Lagging Political Theory and the New Techno-scepticism

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Abstract: Restrictions on smartphones in schools and social-media bans for minors were implemented in the United States, Australia, and other countries in 2024. There is broad popular support for some of these regulations which does not reflect usual partisan divides. Critics of digitalization, such as Antón Barba-Kay, Mark Fisher, and Byung-Chul Han, elaborate the popular attitude of 'techno-scepticism' which holds that digital media adversely affect mental health and politics. Yet academic political theorists have been slow to engage, even when techno-sceptics invoke Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and other prominent figures in political theory. This article argues that political theorists' lack of engagement with the new techno-scepticism is partially explained by pre-digital accounts of depoliticization that Arendtians, critical theorists, democratic theorists, and other historically inflected approaches broadly share already. Political theorists' pre-existing commitments can explain their lack of interest in new forms of digital-age depoliticization and the warnings of the new techno-sceptics. This hesitation, in some ways intrinsic to prevailing approaches in political theory, is unfortunate. Political theory ought to be responsive to emerging popular and scholarly concerns about how digitalization is disfiguring the political.

Introduction

Legislators and policymakers around the world are being persuaded of the baleful effect of social media and other Internet use on education and mental health. On 28 November 2024, the Australian Parliament passed world-first legislation that requires social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok to block users under the age of sixteen in order to protect their mental

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health and wellbeing.[1] Smartphone bans in schools took effect in eight U.S. states—California, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, Ohio, South Carolina, and Virginia—in 2024.[2] Similar bans have been introduced by legislators in various jurisdictions in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France, Germany, and other countries. Some of these measures are broadly popular. A widely cited poll, for example, shows that almost 7 in 10 Americans support school cell phone bans during class time but not for the entire school day.[3] Both left- and right-of-centre governments alike have supported restrictions on social media and smartphones for young people around the world. And concerns about adverse mental-health effects of social media do not seem to be limited to older generations. 'Brain rot', a popular Gen-Z slang term for intellectual deterioration related to online media consumption, was voted Oxford University Press's word of the year for 2024.[4] More broadly, 64 percent of Americans who responded to a Pew research survey in 2022 and 2023 said that, in general, 'social media has been more of a bad thing for democracy' in the United States. In the same survey, Australians, Britons, Canadians, and Europeans were more evenly split on whether social media has been a good or a bad thing for democracy in their respective countries.[5]

[1] Maani Truu, 'Children and teenagers under 16 to be banned from social media after parliament passes world-first laws', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation News*, 28 November 2024, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-11-28/social-media-age-ban-passes-parliament/104647138.

[2] It is notable that this list includes staunchly liberal as well as staunchly conservative U.S. states. Natasha Singer, 'Why Schools Are Racing to Ban Student Phones', *The New York Times*, 11 August 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/11/technology/school-phone-bans-indiana-louisiana.html.

[3] Monica Anderson, Jeffrey Gottfried, and Eugenie Park, 'Most Americans back cellphone bans during class, but fewer support all-day restrictions', *Pew Research Center*, 14 October 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/10/14/most-americans-back-cellphone-bans-during-class-but-fewer-support-all-day-restrictions/.

[4] '"Brain rot" named Oxford Word of the Year 2024', Press Office of Oxford University Press, 2 December 2024. https://corp.oup.com/news/brain-rot-named-oxford-word-of-the-year-2024/.

[5] Sneha Gubbala and Sarah Austin, 'Majorities in Most Countries Surveyed Say Social Media Is Good for Democracy', Pew Research Center, 23 February 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/02/23/majorities-in-most-countries-surveyed-say-social-media-is-good-for-democracy/.

The hopes of the 1990s and early 2000s that the Internet would spontaneously facilitate highly informed participatory democracy have been dashed. Still, academic political theorists hesitate to take up the new techno-scepticism with the same aplomb that they embraced optimistic visions twenty or thirty years ago.[6] In fact, it is difficult to find any uptake of critics who warn that the Internet itself deteriorates democracy in political theory literature. Evidence of absence is difficult to marshal, especially concerning political theory, a field whose boundaries are constantly being re-examined and reimagined. However, one might consider recent issues of *Political Theory* as a better-than-representative sample for three reasons: it is a flagship journal for the discipline; the editors aim to include emerging political ideas and to be expansive in scope; and because from 2021 to 2023, Davide Panagia was one of its co-editors. Panagia is a political theorist at UCLA whose scholarly work bridges media studies and more traditional areas like democratic theory and the history of political thought.

Three articles in *Political Theory* since 2021 have been critical of digital technology. While an earlier generation of scholars worried about a 'digital divide' due to marginalized groups' lack of access to the boons of the digital revolution, these new critics focus on how digital technologies perpetuate and increase inequity. All three articles investigate the ways that algorithms reinforce problematic biases through 'looping effects'.[7] They include Panagia's proposal to develop 'a political ontology of the algorithm dispositif' that investigates how technical media like information management systems govern, plus two more articles that take up his challenge.[8] Another noteworthy example of this approach, sometimes called data politics, is Safiya Umoja Noble's description of 'technological redlining' in her book

[6] Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 1-7.

[7] Colin Koopman, 'The Political Theory of Data: Institutions, Algorithms, & Formats in Racial Redlining', *Political Theory* 50.2 (2022), 337-361, at 345. See also Mark Reinhardt, 'Spectacle, Surveillance, and the Ironies of Visual Politics in the Age of Autonomous Images', *Political Theory* 51.5 (2023), 814-842, esp. 834; Louise Amoore, *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others* (Duke University Press, 2020); Peter Polack, 'Beyond Algorithmic Reformism: Forward Engineering the Designs of Algorithmic Systems', *Big Data & Society* 7.1 (2020).

[8] Davide Panagia, 'On the Possibilities of a Political Theory of Algorithms', *Political Theory* 49.1 (2021), 109-133, 111.

Algorithms of Oppression, where she explains how Internet search engine algorithms embed racial bias. For example, search terms like 'Black girls' are more likely to pull up sexualized content compared to other racial and gender-related terms (e.g., 'White boys'). Biases about gender, race, and sexuality are then embedded in a supposedly neutral technical medium.[9] These critical studies of data politics are certainly pessimistic about *some* effects of certain algorithms. However, data politics and Panagia's algorithmic dispositif do not engage with the widespread arguments about universal mental-health problems and TikTok 'brain rot' that are influencing policymakers around the world. Political theorists extend their critical perspectives on race, class, and gender into data politics, but they do not engage with the novel harms of digitalization that techno-sceptics argue are more ubiquitous in scope. About these broader concerns, I concur with the self-reflection of other political theorists: 'democratic theorists have been silent.'[10]

Political theorists lag behind media-studies scholars, philosophers, psychologists and sociologists when it comes to engaging with the novel ways that digitalization distorts their field of study; however, a general mood of techno-scepticism has reshaped the discipline, nonetheless. Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore, and Rob Reich describe a sea-change from 'techno-utopian rhetoric' about digital democracy to 'alarmism' about social-media misinformation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election: 'Today conventional wisdom holds that technologies have brought the world addictive devices, an omnipresent surveillance panopticon, racist algorithms, and disinformation machines that exacerbate polarization, threatening to destroy democracies from within.'[11] Some critics of digital democracy foresaw problems of democratic capture and elite steering before 2016,[12] and, of course, some researchers continue to see the promise of digital platforms for advancing participatory democracy.[13] Still, the excitement about digital democracy, virtual townhalls, and plebiscita-

[9] Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression* (NYU Press, 2018), 104.
[10] Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore, and Rob Reich, 'Introduction', in *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 4.
[11] *Ibid.*, 3, 6.
[12] See, e.g., Hindman, *Myth of Digital Democracy*.
[13] See, e.g., Roberta Fischli and James Muldoon, 'Empowering Digital Democracy', *Perspectives on Politics* 22:3 (2024), 819-835.

ry e-government has quieted considerably. As long as the spectre of techno-scepticism haunts political theory, and so many democratic theorists acknowledge its power, it is high time we see its views, aims, and tendencies publicized.

