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Democratic self-defense: bringing the social model back in

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ABSTRACT
The rise of authoritarian populism has forced many democracies to consider how best to defend democracy against its inner enemies. In the literature on democratic self-defense, one often distinguishes between three models: a legal (militant), political (procedural) and social (integrational). If much scholarly attention is on the merits and limits of the first two models, the social model has fallen behind. This is surprising given its success in the interwar years in many Scandinavian countries, and the empirical correlation between high levels of social equality and high levels of political tolerance. This article examines the merits and limits of the social model. More specifically, it makes two contributions. First, it introduces 'the social security' approach proposed by early Swedish social democratic thinkers as an alternative to 'the social homogeneity' approach proposed by Hermann Heller. The aim is to show that they provide different solutions to the loser's dilemma: the fact that losers in a democratic election must be ready to support the winners, whose decisions are at odds with their own convictions. Second, the article examines a common objection against the social security approach, namely, that it politicizes democracy, and thereby undermines the distinction between procedure and substance in the defense of democracy.

KEYWORDS
Democratic self-defense; social security; Heller; universal suffrage; universal social rights; militant democracy; authoritarian populism

The entry of authoritarian populists into the political arena has forced many democracies to consider how best to defend their core values against democracy's inner enemies (e.g. Lowenstein 1937a, 1937b; Capoccia 2013; Gustavsson, Jonsson, and Lindberg 2018).[1] In the literature on democratic self-defense, one often distinguishes between three major models (Malkopoulou and Norman 2018): a legal model, a political model, and a social model. While much scholarly attention so far has been on the merits and limits of the first two models – and in particular, on the legal version of a 'militant-democracy paradigm' advocating party bans and restrictions on free speech – the social model has fallen behind. This is surprising given its success in the interwar years in many Scandinavian countries (Berman 1998, 2006, 152; Elmbrant 2015), and the empirical correlation between high levels of social equality and high levels of political tolerance (Wilkinson and Pickett 2011; Molander 2014).

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This article is an attempt to bring the social model back in. Today we witness growing democratic discontent within consolidated democracies as well as the resurgence of new forms of authoritarianism (Foa Dienstag and Mounk 2017; Keane 2020). Since authoritarian populists often mobilize people against rule of law, political procedures, and professional media (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), the literature on democratic self-defense has followed suit. It has concentrated on legal and political measures to exclude and/or tame democracy's inner enemies. Still, democratic discontent and increasing intolerance between groups is difficult to address in legal and political terms. It rather calls our attention to the significance of social integration for democracy. To that end, this article examines the merits and limits of the social model of democratic self-defense. More specifically, it makes two contributions to the literature.

First, it introduces a tradition of thought that has remained largely overlooked in the literature on democratic self-defense: 'the social security' approach which was proposed by early Swedish social democratic thinkers. Established in the interwar years, it sought to combine universal suffrage with universal social rights, and in this way, it inhibited the regrowth of both Bolshevism and fascism (Berman 1998; Elmbrant 2015). The social security approach has strong affinities with the more familiar 'social homogeneity' approach proposed by the German legal scholar Hermann Heller. Still, it differs in its description of the predicament that emerges in times of democratic discontent, including how one ought to remedy it. For Heller, the basic problem is 'disparity', and the answer is 'social homogeneity' (Heller 1928, 260). For early Swedish social democratic thinkers, by contrast, 'the great curse' is uncertainty, and the answer to this is universal social security (Branting 1928 in Edberg 1948, viii: 242–3; Möller 1928, 3).

As I will demonstrate, this difference has important implications for the debate on democratic self-defense, notably with regard to how one addresses the loser's dilemma: the fact that losers in a democratic election must be ready to support the winners, whose decisions are at odds with their own political convictions. In the former case, you accept the loss if you feel that you belong to the same unity as the winning majority. In the latter case, you accept the loss if it does not threaten your basic social subsistence and well-being.

Second, the article takes issue with a common critique of the social security approach, namely that it is too ideological to serve as a remedy to democracy's inner enemies. Instead of protecting democracy through procedures like election and deliberation, it introduces a substantial defense of democracy. This is a potential limitation. According to its critics, the social model amplifies political contestation because it takes side in the ideological conflict on the substantial contents of politics. They argue that it is better to stick to elections and rational deliberation as neutral arbiters in difficult times (e.g. Schumpeter 1942; Tingsten 1967). In this article, I draw on the Swedish case to show that this distinction between procedural and substantial defenses of democracy is overstated. Both universal suffrage and universal social rights hinge on a central yet typically undertheorized premise that partly invalidates this familiar distinction: uncertainty about the purpose and direction of society.

The resurgence of authoritarianism, coupled with the lack of reforms to address global structural problems like capitalism, climate change, and migration have revitalized the role of reason and affect in the defense democracy. To some, democracy requires favourable conditions for a peaceful exchange of reasons, and when these conditions break

down due to demagoguery or hate speech one seeks to restore the role of reason in democracy, notably through rule of law, deliberation or education. To others, democracy is a matter of channelling antagonism into a peaceful conflict between political adversaries, and when antagonism takes over one seeks to restore the role of ideological conflict and partisanship in democracy. But what makes people ready to reason with one another? And what makes affect a constructive rather than a destructive force in politics? Bringing the social model back into the picture is an attempt to address 'the social weightlessness' of contemporary democratic theory (McNay 2014). It is not enough to focus on the legal and the political realm in the defense of democracy. What is required is attention to the social, material, and everyday underpinnings of democracy (Näsström 2021).

The article contains three sections. The first section recapitulates the literature on democratic self-defense, with particular attention given to the loser's dilemma in a democracy. The second section examines the two aforementioned versions of the social model, and their respective responses to this dilemma. The third section scrutinizes the critique of the social security approach, namely that it is too ideological to serve as a remedy to democracy's inner enemies. The conclusion, finally, takes stock: How does this interpretation change our outlook on the topic of democratic self-defense?

