

## Democracy Paradox Podcast

*Hugo Drochon Says Elites Are Inevitable* (4/1/26)

Transcript

### Introduction

Today's guest is Hugo Drochon. He is an associate professor in political theory at the University of Nottingham and the author of a new book titled *Elites and Democracy*. I was unfamiliar with his work before stumbling on his book, but I found myself drawn to it for a few different reasons.

For starters, the book provides an in-depth exploration of the work of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels. These are economists and sociologists of the early twentieth century whose influence on political science is routinely underrated. While they are rarely discussed among political scientists nowadays, their ideas about elites shaped our thinking about liberal democracy through scholars such as Robert Dahl, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Juan Linz.

Hugo will introduce you to some of their key ideas such as elite replacement and the iron law of oligarchy, but I don't want you to get the impression this episode is just a summary of their ideas. Instead, we try to relate those ideas to the political moment we are living through today. My questions focus less on what those theorists believed and more about how their ideas might answer some of the questions we face right now.

One of the questions we try to answer is whether elites stabilize democracy or threaten it. Hugo shows the answer to this question is not straight forward. A healthy democracy must provide avenues for groups to challenge established elites and even replace them. According to Hugo, a dynamic democracy requires a deeper commitment than the presence of competitive elections. It must allow for genuine outsiders to have pathways to obtain political power.

Hugo's conclusions might make some listeners uncomfortable. His analysis leaves him more sympathetic to populist movements than other theorists. He views populist movements, even those with antiliberal or even antidemocratic sentiments, as evidence of democracy's ability to react to popular concerns and allow for new leaders to emerge. This does not mean populism is not a threat. Instead, he argues it should inform our response to it.

My challenge for you is to consider the role of elites within a democracy. Are elites necessary to stabilize democracy or does their presence make democracy less democratic? I expect you might find the answer is a little bit of both. Take the time to think through your own ideas on this topic and feel free to share them with me. If you listen to Spotify, you can leave your thoughts as a comment on the episode. You can also send me your thoughts as an email to [jkempf@democracyparadox.com](mailto:jkempf@democracyparadox.com). There is also a link to the complete transcript in the show notes.

*The Democracy Paradox* is made in partnership with the Kellogg Institute of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame. Make sure to mark your calendar for the upcoming Global Democracy Conference on May 19th and 20th. This year's conference will take place at the University of Notre Dame. Check the link in the show notes to register today. But for now... here is my conversation with Hugo Drochon...

## Podcast Transcript

**Justin Kempf:** Hugo Drochon, welcome to the *Democracy Paradox*.

**Hugo Drochon:** Thank you, Justin for having me. I'm looking forward to the discussion.

**Justin Kempf:** Well, Hugo, I found your book really interesting - *Elites and Democracy*. Elites are a concept that a lot of people in the democracy space don't want to talk about. They come up frequently and there's a few theorists such as Larry Bartells, who I've had on the podcast, and others who will talk a lot about elites. A lot of democratic theory just bypasses them and overlooks them. So, I was really interested because your book centers on this topic specifically. It focuses entirely on the relationship between elites and democracy and looks at it both through different theorists through history as well as comprising your own theory as a result about the relationship between the two.

But where I'd like to start here is particularly in America, but I feel like this is true everywhere. The idea of an elite seems to be almost like a bad word or a slur. So rather than defining who exactly is an elite, why is it that nobody wants to embrace themselves as an elite? I mean, I see people like Elon Musk, who's the richest man in the world, think that the elites are somehow somebody else. I see protesters at Occupy Wall Street say that we are the 99% as if when you're in the 2% of the wealthiest people, somehow you're not part of the elite. Why is

it that nobody wants to admit that they actually might be one of these elites that we're talking about?

**Hugo Drochon:** I am thrilled you open with that because it's true. I do feel there's resistance to speaking about elites in the current political situation, especially perhaps in the US, because there's a general, obviously American, if you want, democratic ideology that wants to reject the idea of elites and perhaps elites is part of the makeup of American democracy, especially with the sense that the War of Independence or the American Revolution was trying to get rid of the English elites perhaps. So that seems to be ingrained and there's this ideological element too, which is that America's a democracy. Everybody can succeed. So, elites is a bit of a bad term and today perhaps just in the way that the configuration from the so-called polarization in US politics neither side really wants to take up that term.

