

## Summary

For decades, widely accepted opinion held that liberal democracy is the endpoint of history, the free market is the only practicable form of economic organization, and social individuation progresses inexorably, increasing personal freedom and diversity while weakening overarching concepts of collective identity and agency. Now, it seems, all this has begun to change. It is widely observed that political liberalism is under threat, the neoliberal market economy is subject to serious crises, and postmodern society, with its celebration of multicultural hybridity and difference, is challenged by a fragmentation of society into closed communities pitted against one another. This book, *The Politics of Unity in a World of Change*, is an attempt to understand the specificity of the present moment by looking at the political-philosophical implications this apparent shift, analyzing new conceptualizations and articulations of unity that have emerged in the period since the old consensus began to break down.

The authors approach this problem by interpreting significant intellectual currents as they appear in the work of prominent thinkers and political actors, against the backdrop of a changing social and cultural context. In order to understand this context, the authors take as a point of reference the so-called “end of postmodernism”. If postmodernism was understood as a complex configuration of social and cultural material—a “situation”, as Lyotard put it, or a “cultural logic”, for Jameson—then the widely observed “end” of postmodernism can likewise be analyzed as a far-reaching phenomenon, indicating not only a shift in artistic style or aesthetic fashion, but also shifting patterns of discourse, weakening economic orthodoxy, and changing practices of political mobilization. Among these phenomena, the authors identify emergent concepts of political unification that may appear to revive modernist (pre-postmodern) concepts, notions of broad collectivity like “the nation” or “the people” or “the community” that figure in revitalized narratives that offer the promise of shared salvation, whether this salvation takes the form of outward-looking hopes for human emancipation, or the form of an inward-looking defense of the community from foreign threats. Yet these emergent concepts are not purely modernist or pre-modern. Rather, they take on new forms influenced by postmodern critiques of modernity, and many postmodern concepts persist even while they are reformulated within new theoretical frames.

Many of the current moment's emerging concepts are deeply troubling for those who still see value in liberal democracy and cultural diversity or in leftist antiracism and internationalism. At present, the strongest challenges to the liberal consensus include xenophobic populism, fundamentalist communitarianism, and ideologically hybrid authoritarianisms. But even while these tendencies abandon the postmodern framework that articulated difference within a discourse of intercultural tolerance and unlimited mixing, the new forms incorporate postmodern principles, justifying cultural separation and social exclusion with appeals to individual freedom (presented as the right not to help others), to the value of difference (which can allegedly be protected by restricting immigration), and to anti-essentialism (which contemporary movements invoke as they call for the active social construction of difference, rather than relying on the persistence of immutable national essence, as was common in older nationalisms).

The authors of this book suggest that this incorporation of liberal and postmodern principles has rendered right-wing populism somewhat resistant to liberal-postmodern criticism, because right-wing populism has already reshaped its self-presentation to accommodate such criticism. Moreover, new right-wing populisms offer notions of political unity that respond to a widespread dissatisfaction with the individuation and fragmentation that characterized postmodern sensibility during the period of liberal democratic and neoliberal hegemony. For these reasons, the most viable challenges to contemporary right-wing populism appear in forms that move beyond reasserting liberal and postmodern principles and instead offer alternative notions of unity.

After a general introduction, the book's first two chapters analyze two such visions of unity: radical democratic theory (chapter one) and radical orthodox theology (chapter two). Both emerged early in the period of postmodernism's and liberal democracy's decline, and they are analyzed here not as currently emerging trends, but as well-established conceptual bases that in recent years have exerted increasing influence on political and intellectual trends that challenge both the liberal/neoliberal order and the right-wing populism that threatens to replace it.