Democratic self-defense

Politics has changed dramatically in the last decade. The effort of populist leaders to mobilize people against 'the corrupt elites' is a case in point (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In a very short time, these kinds of leaders have replaced the dry and bureaucratic tone of third way politics with affective language and 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016). Populism has democratic connotations. Many democratic movements in the past used the very same language of people versus elites to contest their subjection to the governing few. Still, authoritarian populism has a different rationale. For authoritarian populists, democracy is a term reserved for the native majority (Mudde 2007). The majority principle, which is a mechanism for reaching binding decisions under conditions of disagreement, is thereby replaced by majority rule (Tingsten 1967, 71; Dahl 1989, 156; Urbinati 2019, 77ff). The difference is that whereas the majority principle recognizes the existence of a plurality of opinions, and the necessity of holding general and regular elections – the winning majority being only temporary and replaceable – the majority rule assumes that the party who wins the majority *is* the people. Expressing the will of 'the real' or 'the authentic' people, it has no incentive to listen to minorities or respect the existence of a democratic opposition (Müller 2016b).

The attempt by authoritarian populists to undermine democratic practices and ideals has revitalized the literature on democratic self-defense.[2] In this literature, one asks how a democracy should defend itself against actors committed to spread authoritarian ideas or making use of democratic freedoms to undermine democratic practices and ideals. Should a democracy tolerate the intolerant? (Popper 1966, 265) There is no easy answer to this question. Authoritarian countries may crack down on their inner enemies without having to worry about doing something wrong. For democracies, however, targeting specific actors is a more delicate issue. The paradox is that by fighting their enemies in this manner, democracies may end up becoming *like* their

enemies: 'they might think that they have held on to democracy, but they actually destroyed it in the process of securing it.' (Müller 2016a, 253)

To date one can distinguish between three major models in the literature on democratic self-defense: a legal (militant) model, a political (procedural) model, and social (integrational) model. Let me introduce the first two models in this section and briefly discuss their respective merits and limits. After that, we shall move on to see what the social model can add to the debate. It is vital to stress that we talk of a debate. Although the models are analytically distinct, we do not have to choose between them. In practice, they can be combined in all kinds of ways.

The legal model – and in particular the version of a militant-democracy paradigm – has prompted much attention as of late (e.g. Malkopoulou and Kirshner 2019). 'Militant democracy' is a term coined by Karl Löwenstein in the 1930s, and it serves to indicate that a democracy must be militant or tough against those who seek its demise (Löwenstein 1937a, 1937b). One should not tolerate the intolerable. On the contrary, the hard lesson of the Weimar republic is that one must use legal means – such as legal exceptions, party bans, and restrictions on freedom of speech and association – to defend democracy against its inner enemies. By curbing political participation of the most extreme political actors, it is possible to prevent their abuse of democracy. The rationale is that one cannot wait until the actors 'have gained majorities at the polls', for then it may be too late. Instead, one ought 'to nip fundamental opposition to democracy in the bud' (Müller 2016a, 250).

The main advantage of militant democracy is that it can intervene quickly and so preempt the proliferation of anti-democratic movements before they have had the chance to stabilize into more consolidated parties. The hatred the anti-democratic movements spread in society – often under the pretext of protecting the people against an imagined enemy – can poison entire communities. Hannah Arendt remembers how hatred intensified in Berlin in the 1930s: 'everywhere this vague, pervasive hatred of everyone and everything' (Arendt 2004, 342). It contributed to the silence and concessions to the National Socialists. Accordingly, instead of ignoring the enemies of democracy under the assumption that democracy is robust enough to withstand them or that their power diminishes as soon as they enter into the corridors of politics, defenders of democracy must take action directly. The brutal climate created by democracy's enemies has a negative impact on society, especially on vulnerable minorities. No one dares to stand up for them in fear of becoming victims themselves.

Still, it has been objected that what makes militant democracy quick to respond is also what makes it democratically adverse in the long run. It 'may lead to an arbitrary extension in the range of potential targets of militant democracy' (Invernizzi Accetti and Zuckerman 2017, 193). The reason is that there is no principled way of establishing who constitutes an enemy to democracy. This question will always be subject to the decision of the one who is sovereign, i.e. the one who currently holds the power. The worry is that by resorting to legal powers in the defense of democracy one will in effect give enemies of democracy the means to abolish it. For as soon as they come to power, they will use the very same and now democratically accepted instruments in the form of legal exceptions, party bans, and restrictions on freedom of speech and association to strike down on all legitimate opposition. In the words of Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, 'it

will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed' (Müller 2016a, 252).

Alongside militant democracy, the political model of democratic self-defense has also attracted much attention. This model originates in the work of Hans Kelsen who, in contrast to Löwenstein, holds that a democracy must tolerate the intolerant, even those who hold patently anti-democratic views. Rather than resorting to legal measures, a democracy should be value-neutral and give all political positions equal opportunities for expression and participation (Capoccia 2013, 211). The reason is that this is the only way to reach democracy's inner enemies: to include them in a democratic debate on what is right, reasonable, and true. The moment a democracy gives up on this basic idea and uses legal powers against the will of the majority, it ceases to be a democracy, allowing itself to become as intolerable as its enemies (Müller 2016a, 253). The upshot is that even in times of crisis one must have faith in democratic procedures. Why? Because the most effective guardian of democracy is democracy itself.

The rationale behind the political approach is that by drawing the inner enemies of democracy into a codified procedure of equality, one will gradually socialize them into becoming democrats. In effect, one forces them to practice democracy by voicing their discontent in public and listening and answering to others who think differently than they do. When authoritarian populists are included in political debates, the argument goes, they will automatically become more moderate as they go along. The slow work of finding compromises between opposing positions will temper their most extreme manifestations. Accordingly, instead of forbidding anti-democratic parties and movements, which only forces them to go underground, one should have 'faith in politics' (Rosenblum 2008, 450–52). The point is that when arguments are presented and exposed in public, they can also be evaluated – and if found democratically hostile, be corrected as such. In this way, democratic politics has a formative and pacifying effect on actors.

Notwithstanding these qualities, the problem remains that the socializing effects of deliberation are not self-evident. As recent studies on the mainstreaming of populism show, inclusion may also give authoritarian populists a chance to normalize their claims (Malkopoulou and Norman 2018, 449). By receiving a legitimate platform to further their ideas, they may change existing ways of doing politics and styles of communication. In line with the insight that words can wound, and that a constant repetition of a certain message can change the boundaries of what is considered normal, the political approach may end up legitimating the discrimination of vulnerable groups. In short, through the mainstreaming of authoritarian populism it may become gradually acceptable for a winning majority to exclude some minorities from having a say in political affairs, or to regard some people in society as less deserving of the right to vote than others. Another way of saying this is that the political model tends to forget that politics always takes place in a particular social context. If that context is polarized and unequal, then it affects the terms of public discourse, including the willingness and patience of people to listen to others who think differently than themselves.

