Article:
Koutsourakis, A (2019) Introduction: European Cinema and Post-democracy. Studies in European Cinema, 16 (3). pp. 173-180. ISSN 1741-1548

https://doi.org/10.1080/17411548.2019.1644036

Introduction: European Cinema and Post-democracy

It is not unusual to hear or read that we live in a post-democratic world. The term post-democracy is a current buzzword used profusely in the media especially following the results of the 2016 UK EU Membership Referendum and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States the same year. As per the dominant media consensus, we have entered the period of post-democracy because the masses ignore the warnings of the elite experts and cognoscenti and are misled by populist politicians who present them with easy solutions to very complex problems. The shortcoming of this approach is that post-democracy is strictly seen as a recent phenomenon and not as something directly linked to the neoliberal experience. Yet, the term, was coined by the British sociologist Colin Crouch in the beginning of this century, who argued that there is a direct link between the marketisation of every aspect of daily life and the crisis of democracy. The narrative of economic inevitability to which most of the mainstream parties accede to, implies that democratic elections have little influence on the lives of the majority of their citizens, who turn their backs to politics. This has tremendous consequences for the function of democracy. Citizens are dissatisfied with politics because they feel that the political debate between mainstream parties does not challenge the dominant economic consensus of the limited government. In effect, despite the pluralism of parliamentary parties, their political programmes have minor differences. Their reluctance to enter discussions related to the redistribution of wealth and power, their inability or unwillingness to restrain powerful economic interests, and their disinterest in putting forward policies that can tackle economic inequality lead to the trivialisation of democracy. This, for Crouch, is to be attributed to the neoliberal orthodoxy according to which we are not allowed to envisage alternatives to the existing order. As Crouch states, ‘The globalization of business interests and fragmentation of the rest of the population does this, shifting political advantage

away from those seeking to reduce inequalities of wealth and power in favour of those wishing to return them to levels of the pre- democratic past' (Crouch 2004, 15).

In the era of post-democracy, the devaluation of labour and the weakening of the workers' capacity to challenge the existing state of things and achieve better wealth distribution generates political apathy. This indifference empowers powerful minority interests which have privileged political access as opposed to the majority of the citizens. Thus, the devaluation of democracy is fundamentally tied up with an economic environment that diminishes the workers' bargaining and participation rights. The implications of this connection can be brought into sharper focus when considering the dominant political idea that social class is no longer relevant in the modern world. As Crouch states,

> The contemporary political orthodoxy that social class no longer exists is itself a symptom of post-democracy. In non-democratic societies, class privileges are proudly and arrogantly displayed, and subordinate classes are required to acknowledge their subordination; democracy challenges class privileges in the name of subordinate classes; post-democracy denies the existence of both privilege and subordination. While this denial can be vigorously contested through sociological analysis, it is certainly increasingly difficult for any other than increasingly confident shareholding and 'executive' classes to perceive themselves, or be perceived, as clearly defined social groups. This fact, and the imbalance produced, is a major cause of the problems of democracy (2004: 54).

The refusal to consider social class as a relevant category becomes even more problematic when considering that fundamental labour market changes have led to less secure forms of employment widely known as precarious labour. Precarious workers face pressing everyday anxieties related to their capacity to survive under vulnerable working conditions. Subsequently, they have little energy and interest in participating in politics. As a result, many people are excluded from the democratic process due to their material disprivilege. There is an inherent danger here because disenfranchised individuals may return to politics to support the very social interests that stabilise their disprivilege. Guy Standing's study on precarious labour published in 2011, pointed to this danger stating that disengaged people can be easily seduced

by populist and authoritarian movements built on new forms of exclusion rather than inclusive participation and social justice. As he says,

> The precariat is not a class-for-itself, partly because it is at war with itself. One group in it may blame another for its vulnerability and indignity. A temporary low-wage worker may be induced to see the 'welfare scrounger' as obtaining more, unfairly and at his or her expense. A long-term resident of a low-income urban area will easily be led to see incoming migrants as taking better jobs and leaping to head the queue for benefits. Tensions within the precariat are setting people against each other, preventing them from recognising that the social and economic structure is producing their common set of vulnerabilities. Many will be attracted by populist politicians and neo-fascist messages, a development already clearly visible across Europe, the United States and elsewhere (Standing 2011, 25).

Importantly, the entrenchment of precarious work and insecurity, the waning of labour's bargaining power, and the absence of solidarity that ensues can have negative effects for democracy and give rise to anti-democratic forces that capitalise on widespread frustration. As Crouch anticipated in 2004, the absence of social class from political debates makes disengaged individuals prone to exclusionary identities of race and nation (See Crouch 2004, 68). A close look at the recent political developments and the paranoia surrounding the refugee crisis in Europe can corroborate Crouch's argument.