Many reasons for the conspicuous silence in political theory may be conjectured: technology is changing too quickly; the political developments around technology restriction in 2024 are too recent; school technology bans are the domain of some other academic field such as educational psychology; political theorists have partisan motivations which broad harms of digitalization fail to activate; this is not an 'academic' topic at all. Yet even a cursory scan of one recent issue of a multidisciplinary journal, *Theory, Culture & Society*, belies some of these conjectures. There sociologists examine how digital experience shapes memory and recognition, media studies professors compare digital exchanges to communication in the confessional box, and philosophers probe how digital control shapes the modern self.[14] While data politics may unconsciously contribute to the 'now-canonized scholarship in the political theory of technology', Colin Koopman admits that it does not take up the claims of Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and others that technology shapes or suppresses thought and action across the board in politically salient ways.[15] Political theory journals are outliers in their silence.

This article explores an additional reason that political theorists resist engagement with the new techno-scepticism which is intrinsic to prevailing approaches in the discipline. It has two parts. The first part surveys philosophers, journalists, and other outsiders to academic political theory who argue that the Internet undermines psychological and social conditions that are prerequisite for politics. I especially focus on three contemporary techno-sceptics who engage with the canon of political theory: Mark Fisher (1968-2017), Byung-Chul Han (1959-), and Antón Barba-Kay (1983-). I note three points of convergence among these three thinkers in particular: digital con-

[14] See, e.g., Benjamin N. Jacobsen, 'The Logic of the Synthetic Supplement in Algorithmic Societies', *Theory, Culture & Society* 41.4 (2024), 41-56; Joshua Reeves and Ethan Stoneman, 'From the Confessional Booth to Digital Enclosures: Absolution as Cultural Technique', *Theory, Culture & Society* 41.4 (2024), 57-73; Juho Rantala and Mirka Muilu, 'Simondon, Control and the Digital Domain', *Theory, Culture & Society* 41.4 (2024), 23-40.

[15] Koopman, 'The Political Theory of Data', 339, 356n4.

nections lower the cost of forming worldwide voluntary associations; they create the impression that all disagreement is primarily informational; they form a visceral web that informs powerful affects and personal identities. All of these, I shall argue, reduce the capacity for collective political action and disintegrate the political. These are some new contours of depoliticization.

The second part of the article offers a partial explanation for why political theory fails to engage with this new techno-scepticism. Political theorists often approach politics as a restricted domain of activity and even a threatened one. Our special conceptions of the political are supported by accounts of depoliticization. These accounts argue that properly *political* collective action is crowded out or hemmed in by administration, culture, ideology, the sheer size of the political community, or some other factor. The older, pre-digital accounts of depoliticization are associated with influential movements and figures in political theory: the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, Sheldon Wolin, Frankfurt School critical theory, Jürgen Habermas, and Arendt. They inherit, in turn, conceptions of politics from the historical canon of political theory from Carl Schmitt to John Locke to Aristotle that are already highly restricted. Quite simply, political theorists overlook the new techno-sceptic critics because our disciplinary training inclines us to regard digital-age causes of depoliticization as redundant. Already prone to the view that we live in depoliticized regimes, political theorists must regard digital-age concerns as old news.

This seems unfortunate for two reasons. First, there is a disconnect between academic political theory and citizens' widespread concerns with what, to an untrained eye, look like new and interesting problems for politics and active political movements. For some political theorists this will already seem like a serious problem. Second, our discipline seems calcified. Dated 'canonical' accounts of depoliticization from graduate-school readings lists (Schmitt's, Arendt's, Adorno's, Wolin's, etc.) muffle new concerns about digital depoliticization. Classic twentieth-century accounts of depoliticization buffer political theorists against the same urgent questions that animated those influential forerunners in our discipline. This second problem, which seems worse to me, is only serious to the extent that techno-sceptics have compelling arguments about how digital infra-

structure, smartphones, and social media are disintegrating politics. I suggest throughout this article that their arguments are compelling. However, my primary purpose is to use the silence of political theory, like the 'dog that didn't bark', to indict a shortcoming not only *of* political theorists but *in* academic political theory. A blind spot is created by how graduate students in political theory learn to think and write about politics. To the degree that prevailing approaches blinker us to new technologies of depoliticization, we should set them aside.

New Critics of Digital Depoliticization

For the past fifteen years, critics of technology have increasingly argued that the Internet undermines fundamental conditions that are necessary for politics. Zeynep Tufecki argues that the Internet-based social activism that fuelled the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Gezi Park protests lacked formal organization and the strong sense of belonging necessary to sustain lasting democratic movements.[16] Shoshana Zuboff argues that 'surveillance capitalism' offers the illusion of freedom and control to Internet users who are in fact tracked, quantified, and manipulated by Big Tech companies.[17] Nicholas Carr, Evgeny Morozov, and Jaron Lanier argue that Internet usage is sapping our memory and attention, changing our neural pathways so that we shall no longer be able to sustain informed public discourse and democratic participation.[18] A new pessimism about the Internet and social media has descended first upon journalism and more recently upon academia. Now it involves concerns about depoliticization.[19]

Digital *depoliticization* may seem like a strange description of a process in which everything from consumption choices to holiday

[16] Zeynep Tufecki, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press, 2017), 95-109.
[17] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for Human Freedom at the New Frontier of Power* (PublicAffairs, 2019).
[18] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton, 2010); Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (PublicAffairs, 2012); Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (Henry Holt, 2018).
[19] Emre Bayamlıoğlu, 'Depoliticization in the Digital Info-Sphere: When Communication Runs Counter-Democratic' in *Digital Democracy in a Globalized World*, eds. C. Prins et al. (Edward Elgar, 2017), 100-120.

greetings becomes politicized. Social media platforms like X are saturated with political discourse, while users of Facebook and Instagram signal identification with political causes on their online profiles. In one viral example, 28 million Instagram users changed their profile pictures to plain black squares on 2 June 2020 to protest the death of George Floyd in police custody. Some Black Lives Matter organizers immediately criticized this trend as frivolous 'slacktivism' crowding out their protest marches and even their own voices on social media.[20] Is this depoliticization? Anton Jäger seems closer to the mark in calling this *hyper*political. Politics seems to be everywhere, but only ephemerally, in symbolic gestures of personal identification and in the short term. Hyperpolitics reflects 'the online world' of social media. Since this ever-present low-cost politicization never coalesces into impactful collective action, Jäger concludes, memorably, 'What Americans are left with is a grin without a cat: a politics with only weak policy influence or institutional ties.'[21] Hyperpoliticization, then, is not the opposite of depoliticization, but rather a form of it. Jäger's term is apposite, but I retain the older and more general term 'depoliticization' to connect twentieth-century political theorists' concerns with this omnipresent low-impact politics of our digital age.