The Republicans have spent a lot of time denouncing the elite and the Democrats don't really want to go into that territory either for different reasons. Then if we drill down slightly, and this is part of the story I want to tell, the term elite first came around, we can date it I think quite precisely now, with Vilfredo Pareto who's a Franco-Italian economist. He's the one who gives us the 80-20 rule which has echoes of the 1% and the 99%. That 20% of the population will always own 80% of the land or of the wealth. That's just an iron law. Pareto in 1902 gives us the term elite. He's lecturing in Lausanne in Switzerland at the time, so in French. His mother's actually French. He's binational and bilingual. So, he used the French term elite with the accent.

At the time it was more a term of art. It's meant to be a social science term. It's like, okay, in the past we've obviously had the regime, the old regime within aristocracy, but we're moving to universal suffrage and democracy, so we don't want to use that term anymore. We don't want to use the Marxist term of class either. A lot of the figures I look at are anti-Marxist because they say maybe you have a proletarian revolution, but what will come from that is a new form of elite. It's not that you get rid of elites completely. So, this is the term to say that in a democracy you still have a small group of people who rule. That's meant for social scientists at the beginning. It's meant to be just a neutral term to describe what's happening.

Obviously, sometimes there's a bit of normative positive element addressed to it. Although the figures I look at, including Pareto are extremely critical of the elites of their day in the American context. Aside from this ideological resistance, C. Wright Mills writes this book in 1956, *The Power Elite*, which, I think, is also the moment where it becomes anglicized. Elite loses the French

accent. Now we don't write it with a French accent except for the *New Yorker*, which I think says more about the *New Yorker* than anything else. What's picked up from C. Wright Mills is the military industrial complex added in with the power of the presidency in the context of the Cold War, the growing power of American military might, and also the centralization of society. He's critical of it.

So maybe that feeds into this general resistance that you might have to the term elite to start off with in the US where the idea is everybody's meant to be equal and there's no such thing as an elite. But it's pejorative. Then today, obviously nobody wants to be an elite because elite has this pejorative element to it. So obviously people like Elon Musk, as you rightly point out, is an economic elite. He's the richest man in the world, so it's obvious that he's an elite, but he's using this as a way to say no. I'm not part of the established elite. I'm challenging the established elite and that's a good thing.

There's something fundamentally democratic about that, which is the idea that in democracy we don't have elites or we challenge elites, so nobody wants to be an elite. Nobody wants to be an established elite. Nobody wants to be a democratic elite. No one wants to be an economic elite. So, there's a general resistance and I have been wondering whether there's a bit of resistance to the book precisely for these reasons.

**Justin Kempf:** So, do you think there are different types of elites? For instance, one of the reasons why I feel that there's resistance to elites is people think of themselves as not being the type of elite that they might think of as dangerous. For instance, Elon Musk might recognize that he's an economic elite but think that it's the academic elites or the elites in Washington that are the danger.

William F. Buckley, who comes across very much as somebody who is embracing elitism in a lot of ways during his day, at the same time said that he'd rather pick the first, I don't know, like a hundred names or a thousand names out of the telephone book to run the country than the faculty of Harvard University. He saw a difference in terms of who he considered to be elites. Do you think there's contests between different types of elites, such as economic, political or academic or do they kind of all just lump together in terms of their relationship to political power?

**Hugo Drochon:** Spot on again as a question. Of course, in certain contexts, everybody wants to be an elite and everybody's very happy to use that term. If you think about sports or athletics, you say elite athletes or even in the army, elite units. And that's very, very positive. When I was saying Pareto was the one

who gave us this term, the kind of social science term, his idea was every sphere of activity will have an elite, so whatever it might be - the best chess player, the best tennis player, and it was beyond good and evil, so it could also be the best courtesan, the best thief. Then Pareto wants to make the distinction between the kind of the general elite and the ruling elite, and unless you're Gary Kasparov normally there's no mixture between the two.

Gary Kasparov just happens to have done a political career afterwards, but normally that's not the case. There is separation. Obviously, Pareto was most interested in the ruling elite. Within that, then the idea is to say that there is competition between different types of ruling elites and this expands out. So, there's this French theorist, he's best known in the US as a theorist of international relations and being close to Kissinger, Raymond Aron. Aron says you look at the different categories of society, so economics, society more generally, the juridical system, the bureaucracy, the military, and there within that you'll have certain elites such as the generals, high court judges, whatever you want. You have those and you have the political class, the politicians.

