism by 'too many people in the Labour Movement', and to declare that 'It is about time we cleared the decks for the settlement of the issue of

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[62] Hewart of Bury, *The New Despotism* (London, 1929).

[63] Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 18-20.

[64] Laski, *The Crisis and the Constitution*, 26; 34; id., 'Labour and the Constitution', *New Statesman* 10 Sep. 1932, 277.

[65] Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge, 1977), 49-50. I am generally indebted in what follows to Pimlott's account of the Socialist League.

[66] Stafford Cripps, 'Can Socialism Come by Constitutional Methods?', in Stafford Cripps *et al.*, *Problems of a Socialist Government* (London, 1933), 46.

[67] C.R. Attlee, 'Local Government and the Socialist Plan', in Cripps *et al.*, *Problems of a Socialist Government*, 189; 208.

democracy or dictatorship' – which the Labour Party itself rapidly attempted to do, at a party conference that exhibited what the progressive journal *Time and Tide* wryly described as a 'militantly democratic' tone.[68]

The brief 'Cripps-Citrine controversy' is indicative of the extent to which democracy could be claimed to be at risk after 1931 – issuing, on Citrine's side, in a demand that the Labour Party's commitment to formal political democracy be reaffirmed, and on Cripps's in a demand that such a commitment be qualified in view of a possible obstruction of democracy by other parties and by the state apparatus. The issues raised by Cripps were also explored in Laski's *Democracy in Crisis* (1933), in which he presented the contemporary 'crisis' of representative democracy as a crisis of *capitalist* democracy – that is, of the incompatibility of capitalism with the democratic principle of equality, such that the ethical basis of political consent had broken down and parliament was in a condition of 'decay'.[69] Socialism was the natural resolution of that crisis, because it sought the equality that was both the essence of democracy and 'a permanent passion among mankind':[70] a claim which, although Laski also emphasised the necessity of winning popular support for socialism by conventional means, could also tacitly justify quite radical departures from formal democratic norms and procedures as a prerequisite for the realisation of democracy in a fuller, ethical sense.[71] Nonetheless, Reinhold Niebuhr—an influential participant in inter-war debates about democracy in America—suggested in a review of Laski's book that it was 'rather too closely wedded to parliamentarism', and that socialist parties could learn from the recent Nazi seizure of power in Germany.[72]

<p style="text-align:center">III</p>

By the early 1930s talk of the discrediting, or of the impending demise, of democracy was even more commonplace than it had been in the early 1920s. Democracy, the Conservative

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[68] Quoted in '"Hitlerism" Denounced', *The Times* 10 May 1933, p.10; 'Heretics at Hastings', *Tide and Tide* 7 Oct. 1933, 1173.
[69] Laski, *Democracy in Crisis*, 92.
[70] Ibid., 263.
[71] As, for example, in Laski's justification of the USSR, ibid., 211-16; and in his conjecture earlier in the text that a future Labour government would have to undertake 'a radical transformation of parliamentary government […] It would have to take vast powers, and legislate under them by ordinance and decree; it would have to suspend the classic formulae of normal opposition' (ibid., 87).
[72] 'Reviews', *The Adelphi* 6:2 (1933), 140-2 (quotation at 141). On Niebuhr's interventions in inter-war American debates about democracy see Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton, 2010), ch.2, esp. 71-5.

former Cabinet minister Eustace Percy declared in 1931, was 'on trial' in Britain, its survival dependent upon the reversal of 'a whole process of moral degeneration in the body politic' and upon the resolution of an economic and spiritual 'Crisis of Western Civilisation'.[73] The centenary of the Great Reform Act was greeted by the BBC's magazine *The Listener* with the regretful observation that 'nowadays we none of us feel very jubilant about the success of democracy'.[74] Stanley Baldwin, who had seen the result of the 1931 election as a 'justif[ication]' of democracy, reverted to a more sombre tone after Hitler's accession to power: the post-war world, he reflected in July 1933, had 'largely lost faith in democracy' amid the increasing prevalence of dictatorship in Europe.[75] The following year the Liberal writer and politician Ramsay Muir remarked upon a 'widespread dissatisfaction with the working of democracy, which is shared by those who believe in it […] as well as by those who denounce it' – and to which Britain was not immune.[76] Concern over the survival of democracy in Britain was one of the reasons for the attractiveness of micro-economic planning by the state during the 1930s, which many of its advocates hoped might mitigate the worst effects of the Depression and thus preclude the movement towards authoritarianism that had taken place in a growing number of European countries.[77] Yet even the most fervent advocates of planning acknowledged that there was no obvious way in which it could be undertaken on an unarguably democratic basis, because it required the kind of fundamental agreement on the ends or purposes of production that was not easily envisaged by writers who complained of the absence or incoherence of a 'popular will' in modern societies.[78] It was partly for this reason that progressive politics in Britain developed something of a fascination with the USSR, where economic planning could appear to be enjoying unprecedented success *and* to be compatible with 'democracy', in a certain sense – particularly after the promulgation of the new Soviet constitution of 1936, which ostensibly established equalised individual voting rights, the secret ballot, and freedom of conscience,