Contemporary techno-sceptics delve into widespread concerns with attention-span reduction, 'misinformation' (the proliferation of low-cost propaganda), polarization, and screen addiction. They are pessimistic about the survival of genuinely *political* possibilities and spaces in a world of rapidly advancing communication technology. Yet techno-scepticism is not 'political' in the sense of representing the Left or the Right or any other discernible political tendency. A similar constellation of ideas emerges from a theorist committed to the Left, such as the late Mark Fisher, from 'a conservative of sorts' such as Antón Barba-Kay,[22] and from a sui generis philosopher such as Byung-Chul Han.[23] Fisher's concern with mental health arises from

[20] Shannon Ho, 'A Social Media "Blackout" Enthralled Instagram. But Did It Do Anything?' *NBC News*, 13 June 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/social-media-blackout-enthralled-instagram-did-it-do-anything-n1230181.

[21] Anton Jäger, 'Hyperpolitics in America', *New Left Review* 149 (2024), 5-16, at 3.

[22] Antón Barba-Kay, 'The Substance of Things Hoped For', *The Point*, 6 February 2017, https://thepointmag.com/politics/the-substance-of-things-hoped-for/.

[23] See Steven Knepper, Ethan Stoneman, and Robert Wyllie, *Byung-Chul Han: A*

his experience teaching in the U.K.'s non-degree adult Further Education colleges in the 2000s, where he encountered students who were depressed, hedonic, and politically disengaged, in stark contrast to radical students of the 1970s.[24] Barba-Kay's *A Web of Our Own Making*, published in 2023, explores how digital technologies have reshaped knowledge and personal identity in ways inimical to discourse and collective action in any bounded political community.[25] Han's 'media-studies turn', which begins with his 2013 book *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, makes stark pronouncements about the depoliticizing effects of technology.[26] Because they share an uncompromising critique of digitalization despite their range of political affinities, I put them forward as representatives of the new techno-scepticism.[27]

Techno-sceptic critics draw our attention to the 'medium bias' of the Internet; they deny it is a universal public sphere that reproduces a global general will in any neutral way. In this respect, they are in dialogue with the 'technological tradition' in media studies, which has long been differentiated from the social-scientific study of media effects or critical approaches to meaningful cultural symbols. This tradition investigates how media themselves shape our perceptions, thoughts, behaviour, relationships, and social and political organizations. The most famous of these media theorists is Marshall McLuhan, whose slogan 'the medium is the message' serves as a kind of slogan for the technological tradition.[28] Medium bias is a term from another Canadian media theorist, Harold Innis, which signifies how

Critical Introduction (Polity, 2024), 147.

[24] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zer0 Books, 2009), 20.

[25] Antón Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making: The Nature of Digital Formation* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[26] Knepper et al., *Byung-Chul Han*, 66. See Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, tr. E. Butler (MIT Press, 2017).

[27] 'I have benefitted more than anyone from reading Nicholas Carr, Evgeny Morozov, and Jaron Lanier. But I have been surprised again and again at how, after a few hundred pages of incisive criticism, such authors feel compelled to conclude on a note of contrived and desperate positivity', writes Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 3. See also Han's critique of Zuboff for being too optimistic about the potential for political resistance against surveillance capitalism, in Byung-Chul Han, *Non-things: Upheaval in the Lifeworld*, tr. D. Steuer (Polity, 2022), 24.

[28] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (University of California Press, 1964).

the physical properties of media interact with our psychic and social realities.[29] Ethan Stoneman borrows this concept to explain Han's accounts of transparency and positivity.[30]

Han's techno-scepticism makes a stark and maximal case for digital depoliticization. In *Topology of Violence*, he declares, 'Power is no longer a key medium of politics.'[31] Han's point is that democratic politicians accommodate the desire of voters, promising to facilitate whatever it is that voters want.[32] In other words, they do not constrain, persuade, or transform their fellow citizens. Leaders do not pursue long-term public goods that defy the short-term wishes of the electorate, Han argues; he calls this an excess of positivity. Public opinion data govern instead of leaders. Furthermore, Han continues, voters select candidates who seem personable or 'authentic', or with whom they could imagine having a personal connection. The predictiveness of the so-called 'beer test', where pollsters ask prospective voters whether they would like to drink a beer with this or that candidate, is a measure of this phenomenon. To the degree that beer tests are accurate, politics seems like a personality contest where relatability is at a premium. In order to facilitate this glassy personality politics, voters expect complete transparency from their prospective leaders.[33] Barba-Kay adds questions here about the nature and origins of public opinion data. While rarely going beyond the superficial in policy discussions, the media rush to offer up-to-date polling changes, which create the impression that these data are snapshots of the 'will of the people' before it is exercised at the polls or in a situation of political responsibility.[34] Whatever is ambient, vague, and undecided is reified as polling data, the facts of public opinion.

Han's description of 'the self-referential political system',[35] where constantly generated political data drives transparent politicians to

[29] Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, 2nd ed. (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 33-60.
[30] Knepper et al., *Byung-Chul Han*, 95.
[31] Byung-Chul Han, *Topology of Violence*, trans. A. DeMarco (MIT Press, 2018), 72.
[32] Byung-Chul Han, 'I Am Sorry, But These are the Facts', in *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, trans. D. Steuer (Polity, 2021), 127.
[33] Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. E. Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), 35.
[34] Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 135.
[35] Han, *In the Swarm*, 65.

reflect the vagaries of mass opinion is consistent with his broader argument about power. His emphasis on the changing character of politicians is another dimension of hyperpolitics, with its flash floods of political gestures and symbols that so seldom translate into collective action, institutional power, or policy influence. Han calls this a disappearance of power from politics. As opposed to violence [*Gewalt*], which is destructive, power [*Macht*] is constructive, always organizing itself into a structure.[36] Han's claim, then, is that politics has largely ceased to structure our lives. In his international best-seller, *The Burnout Society*, he argues that modern societies are shifting from a disciplinary structure to an achievement structure. Commands are replaced with positive encouragement. Now power organizes itself not inter-personally but intra-psychically.[37] I am my own taskmaster. I demand achievement from myself. Violence is internalized, too, as I exhaust myself to the point of burnout and depression. Modern democracies can be as relentlessly positive as the broader achievement societies that they supervene. Politicians reflect who we are at any given moment. The political is drained of any power of its own to 'negatively' discipline and form the lives of citizens.

Han's analysis of achievement society resembles Fisher's description of reflexive impotence in *Capitalist Realism*: 'If the figure of discipline was the worker-prisoner, the figure of control is the debtor-addict.'[38] The exhausting, largely self-inflicted violence of the new control society manifests in problems of mental health. Han and Fisher both explore sociogenic explanations for the fact that so many young people oscillate between motivation and demotivation, between pleasure-pursuit and depression. Both are concerned that young people are increasingly disoriented, unable to synthesize the moments of their lives into a coherent narrative to provide meaningful identities. Each in his own way works towards a politics of mental illness.