Comparable arguments have been made by other scholars. Wendy Brown argues that in the age of neoliberalism every domain of social life is marketized leading to social disintegration. The fact that individuals are judged on the basis of their 'human capital' and not as citizens, or social beings concerned with the collective good breeds a culture of competition. This culture is at the antipodes with ideas of active citizenship which are essential for the effective functioning of democracy. Social inequalities are on the rise given that an environment of competition does not cater for egalitarian politics. Not unlike Crouch, Brown raises the alarm regarding the dismantling of organised labour and the disappearance of social class from the political debates. Within these conditions, individuals turn against each other; the social fragmentation that ensues contributes to the decline of democracy and the rise of

populist and reactionary sentiments. But there is also something inherently problematic within contemporary democracies that has to do with the fact that the individuals are solely judged on their capacity to contribute to economic growth. Subsequently, the model of the active citizen, who can actively participate in the polity and contribute to meaningful social changes, is no longer valued. As Brown says:

> Fourth, when there is only *homo oeconomicus*, and when the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good. Here, the problem is not just that public goods are defunded and common ends are devalued by neoliberal reason, although this is so, but that citizenship itself loses its political valence and venue. Valence: *homo oeconomicus* approaches everything as a market and knows only market conduct; it cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way…The replacement of citizenship defined as concern with the public good by citizenship reduced to the citizen as *homo oeconomicus* also eliminates the very idea of a people, a demos asserting its collective political sovereignty (Brown 2015, 39).

Brown explains that contemporary democracies understand freedom and liberty solely in market terms, which guarantee the capacity of the savvy individual to accumulate and produce capital. The idea of freedom as a collective striving for democracy and social equality has vanquished. As a result, the demos disintegrates and the state ends up governing not for the people who compose it but for the market. The state models itself on the idea of the private firm and this furthers citizen's alienation. A close look at recent political developments helps us understand the danger behind the marketization of politics. Nationalist politicians in Europe and on the other side of the Atlantic have recently made political gains shaping their campaigns and their parties on the business firm model. Ironically, the anti-elitist nationalist response to the antinomies of globalisation copies the elitist top-down example of the business firm. These developments validate Brown's point that contemporary democracies undermine themselves.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière has also reflected on the post-democratic debate. According to Rancière, democracy begins when political organisation is emancipated from the principle of kinship and the idea that the wealthy and property owners have the

unambiguous right to govern. But against the liberal idea that *aristeia* should be the yardstick to measure one's capacity to govern, Rancière suggests that the quintessence of democracy lies in its power to expand the body politic and enable governance on the basis of equality rather than excellence or expertise. As he states, this is not the case in the present, since the profit-making ethic of capitalism has put democracy under pressure and despite the alternation of different political parties in power, the same elite interests are promoted at the expense of the majority. This is directly aligned with the neoliberal view of the government as an administrative body that implements an indisputable economic programme. The root of our undemocratic experience is the unquestionable adherence to market at the expense of social imperatives that have reproduced an unproductive consensus. As he says,

> The long decline and brutal collapse of the Soviet system, as well as the weakening of social struggles and movements of emancipation, have allowed a consensual vision to establish itself on the back of an oligarchic system. According to this vision, our basic reality does not leave us the choice to interpret it and merely requires responses adapted to the circumstances, responses which are generally the same, whatever our opinions and aspirations. This reality is called the economy; in other words, the unlimited power of wealth. We saw the difficulty this limitlessness produces for the principle of government (Rancière 2006, 77).

Rancière's point that wealthy interests and the economisation of every domain of social life weaken democracy and strengthen the rule of the minority over the majority corresponds with Crouch's view that neoliberalism essentially reanimates social structures associated with the pre-democratic period. A key contradiction arises: the same states that have willingly withdrawn their authority in favour of economic deregulation and privilege the idea of limited government are ready to reaffirm their power 'in order to close their borders to the freely circulating poor of the planet in search of work' (Ibid, 82). Thus, the surrender of state power to capital perpetuates forms of exclusion and inequality that disintegrate the body politic. The current refugee crisis in Europe is an instructive example.

