# Critical Dialogue

**Democracy Rules: Liberty, Equality, Uncertainty**. By Jan-Werner Müller. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. 256p. $27.00 cloth, $18.00 paper.

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"What happened? And why is it still happening, after so many self-declared defenders of democracy have sounded the alarm bells?" (p. ix) These two questions nicely capture the ambition of Jan-Werner Müller's new book *Democracy Rules.* The aim is not merely to diagnose the present crisis of democracy. By turning back to democracy's first principles – liberty, equality and, perhaps more unexpected, uncertainty—Müller wants to move beyond talk of the looming death of democracy (e.g., Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 2018) and instill faith in the fact that it still rules. Democracy is not over—provided, he adds, that citizens nurture its "critical infrastructure" in the form of political parties and free media.

Street demonstrations, tweets, and political campaigns on Facebook are important in a healthy democracy, and so is the rule of law. But without a well-functioning infrastructure of political parties and professional media, democracy becomes unthinkable. This is the main thesis proposed by Müller. Parties and the media are the intermediary powers through which citizens in large-scale democracies reach each other and activate their basic rights to speak, assemble, and associate. Müller's choice to focus on political parties and professional media is not by chance. As many studies show, there is a kind of manual in the dismantling of democracy in countries such as Russia, Hungary, and Poland. Among the first to go are the independence of the press and the respect for partisanship, both of which are needed to secure the existence of healthy political conflict, pluralism, and a legitimate opposition. In this sense, parties and media are indeed critical to the survival of democracy.

The book starts out with a diagnosis of "what happened," moves on to discuss the basic principles of democracy and its critical infrastructure in the form of parties and media, and ends with two forward-looking chapters on how to revitalize democracy. Many things have happened to democracy in the last decade. The major event that sets the stage for this book is the rise of authoritarian populism and the way it has polarized the citizenry in many established democracies. Particular attention in the book is given to the US context. "The center will not hold," writes the late Joan Didion, and Müller agrees. What we witness is a "double secession" from democracy—both from the wealthy and privileged few who, instead of entering the democratic game, seek to control it and from the many citizens on the lower-income spectrum who understand this and so turn their back on politics (p. 21).

A critical point made by Müller is that this double secession is self-reinforcing. Because political parties have no reason to cater to citizens who turn their backs on politics, an oligarchic incentive is set into motion in the midst of democracy. It rigs the democratic game in favor of those with financial and political resources. Squeezed between these two seceding groups—the privileged and the nonprivileged—is a stressed middle class fearing that the center will not hold (p. 23)— or indeed that democracy itself will not hold. To come to terms with this dilemma and the major transformations it sets off in the existing party and media system, it is not enough to simply "defend" democracy. The question one should ask is rather what kind of democracy is worth defending, and this is where Müller invites the reader to go back to basics. As he argues, democracy is mediated through institutions such as political parties and professional media, and "once we see the principles behind this infrastructure, we'll also be less frightened of replacing some of them" (p. xiv).

It should come as no surprise that freedom and equality serve as key principles behind democracy's infrastructure. What makes this book stand out in the literature, however, is that it adds a third principle to the equation: uncertainty. The significance of this principle comes forth in a central passage where Müller addresses what he calls "democracy for losers" (p. 58). Drawing on Adam Przeworski's idea of democracy as a form of "institutionalized uncertainty" (*Democracy and the Market*, 1991), Müller argues that political outcomes in an election must be uncertain. If you know that the system is rigged to your disadvantage, the likelihood increases of you becoming a bad loser. The outcome of the election must therefore be at least a little unpredictable or else there is no hope for losers. It is this hope that

authoritarian populists and technocratic elites now seek to undo by taking "uncertainty out of elections," be it through the design of the party system, the use of money, voter suppression, or gerrymandering (p. 21).