Han and Fisher also argue that 'neoliberal' capitalism aligns profit incentives behind our self-exploitation. The description 'neoliberal'

[36] Han, *Topology of Violence*, 65; Byung-Chul Han, *What Is Power?*, trans. D. Steuer (Polity, 2019), 3.
[37] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. E. Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), 35.
[38] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 24-25. See also Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on Societies of Control,' *October* 59 (1992), 3-7.

denotes a 'peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms'.[39] Digital media permit us to be 'entrepreneurs of the self'.[40] Han's insight in *In the Swarm*, originally published in German in 2013, finds a counterpart in Alice Marwick's book from the same year, *Status Update*. Both Han and Marwick were arguing against zealous proponents of the liberating effect of a new gig economy, who argued that new enterprises like the hosting marketplace Airbnb, the food delivery app DoorDash, and the ride-sharing algorithm Uber were creating new opportunities for entrepreneurial freedom. Marwick argues that 'self-branding' and 'entrepreneurial governance' are hardly an adequate answer to most individuals' economic problems.[41] Han agrees but tends to develop his critique at a higher level of abstraction, considering how social media encourage us to 'exteriorize' ourselves in the form of information. Platform marketplaces and social media allow us to control how we present our digital personae. Initially this self-control and even self-creation involves a thrill of freedom, Han thinks, that encourage digitally mediated interactions, from the dopamine rush of clicks and likes to the satisfaction of a thriving e-commerce or influencer business. Self-motivation replaces command-and-obedience relationships. Third-party vendors like Amazon specialize in facilitating our entrepreneurial behaviours, but the real reward comes from within our minds, from the pleasant feelings bound up with our achievements and new freedoms (until we burn out).[42] This decentralized and participatory 'neoliberal' system, Han is fond of saying, exploits freedom itself.

The advent of this new self-control society, techno-sceptics argue, is accompanied by a loss of meaning. They agree that digital life is fracturing our sense of time, which whizzes by for each of us individually, disconnected from any common time horizons.[43] For Han, and especially for Fisher, the problem is that contemporary people

[39] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books, 2015), 17.
[40] Han, *In the Swarm*, 45.
[41] Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (Yale University Press, 2013).
[42] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. E. Butler (Verso, 2017), 9.
[43] Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*, trans. D. Steuer (Polity, 2017).

are almost constantly integrated with entertainment.[44] While Han's abstract analysis of power insists that positive self-exploitation replaces other forms of repression, Fisher offers similar warnings at the level of cultural critique that focuses on entertainment products. He argues that consuming gritty or neo-noir cultural products —think gangster rap, grunge, and dystopian films— 'interpassively' performs anti-capitalist gestures that only reinforce the idea that capitalism is *forever* to be resisted.[45] Rock stars like Kurt Cobain once worried about how their protests against capitalism were immediately commodified; now, everyone can have this worry when they express dissent on X.

These political techno-sceptics describe stark depoliticizations that are consistent with the profound political disappointments of the Left since the 1970s (Fisher) or an abstract dialectics of power (Han); Barba-Kay, however, begins not from an abstract notion of power or the Left project of political control of economic life, but with the observation that the political life has always 'take[n] place in bonds and bounds' that are contingent and to some degree arbitrary. A willingness to affirm contingent limits that preserve social practices or provide social goods, even those that are irrational or that are imposed inequitably, seems to be the distinctively 'conservative' element of Barba-Kay's approach.[46] The Internet biases us to disparage these limits for their arbitrariness, he argues, even though they are preconditions of political activity, both in the sense of a location in place and time for collective action, and the meaningfulness of such actions. Barba-Kay refers to these as 'our loyalties, our habits, and our particular patterns of care informed by what's been achieved for us and what remains for us still to achieve.'[47] The Internet has ushered in a pattern of everywhere politics, Barba-Kay argues, a global public sphere realized by digital media. It seems to transcend politics altogether: 'The medium is a form of authority that implies not just a new way of conducting politics, but the project of transcending politics altogether by establishing a neutral, mirror-like system of legitimate assessment'.[48] Some acquiesce to the 'implicit demand' of a

[44] Han, *The Burnout Society*, 30.
[45] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 9-11.
[46] Barba-Kay, 'The Substance of Things Hoped For'.
[47] Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 90.
[48] *Ibid.*, 91.

universal rationalized politics. Cosmopolitan liberals are often cheerleaders. Rights claims offer universal, rational standards that are valid everywhere. Meanwhile, a generic nationalist reaction 'united by a common cosmopolitan adversary' rises to meet them, first online, then everywhere.[49] Barba-Kay describes the global New Right as an antithesis to *and* a product of the Internet public sphere.

Barba-Kay uses the term 'natural technology' to insist that *we* are the media of our digital devices: it is *they* that change *our* implicit norms, objects of attention, and passion.[50] The Internet does not represent a particular medium bias for Barba-Kay, but rather an 'ultimate technology' that 'memorializes every human thought'.[51] It reshapes how we think and experience time, Barba-Kay argues, and not in ways that are conducive to politics. Here are three examples: first, the Internet multiplies the number of low-commitment associations to which we belong (often by hybridizing existing social practices), acting as a 'social lubricant' but also a 'social solvent';[52] second, the Internet prevents the sort of communicative practical reasoning that generates the common-sense opinions that communities will recognize as legitimate, and leaders whom they will recognize as competent; third, the Internet crowds out the experiences by which communities forge common identities, and from which they generate consensus about what are the most pressing issues that demand common action.

While this emphasis on limits, place, and particularistic identities may seem to reflect Barba-Kay's conservatism, it is important to see that at least the Fisher of *Capitalist Realism* is equally concerned with the lack of 'organization', 'public space', and even 'markable territory'.[53] The problem the Left faces, for Fisher, is not disciplinary power; it is the 'precorporation' of any subversive potential into the decentralized and fluid organization of work, the commodification of punk rock for example, that brings about a 'reflexive impotence' in young people.[54] He too is worried about an Internet of 'network narcissism' that dissolves any potential spaces or alternative organiza-

[49] *Ibid.*, 91.
[50] *Ibid.*, 12.
[51] *Ibid.*, 9.
[52] *Ibid.*, 99.
[53] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2, 14, 24, 31, 68, 75, 78.
[54] *Ibid.*, 9, 27.

tions that could challenge capitalism. Han's analysis, at its higher level of abstraction, suggests how a conservative and a Leftist might be identifying a common problem: the absence of constructive political power. Unlike violence that would *destroy* us or them, Han argues, power *creates* a space for us as opposed to them; not violence but 'only power can create the political.'[55] A signature of Han's thought is the argument that there can be no friendliness to others without a space of one's own to recognize beauty in what is foreign.[56] For Han the main obstacle to a more welcoming and cosmopolitan (or even moderately xenophilic) world is not exclusion, but the disintegration of political space, cultural meaning, and collective power.[57] Exclusionary and nativist movements are only spasmodic gestures in a global regime of self-exploitation. Techno-scepticism, as I understand it, does not represent a particular political tendency, but rather criticizes the collapse of political space and public freedom altogether.

These three digital biases, which disintegrate associations, common sense, and common identities, offer something like a convergent techno-sceptic argument about how the Internet erodes the conditions of politics. I shall consider them in turn. The first digital bias is the way that the Internet allows us to form voluntary associations worldwide at low cost. Twenty-five years ago, Robert Putnam considered the possibility that the Internet would reverse the trend away from informal social connections ('schmoozing') that he extensively documented in American life but only had the 'surprisingly mundane impact of the phone' on Americans' social habits for an analogy.[58] With the benefit of hindsight, techno-sceptics would argue that he underestimated the Internet's transformative effects. These new digital associations are to be understood not as opposed to Putnam's formal institutions, but rather at the opposite end of a spectrum from that natural association of unconditional belonging, the family, and its particular bonds of love that are contrary to universal justice. There is no closeness online. To borrow an image from Sherry

[55] Han, *What Is Power*, 68.