One of the ways of making sense of society is figuring out the relationship between the two - whether they are separated and in their own institutions and have their own power bases. When there's competition between them, you might say this is a divided elite. Aron was writing within the Cold War. So, he is trying to make a distinction between the West and the East. In the West you have elites, but they are separate. They're often in competition with one another. That's a constitutional pluralist system. That's what he called it. He looked over in the East, so East Europe, Russia, or China, and said those elites are all part of the same institution. Namely, the Communist Party brings together the political elites, social elites, economic elites, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. That's not a divided elite. It's a united elite or a unified elite.

He thought that it was dangerous because if you are the people, then there's less recourse to using one elite against the other. There are less places to go to if you have a divided elite. It's like the social leader may be after me, but maybe the economic leader will go over on this side. There was this idea that when there's competition between elites this is where there's a potential space for liberty to come across. Whereas if it's a united elite where they're all in the same institution, it's not that competition won't happen, but the difficulty is that competition is not allowing for an institutional setup within which it can play itself out. That's dangerous because it means competition will probably take extra institutional forms, namely violence.

So, if you want to replace a leader, you don't do it through this legal framework that everybody consents to. It comes through assassination, overthrow, or whatever it might be. There is always an idea with all the thinkers that I looked at that there are always elites, but elites are always challenged by rising elites or new elites emerging from new fields. For instance, there's a technological revolution which we're going through at the moment that creates a new social force and elites linked to that. They may come about and challenge the established elite. By the way, I think one of the ways of thinking about US politics for the last 10 years is that there's been an established elite, which brought together the established Republicans and Democrats in certain ways and they've been challenged by an outside elite.

Donald Trump is surely part of the 1% and a media personality, but he wasn't part of the DC political elite. He was external to that and so he was an outside elite challenging the established elite. Then in the last round in 2024, he brings over to his side elites from the technological section, the tech bros. He brings them over to his side. He uses their power to challenge the elite and he's been successful. So, you have an outside elite that's completely replaced the established elite, both on the left and the right, both for the conservatives and the liberals.

But what I wanted to say is that there is this idea of circulation of elite. There's always movement. The concern with all of them is whether this movement slows down or whether society becomes crystallized. That's the term that they often use. They like river metaphors. That also comes from Machiavelli. They are the elite coming together in such a way that they're more and more centralized. They're more and more together and then there's fewer and fewer ways of putting pressure on them, especially from below. That's exactly what C. Wright Mills was talking about. He says there's all these different elites, but at the moment there's this alliance between the military, big business and the presidency in the US in the 1950s and they've basically hoarded power and there's no way to apply pressure.

So, the competition or the circulation has reduced and this is the concern. This is what the concern of most of these thinkers was. Whereas they wanted to increase competition as much as possible or ensure the circulation happened because they thought that if there was too much concentration or crystallization, this may actually lead to a form of revolt or revolution.

**Justin Kempf:** So, when we talk about the idea of circulation of elites, the theory is established in the early 20th century during a period that's really the birth of modern democracy. People are just getting used to the idea of political

parties and the way that democracy works in the modern context. Modern representative democracy oftentimes has a natural circulation of elites where the party who's in power is the previous group that used to be the rising elites, the people who are out of power. Then the people who are out of power are both the former elites and the next elites because they'll come back into power again later during a new election cycle.

When you bring up the idea of outsiders such as Trump in the United States, maybe Le Pen over in France, we think of populists throughout the world that are starting new political parties and really coming into power from the outside. When we think of that, these are new elites that are emerging, are they displacing the old elites? Is that what we mean by circulation or does the population of elites grow and expand to include their numbers?

**Hugo Drochon:** Yeah, great question. So, as I said, all these thinkers really like river metaphors. This comes from Machiavelli. If you're remember Machiavelli in *The Prince*, he talks about how politics is a river. It flows through, but sometimes as a storm and it breaks its banks and you have got to be prepared for that as best you can. This is where the figure of Fortuna comes about. They also talk about the circulation of elites in this sense, which is that sometimes the river's flowing naturally. There's tributaries coming in. The renewal happens naturally, but other times there are storms and the river breaks it back. So sometimes you have a system where you want conservative reform or sometimes you have a system of revolution or revolt or whatever it might be and those are the two ways the circulation can happen.

Obviously, most of the figures I have prefer if it's more tributary and is happening naturally rather than a revolt. But they're also conscious of the fact, this goes back to the previous point, which is if the elite becomes too crystallized and there's too much separation between the elites and the people more generally, there's always going to be a degree of separation. But it's a question of degree. If it's too much and if there's too many sentiments animating the elites and animating the people, that's a system which is more likely to lead to revolt. Whereas if it's happening naturally and the elite is open enough, it's able to cream off the best from the top and integrate into it, which is admittedly a somewhat conservative view of society. But that's mainly the position that they advocate for.