This is a profound and original insight. Instead of respecting the uncertainty that comes with people being free and equal—and to Müller, this is precisely the point because in a democracy, you cannot fully predict what other people will say, think, and do—authoritarian populists and technocratic elites seek to suppress and control it. The result is not only a growing suspicion that the system might be rigged and the election stolen but also "a complete inability of party systems to respond to new challenges" (p. 159). Müller admits that uncertainty may sound off-putting, particularly at a time when the challenges to democracy are so imminent. You never hear people engaged with the threat of climate change or surveillance capitalism shout, "We want institutionalized uncertainty now!" (p. 72). But following Müller's thesis in this book, this is what they should do. It would be the most radical and hopeful act to take in a time marked by populist and technocratic efforts to take control of our future.

*Democracy Rules* is a bracing and impressive book, rich in illustrations and astute in its interpretations of the current ills of democracy. The most substantial claim comes forth in the chapter on democracy's critical infrastructure. Müller convincingly shows how political parties and professional media enable citizens to stage political conflict, uphold pluralism, and nurture the existence of a legitimate opposition. The point where the book becomes really interesting, however, is when Müller reflects on the importance of rhythm and design for democracy.

One example is when he analyzes the role of intermediary institutions in structuring political time. This idea is not new. Benedict Anderson's analysis of daily newspapers in the construction of the nation is an early reference in the literature (*Imagined Communities*, 1991). But the observation that democracy needs rhythm and rituals to create a common reference point for partisans engaged in political conflict is intriguing, especially given the growing use of opinion polls and tweets between elections. Do these activities enhance or distract the work of democracy? (pp. 109–11).

Another example is when Müller links his idea of democracy's critical infrastructure to the design of social media, like Facebook. In line with Shoshana Zuboff (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 2019), he insists that social media are not per se authoritarian sites for behavioral predictions. Nor are people who engage online inevitably leaning toward fake news or tribalism. Social media look the way they do "because of basic regulatory and economic decisions" (p. 122), which is to say that the democratization of social media platforms one day may become a reality.

The many contributions of the book notwithstanding, I am not convinced that a devotion to democracy's critical infrastructure suffices to address the double secession diagnosed in the beginning of the book. Would it not require one to address a wider spectrum of political life and look at the social infrastructure related to such things as education, citizenship, work, ownership, housing, and taxes? How else can we tackle the social and economic inequalities that now feed the oligarchic tendencies of both elections and media? Müller repeatedly defends himself against complaints of being a conservative in his embrace of political institutions. But there is nothing conservative in claiming that "democracy hinges on intermediary powers" and that these powers need to be refashioned to cope with new challenges. If there is a conservative stance in Müller's account, it rather lies in how it frames the critical infrastructure of democracy and the larger social reality in which it takes place.

Let me illustrate with two examples related to losing and winning elections. Agreeing with Walter Lippmann (*The Phantom Public*, 1925), Müller notes the paradoxical fact that losers in a democracy are expected "to endure with good humor policies which they did not approve" (p. 59). If this generous attitude is not there, the center will not hold. So, what makes a good loser? According to Müller, two things are needed: one can imagine one's opponent being right, and one can imagine oneself being in the shoes of the winner one day (p. 181). But there is also a third option. If one's human dignity or economic status is not dramatically affected by the outcome of an election, one is probably more inclined to be a good loser than if the outcome severely jeopardizes one's basic human and social existence. If too much is at stake in an election, it could make for an embittered loss, and generosity could be difficult to come by. Granted that one wants to arrest the secession by the disadvantaged, would one not have to include these social and material aspects in the critical infrastructure of democracy?

The second example concerns the status of winners. To offset the oligarchic tendencies of democracy and the role of money in shaping political outcomes, Müller embraces the idea of transparency in campaigns and individual money vouchers for citizens. These may not be bad ideas. They could make democracy more "accessible, autonomous and assessable" (p. 182). But again, it is difficult to see how vouchers could address the secession of the privileged few from democracy. Why is it still happening, despite so many ringing the alarm bells? One reason may be that some of the most important and life-changing decisions on earth today are taken beyond the democratic game, at places like Google and the World Economic Forum. This is not Müller's fault. He would probably agree. But it does raise a critical question about the fault lines of democracy's critical infrastructure.