[56] Byung-Chul Han, 'Beauty Lies Yonder, in the Foreign', in *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, 73.

[57] Knepper et al., *Byung-Chul Han*, 54.

[58] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), 169.

Turkle's *Alone Together*,[59] Internet users are 'co-isolated' in resonance chambers alongside those with whom they identify, people who are both 'everywhere and nowhere'.[60] Han thinks this explains what he calls 'swarms' of online viscera, '*a gathering without assembly—a crowd without interiority*'.[61] Barba-Kay points to the nostalgia for community, a buzzword which features prominently in the self-descriptions of tech companies like Apple, Facebook, Firefox, Wikipedia, YouTube, and so on.[62] This recalls his point about a reactionary sentiment that is universal, with a worldwide network, a global impulse to nationalism that makes Tucker Carlson and Viktor Orban 'friends in a common cause'.[63] Real national differences would suggest that these new nationalists would have more in common with compatriot political opponents; however, the emerging global New Right is no less a network of online voluntary associations than are the cheerleaders of the digital public sphere and its universal norms. The everywhere associations of everywhere politics are on the Left and the Right, among cheerleaders of global public reason and the reactionaries. Other political differences disappear.

As our networks multiply and become more homogenous, the second digital bias is the way all disagreement becomes informational. The first problem is the much-discussed problem of siloing, or what Han calls, following Jean Baudrillard, 'the hell of the same'.[64] In online media, we select into 'bubbles' that are 'different worlds of facts'. These are resonance chambers for our viscera; anyone foreign or 'Other' to whom we might have to listen to something strange is expelled.[65] While Han focuses on the way that *more* things simply become information, Barba-Kay focuses on how the digital medium as opposed to print creates mutually exclusive worlds of information. There is no point in engaging with those with different values, or who draw different conclusions from facts. A contested space of common

[59] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books, 2017).
[60] Knepper et al., *Byung-Chul Han*, 92.
[61] Han, *In the Swarm*, 11.
[62] Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making,* 96.
[63] *Ibid.,* 151.
[64] Han, 'Only What Is Dead Is Transparent', in *Capitalism and the Death Drive*, 34.
[65] Byung-Chul Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, trans. W. Hoban (Polity, 2018), 71-72.

sense or public reason collapses.[66] Our political opponents believe and spread misinformation. Communication, which Barba-Kay calls 'a community's most important activity,' is replaced by information and 'everywhere' reasons. Political spaces disappear.

The third digital bias regards how these fragmented information environments—the way the digital multiplies 'lifeworlds'—incline us towards personal identity. Han emphasizes how the Internet is a visceral medium, where we make gapless emotional connections that are in play—and which can be tracked, activated, managed, or exploited—throughout our waking days.[67] Han seems to think of our personal projects as multifarious, disconnected, mostly apolitical, and only intermittently or sporadically political. This tracks with Fisher's analysis in *Capitalist Realism* where social media 'network narcissism' is infantilizing and mostly depoliticizing, with a few exceptional nodes of resistance linked in cyberspace.[68] Barba-Kay agrees (at least to some degree), focusing on how anonymity allows for the 'voluptuous irresponsibility' of acting without losing face, just as imagined by Socrates' story of the ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*.[69] He emphasizes how this makes our deepest feelings, especially what we find hurtful, resentful, or shocking, central to our identity. Internet users experience a liberating latitude for self-invention, but also an estrangement from their physical lives in their digital personae.[70] As we reintegrate ourselves in our daily lives, we take on more of the people who are shocked, hurt, and mad online, online personae who are nowise answerable to the people who surround us in physical space. Barba-Kay explains how Donald Trump learned through his experiments in political brinksmanship, eschewing compromise, that 'culture war is the greatest form of entertainment.'[71] On both sides of the attention-grabbing culture war, with all its online memes and late-night television comedians, there is a fine line between political action and just playing along.

Digitalization vitiates the attention, discipline, memories, hab-

[66] Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making,* 115-116.
[67] Byung-Chul Han, *Digitale Rationalität und das Ende des kommunikativen Handelns* (Matthes & Seitz, 2013), 12.
[68] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 75.
[69] Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making,* 120.
[70] *Ibid.,* 127-129.
[71] *Ibid.*, 161.

its, and identities that nourish politics. This is not only true for conservatives who would defend local and particular manners of living from 'everywhere' politics, but also for left-leaning techno-sceptics who would revive social democracy, interest-group democratic pluralism, and left-wing resistance movements. Fisher and Han do not think that reterritorialization, or the emergence of a new intersubjective power-space, is inevitable.[72] Power flows inter-psychically.[73] These techno-sceptics do not begin from Barba-Kay's conception of the political, but they likewise conclude that political spaces are disappearing in the course of their critiques of digital market society. Techno-sceptics may begin from different preconceptions of political problems and even different conceptions of the political, but they converge upon a common problem.

A digital bias is not irresistible. It is possible, of course, to successfully resist the urge to respond to smartphone notifications or scroll for the latest political news. However, techno-sceptics from across the political spectrum warn that our smartphones and computers are shaping habits, identities, and viewpoints that are unconducive to sustaining political life together.

Why Political Theorists Are Not Interested

There is scarcely any uptake of techno-scepticism among normative political theorists in the universities. This should be a problem for any pluralist who thinks academic political theory 'mirrors' citizens' political disagreements, reflecting ongoing normative arguments in more drawn-out ways informed by philosophy and other relevant disciplines.[74] (Only then can political theorists be 'provocative' or 'illuminating' to our fellow citizens, as Wendy Brown charges us to be, as opposed to amusing ourselves with idiosyncratic in-group or discipline-specific concerns.)[75] Yet by and large political theory is *not*

[72] See also Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H. Lane (Penguin, 2009), 258-262.

[73] This is why the early Fisher and Han are less sanguine about the creative and liberating potential of mental illness than Deleuze and Guattari are in *Anti-Oedipus*.

[74] Rainer Bauböck, 'Normative Political Theory and Empirical Research', in *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective*, eds. D. della Porta and M. Keating (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 40.

[75] Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 80.

mirroring widespread concerns that the digital medium itself is facilitating attention deficit disorders, misinformation, screen addiction, and so on.