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[73] Percy, *Democracy on Trial*, 12; ch.II.

[74] 'The Centenary of Democracy', *The Listener* 8 Jun. 1932, 816.

[75] Quoted in Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, 314. I am also indebted here to Williamson's account of the development of Baldwin's public discussion of democracy during the 1930s.

[76] Ramsay Muir, *Is Democracy a Failure?* (London, 1934), 13.

[77] On planning as the salvation of democracy, see for example 'The Alternatives', *New Statesman* 28 Feb. 1931, 5; Allen of Hurtwood, 'Private Armies', *The Times* 26 Jan. 1934, 8; '"The Struggle for Liberty"', *The Times* 15 Feb. 1934, 11; 'Liberty and Democratic Leadership: Four Fundamental Issues', *Manchester Guardian* 17 May 1934, 7; Hobson, *Democracy and a changing civilisation*; *The Next Five Years: An Essay in Political Agreement* (London, 1935), 19; Harold Macmillan, *The Middle Way: A Study of the Problem of Economic and Social Progress in a Free and Democratic Society* (London, 1938), ch.XVIII.

[78] For notable articulations of the tension between planning and democracy, see J.M. Keynes, broadcast on state planning (14 Mar. 1932), *Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes* (London, 1971-89), vol. XXI, 84; and Barbara Wootton, *Plan or No Plan* (London, 1934), 311-12.

worship, speech, and assembly.[79] Nonetheless, all the schemes for micro-economic planning during the 1930s that are surveyed in Daniel Ritschel's expansive study—capitalist, 'progressive' conservative, liberal, and socialist—encountered some form of the tension between planning and political democracy, and none successfully resolved it.[80] William Beveridge, one of the few prominent Liberal exponents of planning during the late 1930s, declared in 1938 that 'Planning under democracy is like breathing under water' – a problem to which he, too, had no fully worked-out solution.[81]

The welcome that was extended in much of progressive political commentary to the new Soviet constitution was closely related to a perception that the 'crisis of democracy' had elsewhere entered a particularly acute phase, amid the growing military assertiveness of Italy and Germany and the outbreak of civil war in Spain in July 1936. Philip Williamson claims that Baldwin viewed the pacific temper of public opinion, which the so-called 'Peace Ballot' of 1934-5 was sometimes taken to demonstrate, as indicative of the naivety of the new mass electorate, which he attempted to dispel in speeches warning of the horrors of modern warfare.[82] Meanwhile, the various campaigns for a 'popular front' of anti-fascist political forces that were launched in Britain from the mid-1930s constituted a kind of culmination of progressive attempts to resolve the post-war 'crisis of democracy', by providing a new institutional form for the realisation of a common good. G.D.H. Cole, who helped to initiate mainstream discussion of a British popular front in June 1936, described its purpose as 'the strengthening and more effective expression of democratic opinion', which could be accomplished 'despite the fact that [people] profess belief in divergent theories, and expect different consequences to flow from the actions which they are prepared unitedly to take.'[83] In other words, support for the survival of democracy itself was a kind of residual common good, and the campaign through which it was prosecuted would constitute a training in democratic citizenship. A similar purpose was adopted by the Left Book Club, which after its launch in May 1936 by the publisher Victor Gollancz rapidly established itself as an