In chapter one, Joseph Grim Feinberg shows how radical democratic theory, especially in the work of Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and Jacques Rancière, has revived the concept of "the people" as a point of articulation of political unity. At the same time, this concept presumes a fundamental disunity that is present in the political field before the people comes into play, and it asserts that the political field will never achieve permanent unity,

because newly established unities will continually be challenged by figures that become excluded. Thus, in contrast to modernist narratives of the progressive unification and harmonization of social interests, here unification appears as a process that will always be incomplete. In this way, a form of political unification is conceptualized that avoids the pitfalls of modernist political projects that declared unity as already achieved, while concealing continued exclusion or violently exterminating signs of disunity. The radical democratic notion of the people likewise differs from the right-wing populist notion of the people—which Feinberg terms “the defensive people”—which promotes unity by strengthening borders and suppressing disunity within those borders. The radical democratic notion—which Feinberg terms “the transgressive people”—is formed not by defending borders but by bringing disparate elements together around points of articulation and by actively transgressing boundaries that keep people apart from one another. Nonetheless, Feinberg sees a weak point in this notion of the people as an alternative to “the defensive people” that has so successfully captured public attention in recent years: while problems of economic exploitation and class inequality grow increasingly urgent, radical democratic theory tends to bracket such social questions, translating them primarily into questions of political representation. This elision of the social risks leaving social questions to be mobilized by the radical right.

In chapter two Jakub Ort focuses on the philosophical-theological movement “radical orthodoxy” and its best-known representative, John Milbank. Unlike radical democratic theorists, Milbank actively attempts to incorporate the social into his concept of unity, within an ontological understanding in which all creation coexists under a universal order guaranteed by God. In addressing the relationship between unity and multiplicity on an ontological level, radical orthodoxy introduces another set of features into discussions of the end of postmodernism, bringing the discourse of contemporary continental philosophy and critical theory into conversation with longstanding debates that began in medieval Europe. What Milbank proposes is an “ontology of peace” grounded in the specific structure of the Christian dogmas of the Trinity and the incarnation of God in history, which in Milbank’s view make possible the harmonious articulation of unity and multiplicity in a project of Christian socialism, within a Christian hierarchy of values. In contrast to Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière, Milbank’s “ontology of peace” is marked by the absence of conflict, and this points to some similarity between Milbank’s approach and conservative approaches that suppress disunity and disagreement in the name of Christian values and hierarchical authority. At

the same time, however, Milbank emphasizes that the harmonious articulation of difference emerges out of a creative process and maintains a fundamental pluralism, which distinguishes his attitude from the conservative understanding of society as unchanging and homogeneous. He also differs from most right-wing populists in rejecting nationalism, which he sees as a product of modernity that undermines the unity offered by Christian ontology. Thus, in spite of the fact that radical orthodoxy has been criticized for its conservative tendencies, it also represents a novel attempt at rethinking contemporary political categories, and creative engagement with it may lead to still newer innovative approaches.

In the third chapter, Michael Hauser shifts from the analysis of a specific intellectual tendency to analysis of broad trends in political discourse and practice. He looks at how the very notion of liberal democracy has been reevaluated in light of changing social and economic changes. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a general characterization of the politics of unity at the contemporary moment, when the erstwhile hegemony of liberal democracy, neoliberal economics, and postmodern cultural logic has begun to break down. Hauser argues that these three elements were interconnected, and when one element lost influence, each of the other elements lost influence as well, leading the entire configuration to break down. This “broken unity” demanded the creation of new projects of political unification that sought to replace key neoliberal, postmodern, and liberal principles like market spontaneity, radical multiplicity, and the individualization of civic and human rights. Those right-wing populist projects that are currently most successful, however, in Hauser’s view, suffer from a fundamental logical problem: grounded in a fragmented society where multiple communities pursue their separate interests, and unwilling to challenge that social condition, these populisms are unable to strive for universal emancipation. One emergent form, which Hauser calls “design populism”, seeks the unity of fundamentally incompatible demands by unifying them rhetorically under the empty brand of a political movement or leader, while deemphasizing the actual content of the mutually incompatible demands, which cannot be satisfied without breaking the achieved unity. A second emergent form, which Hauser calls “identitarian populism”, creates a type of cultural or national identity that is both fluid and exclusionary, establishing moving borders of exclusion that leave its basis of identity incoherent. Still, Hauser points to the emergence of a third form, a “universalist populism” that is not satisfied with leaving demands unsatisfied, but attempts to integrate more and more demands in a project that at least in principle is open to the entire world.

It is this promise of universal emancipation toward which radical democracy, radical orthodoxy, and universalist populism all point, each in its own way, and toward which this book may do its part to help orient the political-philosophical discourse of our present moment, a moment which threatens to make emancipation become unimaginable.