If participation and deliberation can be difficult to sustain under conditions of democratic discontent, so can voting. It accentuates a central dilemma associated with the political model, namely, how to create gracious rather than resentful losers. Elections demand tolerance and patience. People must be ready to accept the result of an election,

even when it does not go their way. In democracies, we count heads; we do not smash them. And if we lose an election, we do not dispute its legitimacy. We mobilize for the next. Still, losing an election is not easy. People must be able to support two apparently contradictory views at once:

> A democrat must defend and support a state order, whose activities are often at odds with his general political views. He must constantly be prepared for a situation in which he declares, on the one hand, that a certain decision should be made, on the other, that in his conviction it is inappropriate. (Tingsten 1967, 43)

Solving the loser's dilemma is key in the defense of democracy. To many scholars, elections serve to uphold civic peace (Przeworski 2018; Urbinati 2019), and they do so by making sure that a winning majority can be transformed into a minority, and vice versa. No one in society – no matter how strong, wise or convincing – 'owns' democracy (Lefort 1988; Näsström 2021). Still, with authoritarian populists exploiting and fostering growing democratic discontent, people are constantly encouraged to draw the opposite conclusion, namely, that democracy belongs to the real or the authentic people. And if the people so understood does not win the election, something must be rotten in the state of democracy. The election must have been stolen. How else to explain the loss? A leader who claims to be the only legitimate representative of the people 'cannot plausible fail to win a majority at the ballot box' (Müller 2020).

This is where defenders of the social model step in. Although elections and deliberative procedures are essential to the working of democracy, they cannot themselves generate the legitimacy that they need to sustain over time. They need social backup.

The social model: homogeneity or security?

Often associated with the work of the German legal scholar Hermann Heller, the social model offers a third path in the defense of democracy (Malkopoulou and Norman 2018; Llanque 2019; Malkopoulou 2021). Active during the Weimar years, Heller was an outspoken critic of militant democracy, the roots of which he traced back to Carl Schmitt (Dyzenhaus 1997). His point is that one does not reduce democratic discontent by appealing to rule of law, or to its putative base in a substantial 'Volk', which to Schmitt is premised on the friend-enemy distinction. Nor is it enough to focus on political procedures. Militant and political models fail to account for the unification of democracy, which takes place on an everyday and social basis. To defend democracy means to cater for the formation of 'social homogeneity'. This is the essence of a social rather than a merely formal *Rechtsstaat*: it recognizes that the protection of legal and political equality goes through social integration (Heller 1928, 1931).

Like Heller, early Swedish social democratic thinkers stress the importance of social integration for democracy. They share many of Heller's basic intuitions, including the intuition that social and economic inequalities undermine support for democracy; that the state can be used for progressive purposes, and that social rights are essential in the defense of democracy.[3] Still, there are also significant differences between Heller and his Swedish contemporaries. Below I will accentuate these differences and disregard broader commonalities in ideological and organizational outlook. The intention is to carve out two different social approaches in the defense of democracy, based on

homogeneity and security respectively, and to show that they offer different responses to the loser's dilemma. To make this point, I will examine the premises behind them.[4] More specifically, I will concentrate on two points: (1) their description of the problem that emerges in times of democratic discontent and (2) how a democracy ought to remedy it.

According to Heller, 'disparity' is the greatest threat to democracy (1928, 262; Kennedy 1984, 109). Democracy means rule by the people, and if the people does not form a unity in action and decision, 'civil war, dictatorship and alien domination are in the cards' (1928, 260). Disparity destroys the social fabric needed for parliaments and elections to work. It tears society apart. Working classes and poor people who experience that the democratic apparatus 'condemns the democratic form of class struggle to hopelessness' have little reason to commit to it. They may put their hopes in a dictator (1928, 262). Ruling classes and rich people, in turn, who live isolated from the rest of society do not have to care much about what other people think. Through their political, economic and cultural superiority

> they have adequate means in hand to change political democracy into its exact opposite by means of their direct and indirect influence on public opinion. Through financial domination of party, press, film and literature, through social influence over schools and universities, they are able, without using direct corruption, to influence the bureaucratic and electoral apparatus in such a consummate fashion that they preserve every democratic form while achieving a dictatorship of content. (1928, 262)

Economic disparity between classes can sometimes be held in check through rule of law and common conventions. The same goes for social, cultural, and religious divisions. Still, the peace only lasts for so long – and often under rather specific conditions. Eventually consciousness about the lack of 'fair play' spreads in society, which frustrates cooperation between rivals. This is what Heller saw coming during the Weimar years:

> The difficult birth of the continental coalition governments, their short duration, as well as their lack of any far-reaching operative effect, are the most obvious symptoms of an insufficient social homogeneity and, therefore, most dangerous signs of the crisis of our democracies. (1928, 260)

To Heller, the remedy to disparity is social homogeneity: 'All politics consists in the formation and maintenance of this unity' (1928, 258). By social homogeneity, he means neither the civic homogeneity produced by formal legal equality, nor the thick homogeneity of 'das Volk' that Schmitt has in mind (Dyzenhaus 1997, 85ff; Malkopoulou, forthcoming). Instead, social homogeneity is a matter of integrating and educating all social classes into a shared we-consciousness based on 'common language and a common culture and political history' (1928, 261).[5] Social equalization makes people ready to support democracy, including schemes alleviating social and economic needs (Kennedy 1984, 116):

> Social homogeneity is always a social-psychological state in which the inevitably present oppositions and conflicts of interest appear constrained by a consciousness and sense of the "we", by a community will that actualizes itself. This relative equalization of the social consciousness has the resources to work through huge antithetical tensions, and to digest huge religious, political, economic and other antagonisms. (Heller 1928, 261)

Heller argues that the significance of social homogeneity for democracy is 'inexhaustible' (1928, 256), and this goes both for electoral and deliberative procedures. For without a shared sense of unity, there is no compelling reason for a minority to obey the majority. Majority of what? In Ellen Kennedy's words, 'the procedure of submitting to majority decisions is only meaningful and binding when shared values justify it' (1984, 127). Similarly, public deliberation can only work against the backdrop of a shared we-consciousness. If there is too much disparity, the peaceful exchange of reasons breaks down. The hostility that arises verifies that democracy requires more than mere talk. It presupposes belief, 'not in public discussion as such, but in the existence of a common foundation for discussion' (1928, 260).