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[79] On the welcome extended to the Soviet constitution of 1936 in mainstream progressive politics, see Paul Corthorn, 'Labour, the Left, and the Stalinist Purges of the late 1930s', *Historical Journal* 48 (2005), 179-207, at 184. Prominent dissentients from this positive view of the USSR among British progressives included Hobson (see Hobson, *Democracy and a changing civilisation*, 61-5), and Keynes (see, for example, J.M. Keynes, 'National Self-Sufficiency', *New Statesman* 15 Jul. 1933, 65-7, at 66-7; and id., 'The Issue of Freedom' (letter), *New Statesman* 11 Aug. 1934, 179).
[80] Ritschel, *Politics of Planning*, 77, 122, 160, 173-9, 208, 320-1.
[81] William Beveridge, 'Planning under Democracy', in Ernest Simon *et al.*, *Constructive Democracy* (London, 1938), 142.
[82] Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin*, 303-313. The ambiguities of the 'Peace Ballot' are explored in J.A. Thompson, 'The Peace Ballot and the Public', *Albion* 13:4 (1981), 381-92.
[83] G.D.H. Cole, *The People's Front* (London, 1937), 17; 24. See also ibid., 334.

institutional spearhead of the philo-Communist Popular Front campaign. 'The Left Book Club,' Gollancz declared at a rally in the Albert Hall in February 1938, 'fundamentally, rests on the appeal to every man and woman to be politically responsible; not a cipher, not a pawn, but an active citizen playing his part in the affairs of his country and of the world.'[84] Left Book Club members who were prompted by their membership to 'become active political workers', as Gollancz put it, were praised in the Club's journal *Left News* as 'Citizens in the Making',[85] and Gollancz urged members to induce others 'to turn from ignorance, laziness, indifference or selfishness, to active and intelligent citizenship.'[86]

The popular front campaign and its associated institutions and initiatives might appear to lend credence to perceptions of a 'democratizing impulse' in inter-war Britain, but they were predicated upon the weakness and beleaguerment of democracy in the face of 'totalitarian' regimes, and of more generalized conditions of 'modernity' that were held to be inimical to, or incompatible with, democracy. (As George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta and others also pointed out at the time, the simple opposition between 'fascism' and 'democracy' within Europe that advocates of a popular front tended to promote also obfuscated the nature of colonial rule by ostensibly 'democratic' states, and Jawaharlal Nehru took a similar view of the position in India, notwithstanding the limited reforms of 1935.)[87] The prospect that, to some, the idea of a philo-Communist popular front had offered of a resolution to the problems of post-war democracy began to be weakened by revelations from the Soviet show trials that began in August 1936 and by the encounter with Communist realpolitik that British intellectuals underwent in the Spanish civil war, which demonstrated unambiguously that the USSR was not the ally of democracy that, to some, it had briefly appeared to be.[88] The wider campaign for an electoral popular front faltered through a series of short-lived institutional manifestations, hampered by the consistent refusal of the Labour Party to engage in formal alliances with other parties.[89] In late 1938 the victory of anti-Government forces in the Battle of the Ebro all but confirmed that Spain would be added to the list of European countries in which democracy had given way to authoritarianism; confirmation finally came with the fall

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[84] 'Albert Hall Rally: Verbatim Report', *Left News* 11 (Mar. 1937), 286.
[85] Victor Gollancz, 'Editorial (F) Citizens in the Making', *Left News* 23 (Mar. 1938), 720.
[86] Id., 'First Editorial', *Left News* 24 (Apr. 1938), 753.
[87] Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London, 2019), 366-7, 372 (Padmore, Kenyatta); Tom Buchanan, '"The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged": Anti-Fascisim and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s', *Contemporary European History* 25:4 (2016), 645-665, at 651 (Nehru).
[88] On responses to the 'Moscow trials' among the British 'left', see Corthorn, 'Labour, the Left, and the Stalinist Purges'.
[89] Pimlott, *Labour and the Left*, ch.15.

of Madrid the following March, shortly before the Labour Party decisively rejected a popular front policy at its annual conference.[90]