Stephen White's critique of virtual patriotism is perhaps the best example of normative political theory that approaches techno-scepticism. He considers the 'virtual patriots' of the Tea Party movement. A highly visible and vocal constituency in the 2010 U.S. midterm elections that delivered a Republican Party majority in the House of Representatives, the Tea Party movement connected groups of anti-taxation right-wing activists that mobilized opposition to President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act. White emphasizes how the Tea Party offers a virtual reality of a new eighteenth-century tax rebellion, not only redolent with the symbolism of the American Revolutionary War but also suffused with the jouissance of self-discipline. Yet White does not think the intense pleasure of roleplaying constitutional fundamentalism tells the whole story. Partially concurring with commentators who regarded the movement as 'astro-turf' rather than 'grassroots', White insists the Tea Party would not exist without the Fox News Channel and funding and materials from wealthy elites. His example of the virtual patriot par excellence is not an ordinary person, but Sarah Palin:

> A virtual patriot who has become exemplary in her perfection of the strategy of insulating herself and her message is the former vice-presidential candidate, Sarah Palin. Her political strategy evolved to the point that she would not speak to the mainstream news media, but rather "manag[ed] her image almost exclusively through Twitter, Facebook, reality television shows and appearances on Fox news." This allowed her to be, at the same time, both ubiquitous and insulated. She became, at least for a while, a 24/7 "reality" show designed to unfold only in ways that smoothly fit the political imaginary of the Tea Party and Minutemen. Of course, Palin no longer holds, or is seeking, political office, so the pureness of her virtual reality strategy is relatively easy to maintain.[76]

White's focus on Palin—Han's smooth politician for a certain hyperpolitical constituency—does not mean that he thinks virtual pa-

[76] Stephen K. White, *A Democratic Bearing: Admirable Citizens, Uneven Injustice, and Critical Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 41.

triotism is only a phenomenon of the politician class. Even so, his laser-focus on the Tea Party suggests that only a comfortable subset of right-wing middle-class white Americans indulges in voluptuous resentment and self-righteousness. Techno-sceptics, however, claim that this behaviour is more ubiquitous. Digital bias makes all of us more like virtual patriots—either virtual global-justice cosmopolitans or virtual nationalist reactionaries—whether we despise this outcome or not.

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that virtual patriotism is more than a savvy plan for coordinating right-wing groups. The anti-Trump #Resistance swaps tricorn hats for costumes from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* that are evocative of earlier Puritan New England. They play the victims of history or the heroines of feminist dystopian fiction. The scope of patriotic virtuality is wider than White recognized before 2016. Yet suddenly academic political theorists are lagging. Prominent normative political theorists like White, Jane Bennett, Judith Butler, William Connolly, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, all of whom offered eloquent criticisms of the interlinked problems of religious fundamentalism and a global state of exception during the George W. Bush Administration, seem flat-footed in offering a critique of the emerging New Right (or, indeed, similar trends in the anti-Trump movement). Normative political theorists were able to more convincingly offer timely criticisms of ordinary citizens for their religious beliefs than their new digital practices.

One reason that academic political theory may give techno-scepticism a wide berth is that it is disproportionately United States-centric, and in the United States, techno-scepticism happens to be associated with relatively conservative individuals and politics. Jonathan Haidt, who became the most prominent voice linking smartphones and social media to the rise in mental illness among young people with his book *The Anxious Generation*, is also a leading advocate for viewpoint diversity and the claim that the scarcity of conservative ideas and moral intuitions on university campuses does more harm than good.[77] Of course, an American academic's perception that

[77] Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin, 2024); Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are*

smartphone bans in schools is a right-coded cause is complicated by the public opinion polls cited above and by the fact that more moderate and left-wing governments around the world are enacting similar bans, and by critics like the late David Golumbia who argue that optimism about digital technology is intertwined with the overt libertarian and right-wing politics of tech entrepreneurs like Peter Thiel and Elon Musk.[78] As we have seen, thinkers from a range of political orientations arrive at the conclusion that digitalization disintegrates those spaces where politics can take place. So rather than focus upon the sociological determinants of political theorists' avoidance of techno-scepticism, I isolate reasons that are intrinsic to the ways that political theory is taught and practiced, especially in North America. Mainstream political theory avoids the new techno-scepticism because it is largely beholden to older arguments about depoliticization and, more generally, restrictive conceptions of politics. These range from twentieth-century democratic theory all the way back to Aristotle.

Political theorists from the 1968 Berkeley Free Speech were already convinced that democratic politics was endangered. Long before contemporary concerns with rising illiberalism, it was the sturdy hegemony of liberalism that attenuated democracy. Democratic theorists following Benjamin Barber see liberalism as the replacement of 'the civic ideal that treats human beings as inherently political' with a legal framework for protecting individual rights.[79] Democracy expands the political, while liberalism is a depoliticizing tendency. These democratic theorists seek to show how elites routinely capture liberal regimes with an interest in suppressing political participation. Ten years after Barber's *Strong Democracy* (1984), a veteran of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the most influential democratic theorist of the age was convinced of the ephemerality of political opportunities for most people. Sheldon Wolin envisions democracy as 'something other than a form of government,' and instead described it as a 'rebellious moment' of political experience.[80] 'Fugitive' de-

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Setting Up a Generation for Failure (Penguin, 2018).

[78] David Golumbia, *Cyberlibertarianism: The Right-Wing Politics of Digital Technology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), 30.

[79] Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (University of California Press, 2003 [1984]), 8.

[80] Sheldon Wolin, 'Fugitive Democracy', *Constellations* 1 (1994), 11–25, at 23.

mocracy is the rare opportunity for political experiences and the free exercise of the human capacities relevant to rule.

Academic political theorists of the 1980s and 1990s were not merely describing the diminished opportunities for democratic politics amidst neoliberalism; they took themselves to be clarifying the essence of politics. This is how they are understood today as well. Josiah Ober argues that Wolin's anti-institutionalist conception of politics comes close to the original meaning of democracy in theory and practice, before liberalism. Democracy is the argument and the social fact (born in a rebellious moment in classical Athens) that human beings have the capacity for civic participation.[81] In the aftermath of the populist resurgences of 2016, however, Ober is worried that emerging postliberal movements will use democratic theorists' critiques of liberalism to support even *less* democratic regimes. Indeed, Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed* is emphatically a defence of democracy from liberal *depoliticization*: 'the actual absence of active democratic self-rule is not only an acceptable but a desired end'.[82] Deneen thanks Barber, his teacher at Rutgers University, in the introduction to the book. He proceeds to take up democratic-theory arguments to criticize liberal democracy. Deneen flirts with techno-scepticism when he links liberalism to a defence of unbounded technological freedom to remake the human world, which for Deneen accounts for modern societies' oscillation between 'wild optimism' and 'profound terror' regarding technology, and which is ultimately linked to the diminution of our capacities for self-government.[83] While Deneen makes an argument about centuries-long shifts in attitudes towards politics and human nature that he calls 'liberalism', techno-sceptics are concerned with a much more rapidly diminishing capacity for civic participation. Both are close to the core concerns of modern democratic theory.

The depoliticization concerns that run through democratic theory in the United States find even starker formulations in continental critical theory. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that a 'culture industry' has completely

[81] Josiah Ober, *Demopolis: Democracy Before Liberalism in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 89, 168.
[82] Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018), 155.
[83] *Ibid.*, 91.

eclipsed democracy, offering only 'freedom to be the same'.[84] This book is a landmark of techno-scepticism for its underlying argument that technical domination of nature is at the heart of Enlightenment thinking, and that as we dominate nature, we dominate ourselves. The two Frankfurt School thinkers cannot imagine any escape: 'Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination.'[85] Their disgust with conformism does not track with the consumerist self-expression of the Internet age, but it does inspire Jürgen Habermas to articulate the kind of communicative rationality and communicative action that could underpin social democracy. Habermas's 'discourse theory' of democracy must offer a critical toolkit for recognizing strategic and instrumental forms of rationality that impinge on democratic politics.[86] Continental post-Marxist and U.S. democratic theory traditions begin to converge here. Habermas offers a pragmatist stance against depoliticization that moves beyond his Frankfurt School teachers' despair for a political future. However, contemporary techno-sceptics point out a limitation of the theory that Habermas acknowledges in the late 1980s: communication cannot survive the constant distortion that digitalization brings into play.[87]

Closer still to modern techno-scepticism is Arendt's depoliticization thesis. Human beings need to recover political capacities, Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*, because industrial automation is about to put us all out of work.[88] However, societies of labourers without labour will live bleak and managed lives unless they rediscover the meaningfulness of political action. Like Barba-Kay, Arendt looks to the ancients for political possibilities and a sense of boundaries that have always constituted the political.[89] Yet modern people

[84] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. G. Schmid Noerr, tr. E. Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 135-136.