So, the question for today is about the institutional setups that we have in these different countries and how well are they able to accommodate these challenges coming from outside? Because one of the figures I look at, Gaetano Mosca, the point he started at which is representative government, he said representative

government was probably the best system we have so far to be able to integrate as many of these different competing elites together. He has this slightly dated 19th century language. Mosca says that if the system is able to integrate in a harmonious whole as many social forces as possible then the level of civilization is higher than if it's one dominating over the other. By the way, he thinks that if you have one social force dominating over all of the others that's a form of tyranny.

At the time, he was worried about democracy, understood as what he was calling corporatism, but that we might understand as socialism. He says the socialist claim wants to dominate not just in politics, but also in economics and society, so they become the dominant force. Then he realizes that fascism is trying to do the same thing, which is why he denounces it at the end. The point is he defends representative government and a form of what he calls juridical defense, which is essentially the rule of law and checks and balances. That's the best system within which you can integrate and that's kind of an ideal. Then we can look at the different institutions in the different countries and see how well they are able to integrate these different challenges.

Because you may have a movement, as you pointed out from Republicans or Democrats or in Europe socialists or liberals to conservative or whatever, but sometimes that doesn't mean there's much change happening. Then at other times you can have huge change within political parties themselves. Obviously, Donald Trump is quite a different Republican than what came before him - George Bush or Reagan. In the UK you often talk about the difference between somebody like David Cameron who was quite liberal before Brexit and then subsequently people like Boris Johnson who's a bit more populist and more centralist. But even if there's a change of parties, the policies might remain the same. Margaret Thatcher, one of her famous lines was that one of her biggest legacies was Tony Blair, because Tony Blair continued her legacies even though the country moved from the Conservatives to New Labour there's a continuation.

So, this allows us to see beyond that, because for Pareto, there's two types of elites, and again, this comes from Machiavelli. Machiavelli in *The Prince* says the ideal prince is a combination of two animals. On the one hand, you need to be a lion because you need to be strong enough to scare off the wolves who are there to try to take you down. You also need to be a fox to avoid the snares or the traps that the lion might fall into. But the fox on their own cannot scare off the wolf. You need to be a combination of both. Pareto says this is an ideal.

We have an elite. Some of them are a bit more lion like. Some of them are a bit more Fox like. The question is who's in power at this moment of time. If the lions are in power this has an implication for society more generally. Lions rule in a more centralized way. They're more willing to use force. They're more faith-based, whereas foxes are, the Italian term is *combinazione*. They're more likely to combine and more prone to decentralization. There's more skepticism. There's less willingness to use force. If you take that even within political parties themselves or across political parties sometimes the lions remain in power, the foxes remain in power, or it can change within political parties themselves. That's what I think I was trying to bring with this perspective. Let's have a slightly different lens to politics than we have today.

The final point is since 2016 at least a lot of politics has been analyzed through the lens of populism. We have these populist leaders that have arisen everywhere. I don't want to deny that in the least. I just wanted to bring to the conversation the fact that a lot of these populist leaders are themselves elites. Donald Trump. You mentioned Marine Le Pen. She is the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen. She's not coming out of nowhere. She's been in politics all of her life. Boris Johnson is also presenting himself as a populist leader. He is as establishment as you get. He went to Eaton. He went to Oxford. I want to bring that perspective and say there's these populist leaders, but there's also something else going on and that may be captured by this notion of the circulation of elites.

**Justin Kempf:** So, when we think of elites as lions and foxes, the natural assumption is to think that those are two different parties, two different ideologies, two different groups competing for power. However, it seems that within parties, within factions, there seems to be lions and foxes. I mean, we can think about autocratic politics and think of China for instance. Clearly, Xi Jinping behaves more like a lion. You could say Hu Jintao behaved more like a fox. You can see that within Soviet politics from back in the day. Clearly Stalin would've acted more like a lion. Some of his successors that brought about post-totalitarianism probably would be more like foxes.

You could argue, and of course there's lots of gradations in between, I would assume. How should we really be thinking about that? Because Barack Obama could be argued to be a lion in terms of centralizing stuff, but other people might say that he's a fox. It's not always clear as to how people fall into that and oftentimes it's groups of lions competing against each other or groups of foxes competing with each other rather than one group against the other.