By late 1938 the idea that democracy was somehow incompatible with 'modern' conditions, which had been a latent feature of discussions of the problem of expertise and of the weakness of democratic machinery over the entire inter-war period, converged with the gathering threat posed by 'totalitarian' regimes that *were* held to be characteristically modern, to produce a discussion of the relative capacities of democratic and totalitarian states. Some of the concerns of this discussion had been foreshadowed in Baldwin's oft-stated belief that, in relation to rearmament, 'a democracy is always two years behind the dictator'; but it was also deeply rooted in the idea of a post-war 'crisis of democracy' and intensified as the territorial acquisitions made and sought by the Nazi regime brought another European war into prospect.[91] During the Czechoslovak crisis of September 1938, the *New Statesman* reflected that war against 'totalitarian' regimes would likely require '"democracies" […] more and more to become assimilated to the Fascist States' in their techniques of economic management;[92] and amid the disillusion that followed Chamberlain's return from the Munich conference, the journal published a sequence of articles addressing the widely-voiced assumption that democracy could not compete with the 'efficiency' of totalitarian regimes.[93] One of the criticisms of appeasement that was articulated around this time was that it would ultimately entail the constraint of 'democratic' freedoms in Britain, and politicians and commentators of widely differing political affiliations claimed to perceive proto-authoritarian tendencies in the Chamberlain government as a result of its attempts at cordiality with the Nazi regime.[94] As war came to appear increasingly imminent over the course of 1939, so too did the yielding of democracy in Britain to 'fascist' or 'totalitarian' measures, as a prerequisite of conflict against states that were assumed to be better equipped for 'modern' warfare. The implication was spelled out in a much-discussed essay by E.M. Forster in June

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[90] Ibid., 178-81.

[91] Stanley Baldwin, speech to the House of Commons, 12 November 1936, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series, vol. 317 (1936), col. 1144.

[92] 'War Economics', *New Statesman* 24 Sep. 1938, 446-7 (quotation at 447).

[93] On democracy and efficiency, see: 'Democracy and Rearmament', *New Statesman* 29 Oct. 1938, 676-7; 'Can Democracy Be Efficient', *New Statesman* 31 Dec. 1938, 1113-15; 'Mr. Churchill on Democracy', *New Statesman* 7 Jan. 1939, 5-7; 'Democracy and Dictatorship', *New Statesman* 14 Jan. 1939, 41-2; 'Democracy and Efficiency', *New Statesman* 28 Jan. 1939, 121-3.

[94] See, for example, Winston Churchill, Speech to the House of Commons, 5 October 1938, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series, vol.339 (1938), cols.370-1; Harold Macmillan, Speech to the House of Commons, 6 October 1938, *Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series, vol.339, (1938), col.488 ('We [Parliament] are being treated more and more as a kind of Reichstag to meet only to hear the orations and register the decrees of the government of the day'); 'The "J'Aime Berlin" Credo', *New Statesman* 5 Nov. 1938, 709; Kingsley Martin, *Fascism, Democracy and the Press* (London, 1938).

1939: 'If Fascism wins we are done for', he lamented; yet 'we must become Fascist to win. There seems no escape from this hideous dilemma'.[95]

<p style="text-align:center">IV</p>

In the fairly loose sense in which Forster appears to have been using 'Fascism'—to denote a substantial extension of state involvement in society and economy, accompanied by constraints upon political democracy and civil liberty—there was indeed no escape from the dilemma he described. By the beginning of the Battle of Britain in July 1940, general elections had been suspended; 'enemy aliens' were being indiscriminately interned; a regime of official censorship and propaganda had been introduced; and what George Orwell shortly afterwards called, in a commonplace usage, 'the totalitarianisation of our economy' was in train.[96] Padmore and other critics of British imperialism also continued to point out the parallels between its practices and those of the dictatorships against which it was fighting in Europe.[97] Insofar as it did appear as a dilemma, however, the situation described by Forster was typically circumvented by presenting 'western civilization' or English quotidian culture as a repository of democratic values that would counterbalance the formation of a 'totalitarian' wartime state. This pattern of response was adumbrated in the *New Statesman* at the end of 1939, and developed in J.B. Priestley and George Orwell's influential celebrations of national culture.[98] Its implicit effects were simultaneously to emphasise the inherently embattled position of democracy in 'modern' conditions, and to reinforce a distinction between the innate democratic virtues of 'western civilisation' and the supposed deficiencies of non-'western' cultures, even as some progressive thinkers and commentators demanded the extension of democracy to Britain's colonies as a fundamental objective of the war.[99]

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[95] E.M. Forster, 'The 1939 State', *New Statesman* 10 Jun. 1939, 888-9, quotation at 888.

[96] George Orwell, 'London Letter to *Partisan Review*', 15 Apr. 1941, in Ian Angus & Sonia Orwell, eds., *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* [henceforth *CEJL*] (London, 1968), vol. II, 120.