Heller is careful to point out that social homogeneity does not rule out the existence of pluralism. On the contrary, it is precisely to defend pluralism in opinions, identities, and lifestyles that different classes in society need to unite around a social *Rechtstaat*. It protects democracy from the onslaught of fascists, who offer social rights in exchange for political freedom. What social homogeneity means, and how it is produced, may differ in different contexts. Still, the central tenet in all contexts is the same: disparity threatens to undo democracy from within, and the most promising way to remedy it is through the creation of social homogeneity. It effectively disarms those who seek to inflame hostility and antagonism between groups as a way to cripple the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Turning back to our initial question, we can summarize Heller's response to the loser's dilemma as follows. You accept defeat in an election if you feel that you belong to the same unity as the winning majority. It lessens hostility between groups, and it makes people ready to tolerate the results of an election even when it does not go their way. Belonging to the same unity, they are able to hold two strong convictions at once. On the one hand, political decisions made by the winner should be binding for all; and on the other, the decisions in question are inappropriate. Social homogeneity bridges the opposition and makes pluralism in interests, opinions, and lifestyles bearable. Although we disagree with our political opponents, we know that our unity is greater than what divides us.

The merit of the social homogeneity model is that it underscores the role of human sociability for democracy. If a democracy produces too much disparity in social, economic, and cultural terms, it will eventually come apart. Still, the model also suffers from a potential weakness: Its description of the problem that emerges in times of democratic discontent partly overlaps with the message of authoritarian populists. The main complaint made by authoritarian populists is that social divisions threaten to undo democracy from within. They split up the people, which leads to disorder and chaos. And this predicament is democracy's fault, since it encourages pluralism at the expense of unity. The unity authoritarian populists have in mind is exclusive and nativist, which is very different from the inclusive and socio-economic equalization that Heller advocates. Nevertheless, insisting on the need for social homogeneity as an antidote to disparity may paradoxically strengthen the cause of authoritarian populism: pluralism tears democracy apart.

Let us move on to another tradition seeking to defend democracy through social integration. In his book *The Political Theory of Swedish Social Democracy*, Tim Tilton emphasizes the effort of this tradition to fuse social reforms with democracy into an

'integrative democracy' (1990, 257). The basic idea is that political democracy – premised on universal suffrage – is insufficient to consolidate democracy. Universal suffrage must go hand in hand with a scheme of universal social rights. Interestingly, the focus on democratic *self-defense* is less outspoken by these thinkers. One possible explanation behind this difference could be that the degree of confrontation was less severe in Sweden compared with Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Still, it would be a mistake to conclude that the dramatic events in Europe did not influence these thinkers. The effects of the Russian revolution in 1917 'went like an electric shock throughout Europe' (Edberg 1948, 100, 129ff; Berman 2006, Ch. 7). In Sweden, the ruling elites organized armed militias to strike down on 'unruly' people, whereas the Bolsheviks aimed for a social (as opposed to a political) revolution. The rise of fascism in the 1930s gave a new twist to the debate on democracy and dictatorship (Edberg 1948, 190ff). This political climate figures in the background, and it comes forth both in how this tradition describes the problem that emerges at the time, and how to remedy it. The 'great curse' that haunts society, writes the Swedish social democrat Gustav Möller, is uncertainty, and the answer to that problem is universal social security: 'We want to have people's insurance, not workers' insurance' (Branting 1928 in Edberg 1948, viii 242–43; Möller 1928, 3, 1952, 397).

One would perhaps expect a social democrat writing at the beginning of the twentieth century to insist that *poverty* is the main predicament.[6] It would have been natural for several reasons. The rise of the social question – how to handle large-scale poverty caused by the emergence of industrial society – puts great pressure on thinkers and politicians during this time. Mass poverty increased in the nineteenth century, and it unleashed hunger strikes both at home and abroad. Given that Sweden at the beginning of the twentieth century also counted among the most unequal and least developed countries in Europe (Bengtsson 2019), it would have been natural to focus on the ills of poverty. Faced with widespread social misery and upheavals, social democratic thinkers could have argued in favour of a 'social' as opposed to a political revolution to appease the needs of the working classes and the poor (Möller 1918b; Edberg 1948, 129–134).

Still, this is not what they do. Möller makes an important distinction between poverty and uncertainty, and argues that uncertainty – not poverty or need – is the main source of misery for people:

> What makes life a Gehenna for the great masses of modern industrialized society is not primarily a comparatively low standard of living, or the habit of wear and tear in an often dull and monotonous work environment, which slackens and paralyzes the spiritual resilience of people and leaves no room for free time. All this is certainly an evil of the times, and should be alleviated. Still, the worst of evils is *the economic insecurity and uncertainty*, the threat to tomorrow's provisions, the catastrophe that constantly hovers over the heads of the manual worker and his family, which, when it occurs, breaks down the home and destroys what has been created by decades of hardship and renunciation. (Möller 1928, 3)

His contemporary Per-Albin Hansson makes the same point. For the worker, it is not 'the low income' that is his primary source of anxiety (1926, 147 in Edberg 1948). It is the fact that he does not know how life will turn out in the future for him and his family. The worker 'knows from experience that life is insecure' (1926, 147 in Edberg 1948). One day there may be a low demand in business, factories have to shut down, and the

workforce will be unemployed. These changes do not happen because of him – they are none of his fault – and yet he has to live with them. He also knows from experience that many unforeseen consequences can happen in life due to sickness, accident or old age, and they can make life miserable. Misfortunes can strike today, tomorrow, or in the future. The same goes for other groups in society like farmers, mothers, artisans, and students: they all have to live with the uncertainty of not knowing whether they will be able to support themselves and their families when need be (Hansson 1926, 147ff in Edberg 1948).