[85] *Ibid.*, 95.

[86] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, tr. William Rehg (The MIT Press, 1998).

[87] Jonathan Crary, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-capitalist World* (Verso, 2022), 42-43.

[88] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edition (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

[89] A second voice at the end of the book worries 'the political' is an Arendtian fantasy of an ancient Greece that never was. This remains a worry in the air of what is otherwise a rather Arendtian book. Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making,* 254.

are often isolated individuals only gathered as formless masses, she argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, because modern societies lack forms for engaging in politics.[90] Barba-Kay quotes this book to describe the boundaries he thinks politics requires:

> Positive laws in constitutional government are designed to erect boundaries and establish channels of communication between men whose community is continually endangered by the new men born into it… the boundaries are for the political existence of men what memory is for his historical existence: they guarantee the pre-existence of a common world, the reality of some continuity which transcends the individual life-span of each generation… To abolish the fences of laws between men—as tyranny does—means to take away man's liberties and destroy freedom as a living political reality; for the space between men, as it is hedged in by laws, is the living space of freedom.[91]

These constitutional forms, or rather the belief we can create new constitutional forms, are some of what Arendt calls the 'lost treasure' of the American tradition in an age of depoliticization.[92] One might think Arendt's conception of politics, with its particular emphasis on politics as the space for the expression of one's 'public self',[93] is particularly prone to exploitation by social media or dissipation into hyperpolitics. Yet Barba-Kay carries over this analysis to the Internet age, that massification of individuals is eroding the space of freedom, as technology dishabituates us from sharing a bounded space ruled by local opinion and memory. He even credits her with a prescient foreboding of the digital age as he describes it: 'A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow.'[94]

[90] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt, 1976), 421. Cited in Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 104.
[91] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 598-600. Qtd. in Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 131.
[92] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Penguin, 2006), 215.
[93] See Shiraz Dossa, *The Public Realm and the Public Self: The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989).
[94] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5. Qtd. in Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our Own Making*, 119. Barba-Kay suggests that his book about the Internet, an 'ultimate' technology that 'make[s] it impossible to imagine anything beyond them, is akin to Arendt's worries about the nuclear bomb and human spaceflight.' Barba-Kay, *A Web of Our*

These depoliticization arguments sway twentieth-century Arendtians, critical theorists, and democratic theorists, so that a significant number of political theorists can only regard techno-sceptic arguments, at best, like icing on the cake. Arendt, Horkheimer and Adorno, Wolin—these are some of the classic authors who recur in political theory graduate seminars year after year. They inform the way political theorists are taught to see the world. Depoliticization is old news at best. The contours of depoliticization may even be a settled question that defines different approaches to the political.

Not all approaches to political theory are vulnerable to this critique, however. Realists, notably, are unlikely to accept the major premise that politics 'properly speaking' is rare and under threat. Many realists remain committed to what Paul Sagar calls the project of 'developing a political theory that is appropriately responsive to what is politics mundanely speaking.'[95] And many realists eschew what Mark Philp calls the 'essentialist' conceptions of politics familiar in Arendt or, as we shall see, Schmitt. This is because realists are concerned with corrupted political systems and situations that strict essentialists might dismiss as 'not political'.[96] My aim is not to vindicate realists against essentialists, but I think realism is attractive to the degree that other schools of political theory absent themselves from discussing what everyone else considers politics.

Strict conceptions of politics predate Adorno, Arendt, Barber, Horkheimer, and Wolin. Going further back, historically informed political theory already proceeds from restrictive definitions of the political. These definitions allow one to form a notion of politics 'properly speaking' in the first place. For example, Aristotle famously defines political rule as the arrangement where citizens rule and are ruled in turn.[97] This mode of direct participation in ruling and being ruled, alternation, seems to preclude representation. A conception of politics that centres representation of the public interest or public

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Own Making, 18-19.

[95] Paul Sagar, 'Legitimacy and Domination' in *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice*, ed. M. Sleat (Columbia University Press, 2018), 114-139 at 115.

[96] See Mark Philp, 'Politics and the "Pure of Heart": Realism and Corruption' in *Politics Recovered*, ed. M. Sleat, 194-217.

[97] Aristotle, *Politics*, tr. Carnes Lord (University of Chicago Press, 2013), III.16, 1287a19, 93.

opinion, and so distances government from direct participation for any reason, does not predate Benjamin Constant and James Madison.[98] So representative government, Bernard Manin argues, is not political in the Aristotelian sense.[99] Aristotle, therefore, can offer a political theorist such a restrictive conception of politics that it is not to be found in present assumptions about politics today.

In perhaps the next most famous example, John Locke defines the political as the legislative power that can make 'Penalties of Death, and consequently all less Penalties'.[100] By this definition, signatory nations to Protocol 6 (1983) of the European Convention on Human Rights, which include all forty-six nations of the Council of Europe, have forfeited their properly political power. The definitions of politics at the origins of the classical and liberal traditions, respectively, are too restrictive to account for mundane and everyday politics.

'The political' in the thought of Schmitt is likewise quite restrictive. Schmitt's notion of 'collective identities [that] can only be established on the mode of an us/them' becomes fundamental for Chantal Mouffe's agonist critique of liberal-democratic politics.[101] Mouffe expands the definition of democratic politics to include all sorts of passionate conflicts that are excluded from a more restrictive liberal conception of formal politics. Schmitt insists that what is political is capable of sharing, at least, potentially, 'the public enemy' of his friend/enemy criterion.[102] The political is not possessed of Locke's ultimate juridical potential (capital punishment), but a war-fighting potential (the military draft). Indeed, Schmitt worries that 'the disappearance of the enemy' is replacing the political with an 'extraordinarily intricate coalition of economy, freedom, technology, ethics, and parliamentarism.'[103] In *The Theory of the Partisan*, especially, Schmitt argues that the enemy has become a global enemy in

[98] Bryan Garsten, 'Representative Government and Popular Sovereignty' in *Political Representation*, eds. I. Shapiro, S. C. Stokes, E. J. Wood, and A. S. Kirshner (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 90-110 at 91.

[99] Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 27-30.

[100] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge University Press, 1988), II.i, §3, 263.

[101] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso, 2000), 13.

[102] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, tr. G. Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 28.

[103] Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 76.

a total ideological war that transcends the concrete order of bounded nations.[104] When Mouffe wishes to 'use Schmitt against Schmitt' and open up this concept of the political, showing how the collective will in healthy democracy is formed in the face of contests with adversaries, she is consciously expanding an earlier more restrictive conception of politics.