[97] George Padmore, 'Imperialists Treat Blacks Like Nazis Treat Jews', *New Leader* 13 Sep. 1941, 7; id., 'Britain's Black Record', *New Leader* 27 Sep. 1941, 4-5; id., 'Not Nazism! Not Imperialism! But Socialism!, *New Leader* 27 Dec. 1941, 4-5. Broadly similar criticisms of imperialism were voiced in, for example, George Orwell, 'Not Counting Niggers' (July 1939), *CEJL* I, 394-8; Leonard Barnes, *Empire or Democracy? A Study of the Colonial Question* (London, 1939), 212-14, 261-2, 286-8; Fenner Brockway, 'How Far is the British Empire a Dictatorship?', *New Leader* 30 Aug. 1941, 4-5; 'British Nazism', *New Statesman* 22 Nov. 1941, 438.

[98] 'Progress and Anarchy', *New Statesman* 16 Dec. 1939, 884-5; J.B. Priestley, *Postscripts* (London, 1940); George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (London, 1941).

[99] See, for example, H.N. Brailsford, *Democracy for India*, Fabian tract 248 (London, 1939); Leonard Barnes, 'The Uprising of Indian and Colonial Peoples' in *Where Stands Democracy? A Collection of Essays by Members of the Fabian Society* (London, 1940), 63-84.

The ideas and assumptions that had underpinned talk of a 'crisis of democracy' in inter-war Britain continued to be prominent features of wartime political argument, notably in the political appeal of Richard Acland's 'Forward March' movement and the Common Wealth party that emerged from it, and in attempts to envisage military service as a kind of training in citizenship, which bore a faint imprint of the republican ideals that had also been evident in attempts to foster an active citizenry.[100] Alongside these developments, however, anxieties over the conjunction of morality and politics as a characteristic of 'totalitarianism' had begun to engender a belief that, as Bertrand Russell had put it in 1938, 'The merits of democracy are negative' – that is, that democracy could not be identified with any positive value or values, and that its primary distinctive feature was an absence of compulsion.[101] Such a view had already been evident in Ernest Simon's misgivings over the possibility of teaching democratic citizenship, and it became increasingly prominent from the late 1930s alongside a more general tendency to equate democracy with individual freedom or liberty.[102] This emergent view stood in contrast with the idea, which had been widely expressed during the inter-war period, that the survival and flourishing of democracy depended upon a kind of ethical cohesion among the citizenry that would enable the formulation of a common good.[103] Wartime constructions of national culture or of 'western civilisation' as the locus of such a cohesion signalled the enduring appeal of that belief; but its residual quality—as an ethical cohesion that *already* and *necessarily* subsisted in a cultural heritage, and therefore entailed no compulsion—also registered the force of what we might call the concept of 'negative democracy', the implication of which was that the idea of a common good was inherently coercive. 'Has there ever been any substantial agreement as to what constitutes the public interest?', the political theorist Carl Joachim Friedrich inquired in the *Political Quarterly* in 1939:

> In view of the vast amount of fundamental disagreement throughout the life of a
> working democracy in actual operation, could there ever have been any such

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[100] See, for example, W.E. Williams, 'Education in the Army', *Political Quarterly* XIII:3 (Jul.-Sep. 1942), 248-264, esp. 257-8.

[101] Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis* (London, 1938; repr. 1948), 286.

[102] For this latter tendency see, for example, C.E.M. Joad, *Guide to the Philosophy of Morals and Politics* (London, 1938), Introduction and ch.XIX, esp. 770, 799-801; Stafford Cripps, *Democracy Up-To-Date: Some Practical Suggestions for the Reorganization of the Political and Parliamentary System* (London, 1939), 19; G.D.H. Cole, *War Aims* (London, 1939); Harold J. Laski, 'Government in Wartime', in *Where Stands Democracy? A Collection of Essays by Members of the Fabian Society* (London, 1940), 40, 42; Clarence K. Streit, *Union Now: A Proposal for a Federal Union of the Democracies of the North Atlantic* (London, 1940), 18.