Among early Swedish social democratic thinkers, Möller is perhaps clearest about the predicament of uncertainty, including its corrosive impact on democracy. He points out that while the curse of uncertainty threatens to throw ordinary, decent, and hard-working people into a state of precarity, this is not all it does.[7] It spreads to other classes, which increases hostility in society. The result is 'incurable social damage' (1927, 2). He underscores that those who think that one can limit the social damage to a particular group is grossly mistaken: 'There is no contradiction between the interests of security for the unemployed and the good of society. On the contrary, they completely coincide.' (1927, 2). This is why a democracy cannot ignore 'the corroding wounds' that economic insecurity and uncertainty produce in society (1928, 26). It must 'protect itself against the growth of hotbeds of anxiety that poison society as a whole' (1928, 21). Failing to do so, it will erode its own source of authority: 'We cannot afford to let the Lumpen-proletariat grow, and we cannot afford to let the spirit of citizenship ache away among thousands upon thousands' (1928, 26; see also Karleby 1926, 135ff).

The emphasis on uncertainty is not conclusive. To argue that Möller and Hansson ignored the problem of disparity would be to stretch the argument too far. Hansson's famous description of democracy as 'the People's home' suggests otherwise. In this regard, he sounds much like Heller:

> The foundation of the home is community and solidarity. The good home knows no privilege or neglect, no favourites and no stepchildren. There, no one looks down on another, no one strives to gain advantage at the expense of others, the strong do not repress and rob the weak. In the good home equality, thoughtfulness, cooperation and helpfulness prevail. Applied to the great people's and citizens' home this would mean the breakdown of all social and economic barriers that now divide citizens into privileged and deprived, into the rulers and the ruled, into rich and poor, the propertied and the destitute, the robbers and the robbed. (1928, 152)

The similarities notwithstanding, Hansson's diagnosis differs from Heller's. It is not disparity per se that threatens to undo democracy. What creates unsurmountable barriers between people is the lack of 'a secured existence' (1928, 157). When ordinary people lack social well-being, and thus cannot rest assure that they have enough resources to survive an economic or political crisis, politics becomes existential: 'The conflicts are sharpened instead of softened and removed. The battle is embittered and prolonged' (1928, 161). Accordingly, the logic behind Hansson's argument appears to be that a secured existence generates social homogeneity, rather than the other way around. It forestalls the rise of antithetical tensions, and it makes people from different social classes 'more conscious of their citizenship'. They can feel 'solidarity with the public good' (1928, 157–58). Möller makes the same point. Social security has the capacity to 'unite citizens into an entity of solidarity' (1947, 343).

Following this line of thought, social security is essential in the defense of democracy. It preempts the power of those who seek to exploit individual and collective anxiety for anti-democratic purposes, be it the authoritarian right who fears what poor people can do while in power, the Bolshevik left who proves them right by aiming for a social revolution or the fascists who promise order at the expense of freedom. Social security diminishes the uptake of these groups, and moderates the struggle between adversaries (e.g. Hansson 1935, 128; Edberg 1948, 100–135; Edberg 1948, 190ff; Tilton 1990, 125ff).[8] Since uncertainty strikes many different groups in society, social security cannot be limited to a particular class, like the poor or the workers. It must be universal and 'include all the people' (Branting 1928 in Edberg 1948, viii, 242–43). This goes for social insurances (against unemployment, sickness and old age), social services (healthcare, elderly care, and schools), benefits (child benefits and study grants), and basic income protection.[9] The rationale is that by including all the citizens into the same social security scheme, one builds support for it, and increases solidarity between people (Rothstein 1998).[10]

So far, we have examined two social approaches in the defense of democracy. The analysis is simplified and idealized. It concentrates more on differences than similarities, and it stresses the intellectual coherence among early Swedish social democratic thinkers who of course disagreed on several points.[11] Still, the exercise is worthwhile because it demonstrates that the social model yields two different answers on how to defend democracy in times of democratic discontent and, more concretely, on how to resolve the loser's dilemma. In the social homogeneity approach, the basic idea is that you accept defeat in an election if you feel that you belong to the same unity as the winning majority. In the social security approach, by contrast, you accept defeat if the loss does not endanger your basic social subsistence and well-being. If too much is at stake in an election, it makes for an embittered loss. Social security has the capacity to increase toleration and generate social peace. It makes you ready to live through huge social and political changes, and do the hard work of finding common ground.

The social security approach is compatible with pluralism in opinions, identities and lifestyles. This is to its advantage. What undermines commitment to democracy is not the lack of unity, but the lack of security.[12] Since enemies of democracy know how to exploit individual and collective anxiety, one must target this condition directly and aim for a scheme of universal social security. It keeps enemies of democracy at bay. Still, one could argue that this approach suffers from another major limitation: It politicizes democracy. For while democratic procedures like election and deliberation are supported by an overwhelming majority of actors on the political spectrum, social rights are not. They concern the substance of politics, and here scholars disagree. Some critics would perhaps go further and claim that no element in the social security approach is genuinely democratic. On the contrary, it is precisely by promising social security that enemies of democracy try to reach out and win votes: 'Give us your vote. We promise to give you what you want. Bread, not words. Security, not freedom'. Social reform, as one critic famously puts it, 'is the road to serfdom'.[13]

Is there a trade-off between political and social democracy? Does the one come at the expense of the other? As common as it may be, this idea has little bearing in empirical research. Not only do the Nordic countries' combination of strong democratic institutions and social welfare provisions confirm that political and social democracy can go hand in hand; there is reason to believe that the social security systems that took

hold in many countries in post-war Europe – in combination with the extraordinary growth and prosperity prevalent during this era (Andersson 2013) – contributed to the consolidation and stability of democracy.[14] Still, the issue becomes more delicate under conditions of widespread democratic discontent and polarization. Universal suffrage is a procedure for making binding decisions under conditions of disagreement. Social security concerns the subject of those decisions. The worry is that instead of defending democracy as a neutral arbiter in difficult times, the social security approach politicizes it. By drawing ideology into the picture, it aggravates the very hostility that it seeks to pacify. In the next section, we shall address this important objection against the social security approach.

Social security: polarizing or pacifying?