Political theorists tend to valorize the political, in addition to viewing it as a specific and often endangered space. They argue, for example, that politics offers opportunities for personal development. For the reasons given by Ober above, democratic politics is thought to offer meaningful and valuable experiences that shape human beings. Arendt famously insists that political opinions have a dignity of their own. Therefore, political theorists are prone to critique that which hems in or threatens the political. Their valorization of politics primes them to offer critiques of the forces of depoliticization. To Schmitt, Arendt, Wolin, and Mouffe, one could add Max Weber, Paul Ricoeur, Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau, and others as examples.[105] Even Habermas's discourse theory of democracy belongs in this list. He offers a toolkit to identify how communication can be manipulated; one *sine qua non* of political communication is the 'ability to say no' or refusal that is constitutionally enshrined in protections for civil disobedience.[106] The normative dimension of political theory, in many cases, comes from a defence of the political; because these thinkers value the political, they must criticize depoliticization.[107]

The perspective of academic political theorists is shaped by various priors about depoliticization that make the prospect of a digital erosion of the capacity for civic participation uninteresting. Digital life and social media can only, at best, represent an additional, exogenous, or even superfluous source of depoliticization in many fields of political theory. Meanwhile, these new developments interest ac-

[104] Carl Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan*, tr. G. L. Ulmen (Telos Press, 2007).

[105] James Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political* (Routledge, 2016), 1.

[106] Steven White and Evan Robert Farr, 'No-Saying in Habermas', *Political Theory* 40.1 (2012), 32-57; Robert Wyllie, 'Habermas, 1968, and the Turn to Aesthetic-Expressive Protest', *Constellations* 27.3 (2020), 452-465.

[107] A high-liberal tradition backstopped by ideal worked-out normative theory, which tries to stabilize politics *for* a conception of justice that is worked out prior to or independent of political contestation, such as Immanuel Kant's or John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, is often at odds with the canon of more "political" political theorists described here.

ademic outsiders and raise concerns among ordinary citizens. This puts political theorists in a predicament. Bloggers, journalists, and other 'outsiders' are out ahead of an academic field that wishes to represent its imaginativeness, far-sightedness, provocativeness, and relevance to ordinary citizens.[108] Why? *Theory itself* got in the way of thinking through the problems of the Internet.

Conclusion

This is an embarrassing predicament that political theorists find ourselves in. In the mundane ordinary-language sense, 'politics' has survived the disappearance of capital punishment, rebellious moments, or international warfare within the concrete order. Meanwhile, everyday political attitudes, experiences, and practices are being transformed in interesting ways. To be worthy of the scholarly activity handed down by Arendt, Wolin, and the critical theorists, we should rethink how their great shared topic of concern—depoliticization—functions in the digital age. There is a range of what taking the new techno-scepticism seriously might look like, from the end of political theory to a paradigm shift in how political theorists think about institutions, with some more modest proposals in the middle.

Acknowledging technologies that are intensively and globally diminishing political capacities may seem tantamount to admitting that political theory has no future; however, the alternative makes academic political theorists look like ostriches with their heads in the sand. Is the Internet delivering the final blow to the political, which late twentieth-century political theorists already thought was on the brink of disappearance? All that is left, one might argue, is to write a genealogy of hyperpolitics that doubles as an epitaph for the political. Inclined to this pessimism by temperament, I advise political theorists to follow Adorno and turn back to Søren Kierkegaard. In the mid-1840s, Kierkegaard already sees the newspaper-reading public as the dissipation of a revolutionary age and its passionate collective action based on shared ideals.[109] Indeed, in his *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard identifies something like hyperpolitics—an emotional and spectatorial public sphere obsessed with politics but incapable of ac-

[108] Wendy Brown, *Edgework*, 80.

[109] See Robert Wyllie, 'Kierkegaard's Critique of the Public Sphere', *Telos* 166 (2014), 57-79, at 68, 73.

tion—from the very beginning of mediated society.[110] If we take this elegiac view, we might start to discuss politics like magic, an activity involving a sort of power once widely invoked but that seems to have vanished from the earth, save in the aspirations of a few eccentrics. And while Joshua Foa Dienstag points out that pessimists like Albert Camus have been energized by the foreclosure of political possibilities, this techno-sceptical pessimism about politics is far gloomier than any pessimist 'model for politics' that Dienstag proposes.[111] Of course, after writing elegies for the political, the only remaining task would be to hand the keys over to the sociology department.

Alternatively, digitalization does not rout politics altogether but simply puts political theory in a familiar retreat position where democracy is a 'fugitive' practice, as it was for Wolin. I discovered the works of Han while searching for personal strategies of resistance against the attention economy; even better are Jenny Odell's strategies for perceiving the world 'at different scales and tempos' that evade the way our attention is corralled by digital media.[112] Yet these therapeutics do not seem obviously political until they are framed as demands for digital media-free public spaces. In *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew B. Crawford offers the 'attentional commons' and the 'right not to be addressed' as ways for democratic citizens to demand spaces where they are not targeted with advertisements, background music, or other forms of address and stimulation that digital media make cheap and ubiquitous.[113] These are the concepts that political theorists might take up to inspire and articulate coordinated efforts to push back against digital bias.

Then what? Techno-scepticism inclines me to think smaller about political theory, or even to turn to the history of political thought to find material for a eulogy for the political on my gloomier days, but we can also imagine political theory rising to this generation-

[110] Robert Wyllie, 'Kierkegaard's Later Critique of Political Rationalism' in *Critics of Enlightenment Rationalism*, eds. G. Callahan and K. McIntyre (Palgrave, 2020), 47-60, at 51.

[111] Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 41, 150.

[112] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Melville House, 2019), 109.

[113] Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 187, 252.

al challenge. Imagine if most political theorists became convinced, like Haidt in his much-reported statement from 2019, that social media usage creates 'a very good chance' of the 'catastrophic failure' of American democracy before 2050.[114] Political theorists might think with a new urgency about how liberal protections of free expression undermine democracy. Some might defend some version of the Golden Shield Project, which runs the so-called 'Great Firewall' of China that checks transmission control protocol packets for sensitive keywords and blocks access to offending websites, to protect democracy from 'misinformation'. We are not there yet. A leading U.S. postliberal like Deneen, though he argues that democratic pluralism hinges upon counterweights to a free speech absolutism that protects blasphemy, obscenity, and pornography, does not take direct aim at the First Amendment but rather calls for a new elite to steer institutions like the Supreme Court to weigh the 'common good' in decision making.[115] Yet urgent techno-scepticism might intensify anti-liberalism, so that future democratic theorists in the West are willing to take more direct institutional lessons from really existing illiberal (though hardly democratic) regimes like the People's Republic of China.[116] More modestly, techno-sceptical theorists might set the terms for comparative politics to study which Western-style liberal democracies retain higher levels of informed engagement, robust political participation, and social solidarity despite the centrifugal forces of digital hyperpolitics. Political theory would be a healthier field if its practitioners could generate more questions, answers, and debates on these topics. Until then, we are left to ponder what is wrong with our discipline, and why we lag behind our colleagues in other fields and academic outsiders in theorizing about the digital.

[114] Paul Kelly, 'America's Uncivil War on Democracy', *TheAustralian.com*. 20 July 2019. https://www.theaustralian.com.au%2Finquirer%2Famericas-uncivil-war-on-democracy.

[115] Patrick Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (Sentinel, 2023), 66, 155; see also Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism: Recovering the Classical Legal Tradition* (Polity, 2022), 178.

[116] On the complex self-understanding of the Chinese regime vis-à-vis liberalism, see Daniel F. Vukovich, *Illiberal China: The Ideological Challenge of the People's Republic of China* (Palgrave, 2019).