[103] See, for example, Hobhouse, 'Democracy and Civilization', 135; Burns, *The Challenge to Democracy*, ch.1; Laski, *Democracy in Crisis*, esp.181-5; 'Working a Democracy', *Time and Tide* 17 Apr. 1937, 502.

agreement? What is in the public interest, can be known in a democracy only through the process of working out agreements as you go along.[104]

Democracy, that is to say, is distinguished by 'fundamental disagreement' among its citizens, the effect of which is that even the 'public interest' can only be identified *a posteriori* and in relation to specific issues; in this formulation, anything like a consistent and cohesive common good appears to be incompatible with democracy as such. Friedrich's insistence upon this principle articulated a set of intellectual developments that had emerged in discussions of democracy during the inter-war period, and which later helped to produce the opposition between politics and ethics that was drawn in the heated debates over democratic 'values' immediately after the conclusion of the war, and to secure the ascendancy of value pluralism in Anglophone political theory during the 1950s.[105]

Ideas of democratic fragility or 'crisis' do, then, seem to be of some importance to any proper understanding of British political culture between the two world wars, and afterwards. Of course the perception or discussion of a crisis does not necessarily mean that one existed: politicians and commentators who spoke of a 'crisis of democracy', or voiced some of the subsidiary themes of that broad discursive tendency, frequently had motives for doing so other than that of disinterestedly reporting the condition of Britain's political system and culture to posterity. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that commentators who expressed concern over the capacity of the electorate to engage in democratic politics were partly preoccupied with a possible crisis in their own position as cultural and intellectual arbiters.[106] Something of this is evident in discussions of democracy and expertise, the principal concern of which in many cases was to legitimate the power of experts rather than to disperse or to share it – that is, to demonstrate that it was compatible with democracy, but not in any meaningful sense to democratise it. Nonetheless, that the tension between expertise and democracy was presented as problematic indicates that a concern to preserve their own intellectual authority may not fully explain why so many political writers preoccupied themselves with the weakness or 'crisis' of democracy; and even if it did, the importance of that preoccupation to a properly historical understanding of inter-war political culture would not thereby be diminished. As we have seen in the cases of the Association for Education in Citizenship and the Left Book Club, and as has been shown elsewhere in relation to

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[104] Carl Joachim Friedrich, 'Democracy and Dissent', *Political Quarterly* X:4 (1939), 571-582, at 579-80.
[105] On post-war debates over 'values', see Stuart Middleton, 'Raymond Williams's "Structure of Feeling" and the problem of democratic values in Britain, 1938-1961', *Modern Intellectual History* 17:4 (2020), 1133-1161, esp. 1141-4.
[106] I am grateful to Susan Pedersen for prompting me to think more carefully about this point.

initiates to reform working-class leisure, attempts to promote democracy in inter-war Britain frequently proceeded from the idea that it was fragile or in 'crisis'; and such ideas can scarcely be said to have been entirely unfounded, since Britain was neither isolated from developments in Europe that were placing democratic politics in peril there, nor incapable of contemplating and employing methods of government that some contemporaries found uncomfortably continuous with those of authoritarian regimes.

Taking seriously the idea of a 'crisis of democracy' after 1918, without necessarily endorsing it, therefore enriches our understanding not only of inter-war political culture in Britain but also of the larger 'crisis of democracy'—as a discursive tendency and as a series of concrete developments—that was a defining feature of European history between the two world wars. In particular, it supports the point that Jan-Werner Müller and others have emphasised, that democracy and dictatorship were not simply antithetical during that period but displayed important ideological continuities.[107] It also calls into question the larger historical assumption that Britain followed a course of 'democratisation' during the twentieth century: whilst some developments may appear in isolation to display that tendency, there are several major factors that preclude any easy acceptance of it as a general theme of modern British history, most of which were identified in the inter-war commentary that has been examined in this article. The increasing dominance of the executive over the legislature, which we have seen caused particular concern after August 1931, continued after 1945, in line with wider developments in European politics that tended, sometimes deliberately, to restrict popular democracy.[108] The constraint of democracy by non-governmental institutions and agencies, particularly by large concentrations of economic power, was also discussed (with varying degrees of accuracy) in inter-war Britain and has continued to be a marked feature of politics and political argument.[109] The challenge that commercial media pose to the practice of democratic politics was a central factor in many diagnoses of a 'crisis of democracy' after 1918 and continued to preoccupy critics of mass culture during the 1950s and 1960s; its bearing upon the prospects for democracy at the time of writing scarcely requires elaboration.[110]