The distinction between procedure and substance is central in democratic theory. If the former refers to how we make decisions, the latter refers to the substantial contents of those decisions, i.e. to what we decide. Based on this distinction, many political theorists contend that support for democratic procedures is essential for a democracy to survive. People must be ready to accept political decisions so long as the procedural standards are met, even when they are personally dissatisfied with the outcome, or find it wicked and deluded. The argument is that since democracy places high demands on people – they must be gracious rather than resentful losers – some political issues should never be subject to the verdict of the ballot. This is especially true 'for issues that arouse people's deepest passions, and that relate to their habits and way of life' (MacIver, in Tingsten 1967, 124).

One such issue is religion. It would be undemocratic of a winning majority to decide that one of the many religions that exist in society – the one they themselves confess to – should be elevated to state religion. It has been argued that the same must go for ideological convictions related to the social and economic sphere, such as the decision to introduce a universal social security system or infringe on private property. In both cases, the decision is undemocratic,

> not because of the advantages or disadvantages of change per se, but simply because this change could not take place without the democratic principle being abandoned by both parties, by those whose bitter will to resist is stronger than their sense of democracy, as well as by those who, in order to implement the change, must resort to dictatorship. (MacIver, in Tingsten 1967, 124)

This is why, the argument goes, one should be careful to distinguish between procedure and substance in the defense of democracy. Defending democracy in times of discontent is tantamount to carefully nurturing this distinction, for it marks the difference between democracy and dictatorship. Ideology is one thing, democracy another. As democrats, we should commit to both and resist the temptation to fuse them. In Tingsten's words, 'you are a democrat, but in addition a conservative, liberal or socialist' (1967, 42).

It is a recurrent objection against social democratic thought that it confuses the two. It privileges its own ideological commitments, and therefore it belittles the distinction between procedure and substance. By introducing a scheme of universal social security,

it confuses its own desire to pursue class politics with democracy, which must encompass a plurality of interests. When conflicts sharpen, social democratic thinkers become partisans. They sacrifice democracy to further their own political ideals (Hansson 1926, 145 in Edberg 1948)

Faced with such objections, Hansson and his contemporaries keep insisting that universal social security is in the interest of democracy – and not merely that of a particular class (Branting 1893, 27 in Edberg 1949; Möller 1918a, 22; Hansson 1926, 146–147 in Edberg 1948; Wigforss 1952, 111–128). It protects democracy against those seeking its demise, be it the anti-democratic right that dreads the power of the common people, the Bolshevik left that dismisses democratic procedures for the sake of a higher social good, or fascists who use violence to pursue their aims. The basic argument is that universal suffrage and universal social rights are mutually supportive, and together they safeguard 'the openness' of democracy (Tilton 1990, 132). In what follows, I will explore the underlying rationale behind this argument. For although the notion of 'an integrative democracy' is at the centre of early Swedish social democratic thought, the conceptual link between universal suffrage and universal social rights remains undertheorized. It is for the most part presumed rather than accounted for.

Let me start out by rejecting two possible interpretations of this link. The first interpretation says that universal suffrage is instrumental to universal social rights. It is merely a tool for a particular class to prevail in society, and to pursue its own ideology at the expense of others. Once the goal is achieved, universal suffrage becomes superfluous. It has fulfilled its role. There are passages that speak in favour of this interpretation, especially in the formative years of Swedish social democratic thought (Branting 1896, 30–32 in Edberg 1948; Tilton 1990, 24). Still, the dominant perception is that universal suffrage is desirable in its own right. Instead of juxtaposing ideology with democracy, the conviction is that one should commit to both, and 'comply with decisions of a democratic procedure, even when they go against one's own convictions' (Möller 1918a, 22; Wigforss 1952, 148–49, 2013, 144).

The second interpretation reverses the order and says that universal social rights are instrumental to universal suffrage. This type of interpretation is commonplace in democratic theory. The argument is that the functioning of democratic processes like election will be impaired if people are vastly unequal in economic and social terms (Dahl 1989, 167).[15] Without a scheme of universal social rights, universal suffrage will privilege the ruling classes to the detriment of the poor and the weak. It will succumb to the same cynical fate that befalls legal equality under uneven conditions, namely that the law – in the poet Anatole France's memorable phrase – 'forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under the bridges, to beg in the streets and steal bread'. The bottom line is that when people are vastly unequal in social and economic terms, universal suffrage turns into an empty formula. It privileges those groups in society who have power, resources and time to further their own interests at the expense of others: 'The rules of the game treat everyone equal, but this only means that the outcome of the game depends on the resources participants bring to it' (Przeworski 2010, 92).

Although it is tempting to interpret social democratic thought in this way, it would be misleading. To suggest that universal social rights are instrumental to universal suffrage is tantamount to saying that they are *extraneous* to democracy rather than integral to it. As an empirical precondition, they are not themselves part of the conception of

democracy (Dahl 1989, 167). Still, this reductionist understanding of democracy is precisely what social democratic thinkers intend to dispute. Democracy cannot be limited to a formal decision-making procedure. It 'is a form of social existence based on equality', and as such, it includes both universal suffrage and universal social rights (Hansson 1935, 128; Edberg 1948, 136; Wigforss 2013, 143). Granted that democracy includes both, the task is to clarify what holds them together with political coherency. How do they integrate? Let me indicate a possible answer to this question, only then to come back to the objection that the social security approach aggravates rather than pacifies existing political conflicts.

A key idea in early social democratic thought is that modern society is open-ended. There is no higher law able to steer or predict its course (Lewin 1967, Ch.1). In *Socialism in the face of reality*, Karbely makes this insight into the guiding principle of social democratic thought. He agrees with Marx that human beings make their own history, albeit under circumstances not chosen by themselves (1926, 62). After the revolutions in the late eighteenth century, it is no longer possible to appeal to extra-political authorities like God, nature, or history. Instead, society must aim for a human (and not only a political) emancipation (1926, 49ff, 81ff). Still, Karbely underscores that in doing so, one cannot replace one fable with another. He cautions against dogmatic Marxists who insist that 'the course of history is a law-bound process', or 'involves a necessary progression' (1926, 70). The problem is that such perceptions of a rule-bound course of history foster passivity in the face of human misery.[16] Instead of waiting for history to do the job *for* them, human beings must rise to the task and take responsibility for the future they have opened up for themselves:

> When you can no longer stick your head in the sand and blame higher authorities, when you can no longer explain that everything happens by virtue of superhuman laws, when you can no longer cloth your passivity with obscure references to unknown powers, then the foundation for individual and social irresponsibility vanishes. (1926, 77–78)

In a similar vein, Ernst Wigforss argues that a democrat who wishes to assume responsibility for the purpose and direction of society must navigate between two extremes. According to the first, 'the future is predetermined, either due to the will of an otherworldly power, or to a worldly causal development that is … inevitable' (1952, 108–120, 2013, 175–76). According to the second, 'the forces at work in the history of modern societies are so unpredictable that it becomes impossible to foretell the effects of human interventions' (ibid). As democrats, we should refute both positions. We should acknowledge that the future is neither wholly predetermined nor wholly unpredictable. There is room for politics (Berman 2006).