**Hugo Drochon:** I think one of the claims I want to make and you've hinted towards it already is to say maybe we're in a phase right now where the lions

have come back to power. There are more lions and obviously the thing is, as Pareto said, never one completely dominating. It's always a question of emphasis. Sometimes the lions are a bit more in power. Sometimes the foxes are a bit more in power. But there's a reason to say yes that at the moment it seems like we have a bit of return of the lions whether it's Donald Trump, people like Boris Johnson, or, as you're rightly saying, in China there's also been a turn towards something much more centralized, whereas before it was much more open.

I think the perspective that I wanted to bring is one of the ways I think of interpreting what's going on at the moment is to say the lions are coming back to power. To give you one final example, there's a lot of anti-EU hatred coming from a lot of parts of the world. I think that's a proof of the fact that the lions are coming back to power because the EU is a quintessential fox like project. It's all about combination. It's all about decentralization. So, it's unsurprising that people like Trump or even in the UK, the leave faction, even populist leaders, including Marine Le Pen, in France all hate the EU because it's the opposite of what they are. They're about centralized faith-based rule. The EU is all about compromise.

The idea of the book is to bring that perspective into our discussions about how we understand politics today. The point is to bring us another insight, another lens through which to analyze it, which perhaps captures certain things that other perspectives might not capture. Populism, for instance, overlooks the elitist basis of some of these outside challenges that are claiming they're not part of the elite. Of course they're part of the elite. Maybe a better way to understand what's going on is that you have an outside elite challenging an established elite, even though they reject these labels. Then also to say there's these worldwide phenomena which cut across party ideological lines, as you rightly pointed out, but may still be captured as this broader move within world politics, which I've tried to argue is a move towards the lions.

**Justin Kempf:** So democratic theory for a long time felt that it institutionalized competition between elites because you would have a natural circulation of elites, because as different parties would come to power, other parties would fall out of power and new people would emerge within the system organically. One of the senses I get from your book is that because elites can crystallize and because those two different groups competing for power can start to feel as if it's part of the same organic blob of the elite, that it's good to have new movements rise up and to have new rising groups of elites to come into the system.

That's not just healthy for democracy but is endemic of democracy. That that's necessary for democracy to thrive. Do you feel that that's the case or do you feel that democracy can just naturally cycle through the different elites? Organically. I mean, does it need outsiders to remain dynamic and healthy?

**Hugo Drochon:** Yes, it does. Two points on that of which one point brings us all the way back to the beginning of the discussion. I know you've had a number of different democratic theorists in here and one of the people we associate with competition between elites is Schumpeter, Joseph Schumpeter, although he never actually used the term elite itself, which is quite interesting. It's competition between leaders, which is often a way of democratizing the term elite. Part of the story is to say political science and democratic theory, at least post-war, was aware of how people like Joseph Schumpeter, Robert Dahl, C. Wright Mills were directly engaging with these previous thinkers: Mosca, Pareto, Michels. I think that's been slightly lost from view. So now we study Dahl, Schumpeter, and all that, but we've lost the conversations that they were engaging with.

You can't think about their own theories of Polyarchy and competition between the elites without seeing the discussion they're having with the earlier 20th century. So that's been slightly lost from view, which is perhaps why we no longer think about elites in the same way. There's that point. I think that's important. In many ways, political science and democratic theory are blind to some of its elitist foundations that you can only recover if you do this kind of historical work. That's the first point. The second point is you're absolutely right. It's not just essential for democracy. It's probably essential for all societies, but for all societies with elites, the question is what's the ratio between elites and the people? That can be articulated in lots of different ways.

Authoritarian regimes themselves are always responsive in some ways. You can't just have pure power. That's never going to happen in itself and there's different ways in which this is articulated. What I'm trying to say with the book is if you accept that there are always going to be elites throughout all types of political regimes, then the question is no longer a dichotomous one between is this a democracy or is this an authoritarian regime. It becomes more a question of a spectrum. Is it more democratic or less democratic, or more authoritarian or less authoritarian? The challenge then becomes maybe democracy can no longer mean what we traditionally take it to mean. Democracy as sovereignty of the people is perhaps true in the abstract.

In reality, if there's always a small group of people who rule that can't really mean that. Then we move towards something more like minority rule, which

actually Robert Dahl explicitly uses that term and then moves on to polyarchy. What I've tried to defend then, which I think gets to your point, is this idea that we should think about democracy, as I've termed it, as a dynamic democracy where change may happen when there's social movements from below who put pressure on the political system, on political elites, and it's the interaction between the two where politics may change. So, you can have a revolving door of politicians who actually don't change that much. I think there's a lot of frustration with regards to that today whereas you want a new elite that comes out to challenge it.