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[107] Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 4-5.
[108] Ibid., 146-50. The dominance of the executive in post-war Britain is emphasised particularly strongly in Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (Abingdon, 1989; repr. 2002), 324-31.
[109] On discussions of this (within all the major political parties) after the Second World War, see Stuart Middleton, 'The concept of "the Establishment" and the Transformation of Political Argument in Britain since 1945', *Journal of British Studies* 60 (2021), 257-284.
[110] The most notable critique of mass culture in Britain during the 1950s was Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with special reference to publications and entertainments* (London, 1957). The problems that new media may pose to contemporary democracy have recently been surveyed in

The question remains, however, of how historians are to account for the elements of 'democracy' that subsist within an electoral system that functions as an uneven contest for control of a state apparatus that is not itself inherently or uniformly democratic; and of how to account for manifestations of democratic sentiment or activity in civil society that may not produce or add up to a larger process of democratisation. Historians of modern Britain are not alone in facing these questions. The political theorist Sheldon Wolin recognised the distinction, which we have seen was present in inter-war discussions of democracy, between democracy as a mode of civic activity, and constitutional democracy, which institutionalizes that activity and thus necessarily constrains it.[111] Democracy in the former sense takes on a 'fugitive' character as the possibilities for ordinary citizens to articulate and act upon shared concerns are diminished not only by constitutions and states but also by other centres of power that democracy, by its very nature, tends to nurture.[112] It is easily assumed that the existence of a constitutional democracy in Britain after 1918 or 1928 went hand-in-hand with democracy as a quality of civic life or culture, and that both were elements in a larger trajectory of democratisation.[113] But the idea of democratisation is in principle difficult to reconcile with the historically-observable tendency, to which Wolin points, of constitutional democracy to delimit and constrain the activities of the *demos*; and people who spoke of the fragility or 'crisis' of democracy in inter-war Britain demonstrated an agonized awareness of the inability of constitutional democracy to call forth democracy as a quality of civic life in any straightforward way. J.B. Priestley, whom LeMahieu cast as the personification of the 'culture for democracy' that had supposedly emerged by the end of the inter-war period, spoke in the autumn of 1940 about the impermanent and evanescent quality of the democratic ethos that he had evoked and celebrated during the Battle of Britain. 'Throughout those weeks', Priestley declared:

> […] many of us felt that here now was a country capable, not only of defying and then defeating the Nazis and Fascists, but capable too of putting an end to the world that produced Nazis and Fascists; capable of working a miracle, the miracle of man's liberation.[114]

Hans Kundnani, *The Future of Democracy in Europe: Technology and the Evolution of Representation* (Chatham House research paper, March 2020), https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/03/future-democracy-europe, esp. ch.3 (accessed 4 Jun 2021).

[111] Sheldon Wolin, 'Fugitive Democracy', *Constellations* 1:1 (1994), 11-25, at 11.

[112] Ibid., 22.

[113] See, for example, McCarthy, 'Whose democracy?', 234; LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*.

[114] Priestley, *Postscripts*, 97.

Now, however, 'the high generous mood, so far as it affects our destinies here, is vanishing with the leaves. It is as if the poets had gone and the politicians were coming back.'[115] The resumption of routinised politics signals the retreat of democracy as an access of collective, civic energy. If the idea that democracy is in some kind of 'crisis' is a perennial or even constant feature of democratic politics, it may partly be because, as Wolin suggests, it is 'a mode of being which is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily' – but the memory of which renders it a 'recurrent possibility'.[116] Discussions of a 'crisis of democracy' in inter-war Britain seem sometimes to have registered that possibility, a tacit belief that it might—but would not necessarily or easily—be recovered or recuperated through a revival of civic life. One hundred years later, amid what has been widely interpreted as another 'crisis' of democracy, the recovery of an idea of democracy as a 'recurrent possibility' may be of more than academic interest.[117]

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[115] Ibid., 98.
[116] Wolin, 'Fugitive Democracy', 23.
[117] See, for example, A.C. Grayling, *Democracy and its Crisis* (London, 2017); Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future* (London, 2018), Introduction, 212, 230-1; Michael J. Abramowitz, 'Democracy in Crisis', in *Freedom in the World 2018: The Annual Survey of Political Rights & Civil Liberties* (London, 2019), 1-9; Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2019), esp. ch.5; R.S. Foa *et al.*, *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020* (Cambridge, 2020), 12, 18.