Still, while human beings have in their power to steer society according to their own light, the task of governing can never be conclusive or fixated on a particular social good. It must always undergo a process of trial and error. Since human beings are fallible, and the political reality they seek to govern constantly changes due to human interventions in history and new events in world affairs, 'failures and miscalculations are part of the nature of things. They are integrative to the experimental nature of modern society' (Wigforss 2013, 62). For this same reason, 'the right to govern badly cannot be ruled out in a democracy.' (Wigforss 1952, 68) The task is to pick up the pieces, and begin again in the awareness that all governing is temporary and provisional.

This is where we find the conceptual link between universal suffrage and universal social rights: in the open-ended and experimental nature of modern society. Universal suffrage is not only a procedure for making binding decisions under conditions of disagreement. Nor are universal social rights only a matter of alleviating poverty. Under modern conditions, power and poverty are themselves premised on a fundamental uncertainty about the purpose and direction of society. No human individual or group has the power to dictate the future, and unforeseen changes in human affairs make poverty volatile. The task of universal suffrage and universal social rights is to tame this uncertainty by sharing and dividing it equally. It allows human beings to assume responsibility for the future and begin anew in the case of miscalculation and misfortune.[17]

Democracy is 'our revolution', writes Wigforss (2013, 18). Insisting on this point, he addresses himself both to those who reduce democracy to a formal procedure of decision-making, and to Marxists who reject this procedure in favour of a social revolution. Universal suffrage is a revolution insofar as it allows human beings to disrupt the course of history and begin anew. Through recurrent elections, they can evaluate their own decisions in the face of new and unforeseen realities, and in case of miscalculation, change their minds. The fact that the future is uncertain motivates such a repetition of elections. It signals that democracy is an unfinished journey or 'a provisional utopia', in Wigforss's terms (2013, 170ff). In a similar vein, the introduction of universal social rights is a kind of revolution insofar as it renders human beings free to begin anew in the case of misfortune. It tames the curse of uncertainty that haunts modern societies and makes human beings strong enough to pick up the gauntlet in case of individual or social misfortune. The underlying principle is that everyone should get a second chance, not merely in politics but in private life as well. It creates resilience in times of crisis.

Is this argument polarizing? From the outlook of the political model, it certainly is. Democracy is a procedure for making binding decisions under conditions of agreement, and every attempt to expand its meaning destabilizes democracy. It oversteps the line between democracy and dictatorship. This is so because all those who disagree must now struggle against *democracy* rather than a particular ideology to pursue their own ends. To prevent democracy from becoming hostage to a vicious circle of politicization, it is therefore essential to uphold the distinction between procedure and substance. By limiting democracy to universal suffrage, one secures its role as a neutral arbiter in difficult times.

Still, this objection misses the underlying rationale *behind* universal suffrage; how it divides up the uncertainty about the purpose and direction of society equally. Universal suffrage gives everyone an equal share in the governing of society, a society that is fundamentally open-ended due to new interventions and events in world affairs. This idea of society as fundamentally open-ended partly invalidates the distinction between procedure and substance endorsed in the political model. It suggests that universal suffrage and universal social rights have this one thing in common: they rest on uncertainty about the future course of society. To live with such uncertainty can be trying, and this is what defenders of the political model ignore. By limiting democracy to the ballot, they do not protect democracy against its inner enemies. On the contrary, they open the

door to actors setting out to exploit individual and collective anxiety for anti-democratic purposes.

The upshot is that like the political model, the social security approach maintains that the most effective guardian of democracy is democracy itself. Still, it broadens the *meaning* of democracy, and argues that it should encompass both universal suffrage and universal social rights. It increases toleration and makes sure that a loss at the ballot does not infringe on people's right to a decent existence.

Conclusion

Democratic self-defense – the wording is unfortunate. It gives the impression of a war. On one side of the fence, we find the democrats, and on the other side, their enemies. Still, the task today is not to defend democracy at all costs, but to ask what kind of democracy is *worth* defending. There is legitimate critique to be raised against contemporary democracies, including their generation of social and economic inequalities, the differences they produce in who can be seen and heard in politics, and the many global structural challenges they fail to address, such as capitalism, migration and climate change. This critique cannot be dismissed as 'populist' or 'anti-democratic'. It deserves a genuine response.

In this article, I have examined the merits and limits of the social model of democratic self-defense. The social model has its intellectual origins in the work of Heller, who was active during the Weimar republic. By examining key texts by early Swedish social democratic thinkers active around the same time I have tried to open up a debate on what a social defense of democracy actually entails. What problems do these thinkers identify, and how do they respond to them? The guiding hypothesis is that there are important nuances in the social model that risk getting lost if one concentrates too much on their commonalities. The fact that the social security approach was practiced in Sweden between the wars, and succeeded in keeping authoritarian power wielders at bay, makes it into an intriguing example for present-day debates. However, it also makes it susceptible to nostalgia (Andersson 2009; Bauman 2017). The trouble with nostalgia is that it makes a mirage of the past. It uses history as a sanctuary against future uncertainties. When bringing the social model back in it is therefore imperative not to become hostage to an idealized past. What is called for is 'a progressive' instead of a 'nostalgic' reappraisal of history (Andersson 2009, 241). What does such a reading entail?

'In a new era', writes the young Swedish social democrat Nils Karleby, 'the premises behind the old conclusions need to be brought to light again in order to discern what should be kept and what needs to change' (1926, 12). In line with this principle, I have assumed that while the present era differs from the one experienced by Karleby and his contemporaries – the most important difference being that we today have around hundred years of democratic experience behind us – there is something to gain from reading early Swedish social democratic thought in political theoretical terms. It allows us to lay bare the premises behind their conclusions and keep the important ones for future analysis. Two such premises stand out.