When social movements lead to political change that perhaps is encapsulated by having a leader who represents their interests come to power. That happens when there's social movements, pressure from below applied to the political system. But crucially it needs a part of the established elite to break off from the elite and join with the rising movement to become the spearhead of those combined forces to challenge and overthrow the elite that's in place. I think that's hopefully a way of making sense of true political change. This is why, for instance, if we concentrate on the US case, Donald Trump in 2016 can only come to power because some of the grandees of the Republican party allow him to come in.

Paul Ryan, the senators opened the door and they said there's this new movement, there's this MAGA movement that's going on. There's this new energy. They didn't close the door to it. There was a debate within the Republican party and we could talk about the institutions that allowed this - primaries, for instance - that seemed to allow this more than other forms of institutions, but he never on his own would've been able to do it. That captures what's going on and it's even stronger than 2024 when he allies himself with Silicon Valley.

Whereas on the other side, you might ask the question, why do movements like Black Lives Matter, for instance, not seem to have the same political impact? I'm not saying societal, but the same political impact. It doesn't have a leader or a president who's come to power in a full sense like Trump has or its representatives within the Democratic side. So that's hopefully a description of how politics changes in a more fundamental way, in the way more of lions and foxes than simply a revolving door between the political elite. I'd like to think that it's not just descriptive, but it's normative in the sense that if you want change to happen, then this is the model that you need to follow.

**Justin Kempf:** Let me jump in with a couple comments before I get to the actual question. I do want to note that I was really impressed with how the book

does combine these different trains of historical political thought because Mosca, Pareto, and Michels, who we haven't talked about really, are the three thinkers that you focus on within the book. It's fascinating because these are three thinkers who are generally overlooked within political conversations or within political theory today. Michels is a little bit less so. He gets brought up occasionally because he's tied more to the Weber-Durkheim tradition that still has a vague link to political theory.

But again, when we think of these theorists you brought up Dahl, we can also add in Linz and Lipset and many others that are part of that same exact tradition. It's always fascinating to me how they draw their inspiration from thinkers such as Weber and Durkheim, rather than traditional democratic theorists that we might think of such as John Dewey who comes from a more American tradition. I mean, Dahl is almost entirely silent about Dewey, even though Dewey's pretty much the previous generation to Dahl.

This modernization movement within political science looks to the early sociologists and what's fascinating about your book is that it draws the link not just to these Germans and Austrians, and of course Durkheim is French, but this sociological school, but also these early economists such as Mosca and Pareto that are jumping in and talking about very different ideas that are part of that same tradition and therefore influencing today's political science in a very explicit ways. However, I don't want to drop the thread that you're talking about in terms of the implications for politics to this day, because you talked about the need for elites to support political movements and the needs for these movements to rise up and challenge existing elites. That that's really key and central to ideas of democracy.

It raises a question because in political science literature today, there's a lot of framing of populism as being a threat to democracy. These movements, these social movements that exist are actually threatening the democratic system. So what I'd like to know from you is whether or not you think of populism as a threat to democracy or something that's helping recalibrate and strengthen democracy in the long term.

**Hugo Drochon:** Thanks for both of those, especially also for the first point and it's true just to underline the fact that even a lot of the political language we still use today such as elites, ruling class, iron law oligarchy comes from these guys. So we have all this language that we still use today. We still use this language, but we've forgotten where it's come from. So, the point was to go back to them and even for people, like you brought up Robert Dahl, there was a tendency also for the three to just be lumped in together.

They were given this acronym, the elite theorists of democracy, which comes from Lipset. Other people gave them terms like the Neo-Machiavellians that comes from Burnham. So, they were lumped together and part of what I was trying to do in the book is that these are three individual thinkers who have their individual emphasis. If we go back and see what those were, it gives us a richer picture than simply lumping them together.

There's a link between doing that then and answering your question, which is that thinkers like Schumpeter and thinkers like Dahl and Dahl in particular, was quite concerned about stabilizing the political system which is why a lot of political science and democratic theory is worried about populism because it seems populism and high levels of participation with what populism tries to aim towards at least rhetorically, whether it does so or not is another point, but they were concerned about if this came in, if there's too much participation, too much populism, it would destabilize the system and the democratic system wouldn't hold. Schumpeter is the same. What I try to argue in the book, this is based on the excellent work that Julian de Medeiros has done on Schumpeter said.