The first is the premise of uncertainty. A central lesson of early social democratic thought is that in times of crisis, it is more promising to focus on uncertainty than on poverty. The reason is that while poverty tracks and singles out particular classes in

society, uncertainty has more universal reach. Although it affects the socially marginalized and economic vulnerable more than other groups, no one is spared from the damages it inflicts on democratic societies. Contemporary scholars draw similar conclusions (Bourdieu et al. 1999; Standing 2011; Butler 2015). Precarity is a generalized state of insecurity that cuts across traditional social class divisions. The insecurities are on the one hand, objective and material, and on the other, subjective and emotional. The latter tend to affect also those who do not personally experience the former (Bourdieu et al. 1999).

Cultivated in the right sense, this insight has the capacity to bridge social divisions. It can be tapped as a resource for democratic rejuvenation, both within and across democratic societies. More important still, it changes our perception of what to defend democracy against. Throughout this article, we have concentrated on how democracies should respond to authoritarian populism. But authoritarian populists are not the only enemies of democracy. So are supporters of 'the neoliberal stealth revolution' (Brown 2015; Näström and Kalm 2015). Instead of creating reassurance in the face of misfortune, the goal of neoliberalism is to replace welfare with workfare and dismantle social security schemes, and it is likely to affect the commitment to democracy: Why support democracy if it means living in a constant state of anxiety about one's own well-being? Fascists, who understand this predicament and promise security in exchange for freedom constitute a second enemy of democracy. As Sheri Berman writes, it is important to recall that the fascists who were active between the wars did not only promote violence. They promised protection against the ravages of capitalism, and this is why they became so powerful. They offered 'robust social welfare'. (Berman 2017, 2019)

The second premise to keep for the future is the internal link between universal suffrage and universal social rights. This is an axiom of early Swedish social democratic thought. No political democracy without social democracy. The one presupposes the other, and together they create 'a strong society' (Möller 1947, 343; Tilton 1990, 174–79; Andersson 2013). Early social democratic thinkers do not elaborate much on the conceptual link between them. Still, there is reason to believe that it lies in the open-ended and experimental nature of modern society. Both universal suffrage and universal social rights hinge on a fundamental uncertainty about the purpose and direction of society. Taming that uncertainty by sharing and dividing it equally – through 'one person, one vote' and individual social security – creates a combination of reassurance and freedom. Reassurance against miscalculation and misfortune, and freedom to begin anew. The central lesson is that defending democracy with the short-term purpose of keeping democracy's enemies in check is less constructive than focusing on the long-term role that a combination of political institutions and social policies can play in motivating commitment to democracy.

Notes

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2. (E.g. Lowenstein 1937a, 1937b; Niesen 2002; Sajó 2004; Rummens and Abts 2010; Capoccia 2013; Kirshner 2014; Gustavsson, Jonsson, and Lindberg 2018; Urbinati 2019; Lafont 2020; Vinx 2020).
3. Another way to put this is to say that they share the commitment to reformism, and reject the idea of a social revolution promoted by strands of Marxism. Early Swedish social democratic thinkers speak of three subsequent steps in the development of democracy, from the political to the social and the economic sphere. The last step was not realized in Sweden. It generated heated critique from the right side of the political spectrum, and contributed to the establishment of strong think tanks in Sweden urging for a cutting back of the state from society. (See Andersson 2013; Westerberg 2020).
4. By undertaking a political theoretical approach, I do not intervene in the debate on their ideological and historical trajectories.
5. Against the international aspirations of many Marxists and social democrats, Heller retorts that 'the nation is the essential expression of socialism.' Heller (2019 [1925], 71). Note, however, that the nation here is civic and inclusive. It is akin to something like Habermas idea of constitutional patriotism, where homogeneity is formed through certain values, principles and ideas, not through common blood or identity. Above all, the homogeneity is social and therefore contains values of solidarity, cooperation and social justice. Thanks to Anthoula Malkopoulou for clarifying this.
6. For a revitalization of the ancient idea of democracy as rule of the poor, see Kalyvas (2019).
7. In Swedish, 'sociala bottensatsen'.
8. As pointed out in the beginning, early social democratic thinkers do not speak in terms of democratic self-defense, nor do they phrase the argument exactly as I do here, namely that uncertainty is what gives lease of life to democracy's inner enemies. Still, they defend democracy against its enemies (the anti-democratic right, the Bolsheviks, and the Fascists), and they stress how the curse of uncertainty endanger society as a whole.
9. For a discussion on the meaning of 'universalism', see Blomqvist and Palme (2020).
10. This call for a universal social security scheme lays the ground for what later became known as the Nordic welfare regime. See Esping-Anderson (1990).
11. For example, Wigforss disagreed with Per-Albin Hansson on the People's home. He criticized it for being paternalistic. (Tilton 1990, 128)
12. Some fascists and authoritarian populists do promise social security, though only for natives. On how references to the People's home foster welfare chauvinism, see Norocel (2016).
13. Hayek (1994) [1944].
14. On the strong link between security and growth in the social-democratic creation of a strong society, see Andersson (2013). It is commonplace to argue that the post-war period in Europe saw the triumph of western 'liberal democracy'. Universal suffrage and party politics consolidated in many countries, and despite political grievances, Europe experienced a period of civic peace and stability. According to Berman, however, this description of post-war politics in Europe overlooks the dynamic between political and social democracy. Social democratic parties dominated the vast majority of countries in post-war Europe, and they were careful to meet up economic liberalization at the European level with social security systems at the national level. When these social security systems began to crumble in the 1980s through the rise of the neoliberal revolution and third-way politics, the legitimacy of the liberal democratic project followed suit. Enter, once again, authoritarian populists trying to dismantle core democratic institutions (Berman and Snegovaya 2019).
15. The same point is made by Heller: economic and social diversity are detrimental to the survival of democracy.
16. For this point, see also Wigforss (1952, 109). For an account of how social democracy deviates from Marxism, see Berman (2006, Ch. 2–5). For a general critique of the law-bound understanding of history in Marxism, see also Honneth (2017).

17. For a more theoretical account of this argument, see Näsström (2021, Ch. 4 and 5).

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