Schumpeter actually wanted to restrain this circulation purely to the political field. Whereas for Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, it wasn't just politics, it was society more generally. It was a much broader field, and I think that's a bit of a shame that we've lost this broader perspective. So, to answer your question, in essence, I don't think populism is necessarily a challenge to democracy. I think it's part and parcel of it. If you take it from my perspective of dynamic democracy, the challenge to established elites is by definition what democracy should be about. But obviously, and I say this quite clearly, hopefully in the book, this could be for better or for worse that there's a change to the established elite.

The hope, obviously, is this will mean more democracy in the sense of more participation by the people, perhaps more redistribution, but it may lead the other way, which is more crystallization, more closing in, less participation, elastic redistribution. But it's the essence itself of politics more generally. This is how things come about. So, populism is a form of that and I think I'd put myself more perhaps in this French or continental tradition that sees populism and democracy as being two sides of the same coin. There's always this possibility of a populist or totalitarian element within modern democracy itself. I do not see it as a threat. And that's the point about Schumpeter and Dahl is if you go back to the earlier theorists, they had a broader conception of what it was.

They weren't limited just to defending the political institutions. With a broader conception that causes challenges. Perhaps people are not terribly happy with Trump and Maga, et cetera to date. Nevertheless, if you want to challenge that you have to do the same thing. This is how things keep moving and you want things to keep moving and not crystallize. So you have to expand the lens. Populism is one way of expanding the lens. Obviously, it's true that populist leaders and populism often does end up being restrictive because it restricts, at least in its rightwing phenomena restricts who the true people are.

You could have a specific debate about its contribution, but the idea of having the people putting pressure, contributing, and then certainly establishment's breaking over, coming over, that's the essence of politics. So if you want things to keep changing, then yes, that has to be part of the equation.

**Justin Kempf:** Okay, let's set populism aside because in today's climate it has negative connotations and let's just talk about it in a more abstract sense. It sounds like you're saying that elections are less important to democracy than social movements, such as protests and things where people are engaged in a more direct and visceral level. It sounds as if you're saying that seeing people on the street protesting, expressing their opinions and demands is actually more democratic than the institutions that we link to democracy.

**Hugo Drochon:** I'm not sure I'm saying that. What I want to say is that we have to see both. We have to see the social movements and the political institutions. What I say in the book is the way that the articulation between social movements and established elites breaking off is mediated through political institutions like political parties. That's the role that they've historically played. One of the problems we've been facing today is the death of the political party understood in that sense. But that has been filled with a vacuum of populism because populism says let's get rid of these intermediaries. You can have a direct link with me and I'll be your voice. That was something that all these thinkers were very conscious of when political parties were first coming into existence at the beginning of the 20th century.

So, what I want to say is I don't want to deny the importance of elections, but what I want to say is that it's not all that's going on. If you focus solely on elections, sometimes you'll think there's change because one political party has replaced the other. But actually there hasn't been that much change. If you want to go back to the Thatcher and Tony Blair example, we need to expand out slightly and see where real change is happening. Where I want to focus change on is in the interaction between the two, so the interaction between social movements and political institutions like parties or elections. If we broaden out

the lens a bit more, when we see the interaction between the two, that's where change might really happen.

I remember when Trump was first elected in 2016, to keep on the American example, and there were a lot of discussions that he was elected democratically, but he's breaking all these norms. There were all these norms that were being spoken about and it was hard to keep track whether this was democratic or not. But as we expand from that perspective, if we focus just on elections, we miss things. Notably Putin is still elected with crazy, crazy numbers if we just take elections. Obviously, then you might say yes, but are they free and fair? I take that point completely. But if you want to see more fundamental structural change, then I want to bring us back to social movements and to think about the focal point and where I want people to really focus on is the interaction between the two.

That's what I want to say. I'm not denying the importance of elections or institutions. I just think on their own it's not enough and that we need to bring this other perspective and specifically the interaction between the two. That's where change, real fundamental change, may happen. If you want to reuse the Paretian language where a potential change from lions to foxes may happen. That sounds very schematic. I'm conscious of it. But that's a more fundamental change, perhaps than saying left or right or conservative or liberal or whatever it might be.

**Justin Kempf:** So I didn't catch this when I was reading the book, but when you talk about the decline of political parties and crystallization of elites and the need for outsiders to be able to step in to revitalize democracy I'm getting hints of Peter Mair and the idea of the hollowing of Western democracy. But when I read Peter Mair, it just feels very depressing and sad. I get a little bit more of a sense of hope from the way you're describing, because you portray this as the beginning of an opportunity for people to imprint themselves onto the political process and revitalize and engage into democracy. So let me give you an opportunity to flesh that out. What is the role for ordinary citizens in a democracy when elites are the ones who are technically running the system?

**Hugo Drochon:** Thanks. And you're right to bring in Peter Mair. He is kind of standing behind and particularly the Michels chapter because Michels is about political parties and I think Michels was aware of many of the things that Peter Mair subsequently analyzed in a more systematic way. Obviously, to bring us to where we are today, where there's been this hollowing out of political parties, which has lost its intermediary position between the people and elites. It's now just become very state captured. I think that is one of the big challenges. There

are questions about how you revitalize political parties today. I'm glad you said this sounds a bit more optimistic because a lot of people read the book and say this is depressing. There are elites. We're never going to get rid of them and it doesn't sound very democratic. Maybe we should think about another term to describe it. So, I'm very glad you've couched this in an optimistic term.

I've tried to say there's a sense of pessimism of strength, which is to say it's a pessimistic view, but if you confront it, it's the starting point and it's not the end point. There are not many who rule, but then there's plenty other questions to ask. Beyond that what's the ratio between elites and the people? What type of leads do we have? What's the formation? What is the articulation of accountability, because there's always a degree of accountability there. The challenge is to make that accountability as fulsome as possible. So if I was going to say anything to ordinary citizens of which you and I are certainly members, social movements is the way forward.

Getting oneself involved in social movements or getting oneself involved with the knowledge that you're never going to rule as such, but it's continually putting pressure to try to achieve what you want to try to achieve. That's the only way politics work and that's the only way for you to do something. Don't think that all of a sudden, this is the pessimistic view or the realist view, if you your desires are going to be fulfilled and it's going to be fantastic. The only way is to keep trying, to keep going at it and try to see if you can bring people over, first, obviously with you, but also who are members of the political elite. Can you get people over to your side or to defend your cause? That's the way to build.

It may be the case also that a lot of people want to have some impact on politics, but don't necessarily want to be politicians. I think we have to be realistic and honest also about what is it that we want. I'm very interested in politics. I write about political theory. Do I want to be a politician? No way. That's okay. That's the political system we have. We have representative government. But if I strongly believe in something, then I say can I join a movement or a pressure group or get involved in some way to keep challenging the authorities who are responsible and say have you thought about this? Can we do that? There's a lot of people who are coming behind this idea and see if there's anyone who's willing to come over and to talk over a side. From there change may happen.

Historically, if you look at what's happened in the world, this seems to be the way that most political changes happen. We're not as empowered as abstract theory would perhaps lead us to believe in the type of rhetoric and the ideology that goes with democracy. We're not completely powerless, but it does involve a

lot of work, a lot of energy, and that's it. Energy. That's why I've used the term dynamic, because dynamic has this idea philosophically. We talk about dynamism. It's the application of force to a system to make a change often to increase velocity. That's the idea. Can you develop a force, even if it's a social force that can put pressure on the political system to move in the direction that you wanted to do? That's the model of politics and everybody can participate and dodge in their own way.

**Justin Kempf:** So, I feel like we've talked about this in many different ways, but I want you to bring everything together and just explain in your own words simply how you think about the meaning and purpose of democracy, not what is democracy, but what's the purpose? What's the meaning behind it?

**Hugo Drochon:** Michels in his book uses this fable, an Aesops fable, this ancient Greek fable of a dying farmer on his death bed. I think it's still very gendered. He tells his sons, again, his children that there's a buried treasure in the field. So, the farmer dies and the children are very excited to go in the field. They dig it up. They dig it up. They dig it up trying to find the treasure. Of course, there's no treasure. But having tilled the land, they've made it richer and they've made themselves richer. I think that's the metaphor I hold onto, which is that democracy is that treasure, which we're never going to find, but in striving towards it, there are lots of benefits from it.

So, we need to till the democratic earth as best we can. We'll never find this buried treasure in the field, but in doing so, there will be lots of benefits for us all. That's the hopeful message I think that we need to hold onto.

**Justin Kempf:** Well, Hugo, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. Your book one more time is called *Elites and Democracy*. Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you so much for writing the book.

**Hugo Drochon:** Thank you Justin for the fantastic questions and the in-depth discussion. I really enjoyed it. I hope people can read it in the way that you've read it and really think about it. That's obviously the hope always with a book, to make people think about it and think differently, hopefully too.