In Europe this crisis of democracy has become extremely visible following the financial crisis of 2007-8. One need not be a card-carrying Marxist to acknowledge this. For

instance, the pro-European political philosopher Jürgen Habermas wrote in 2011 that 'the European Union has been sustained and monopolized by political elites' (Habermas 2011, 48). European cinema has captured the structures of feeling of our post-democratic age as evidenced by films made from the early 1990s to the present. Numerous European filmmakers, including Ken Loach, the Dardenne Brothers, Laurent Cantet, Carmine Amoroso, Francesca Comencini, Jo Sol, Pedro Costa, Teresa Villaverde, Stéphane Brizé, Aki Kaurismäki, Michael Glawogger and many more, have addressed themes linked with the post-democratic era such as working insecurity, downward social mobility, labour flexibility, the decline of the welfare state, the exploitation of immigrants and the plight of refugees seeking a better life in Europe. The aim of this special journal issue is to examine European cinema in the context of the post-democratic age. In doing so, the issue extends recent work on cinema and neoliberalism by Jyotsna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner (2011), Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen (2018), as well as work on labour and cinema (Mazierska 2013) and nationalism in European Cinema (Harvey 2018). All these scholars have effectively shown how cinema responds to conditions of market expansion, labour devaluation/ precarization, upward distribution of capital, and to the insecurity produced by globalisation. In this issue, we aim to expand the conversation and focus on one of the key facets of neoliberalism, it's 'mistrust of democracy' (Harvey 2005, 82). One of the reasons for this has to do with the fact that although neoliberalism is such a widespread term many of its key principles, such as limited government and freedom of capital, are still taken to be indisputable features of democracy. This is certainly the case in the USA, but also in many countries from Eastern and Central Europe, which tend to equate democracy with the very principles of neoliberalism. In these countries, democratic deficiencies and uneven wealth distribution are at times explained through an internalist perspective, what in social sciences is also called 'methodological nationalism', according to which social phenomena are approached with 'reference to the inner characteristics alone of a given society

or type of society' (Rosenberg 2013, 569). Justin Rosenberg explains that the limits of this approach is that it tends to ignore broader 'inter-societal relations' that can enable a better understanding of the global dimension of the problems experienced in one nation. In Eastern Europe for example, pro-democracy groups tend to delink questions of corruption and undemocratic rule from the broader inequalities of the globalised economy.

Neoliberalism and its perpetuation of the division of the world between centre and periphery is certainly a key way of addressing 'inter-societal' but also international relations and connections between different states. At the same time, as Rosemary Hennessy aptly explains, the term has been so overused in the humanities and social sciences that it has lost its analytical value. For Hennessy, part of the problem is that the overuse of the term at times prevents us from identifying the link between excessive capitalist accumulation and its historical consequences. For this reason, Hennessy suggests that 'it is important to keep capital in focus as we devise names that capture the times in which we live' (Hennessy 2018, xv). To this, I would add that it is important to think of the negative effects of capital to contemporary democracies, something that has been noted even by individuals across the mainstream political spectrum. For instance, Robert B. Reich, former U.S. secretary of labour, wrote in 2009 that 'capitalism is killing democracy' (Reich 2009) because one of the prerequisites of the democratic rule, that is, the collective debate and decision-making on how to distribute the wealth equally has been abandoned. This decision-making power has now been handed to the market. Yet democracy's aim is to achieve things and produce changes that cannot be accomplished by individuals on their own especially when the private interests of accumulation are privileged over democratic objectives of social equality and justice.

It is our objective with this issue to encourage discussions of cinema through the critical lens of post-democracy that may enable approaches attentive to the social contradictions of the present. Furthermore, a discussion of cinema's response to the post-

democratic experience can potentially debunk mainstream ideas of democracy associated with limited government, free movement of capital and individualism as propagated uncritically by the media, but also by mainstream audio-visual culture. As discussed by theorists such as Crouch, Brown, and Rancière, the devaluation of labour poses an unprecedented threat to the function of democracy, since economic and labour precariousness prevents large part of the population from participating in the polity. Carmina Gustrán's article addresses the issue of labour in post-democracy through an analysis of David Macián's *La mano invisible* (*The Invisible Hand*, 2005). Produced through crowdfunding, Macián's film raises questions apropos the disappearance of manual labour and managerial strategies of creating workplace conflict so as to divide the workers. Gustrán suggests that the film's formal austerity and emphasis on manual labour, which remains largely unrepresented in cinema, invite the audience to consider questions linked with the devaluation of work in European societies and the persistence of class as a material process.

Martin O'Shaughnessy's article engages with the work of Maurizio Lazzarato, a philosopher who has reflected on the role of debt as a form of neoliberal governance and control. Here O'Shaughnessy draws attention to Lazzarato's discussion of machinic enslavement a term introduced by the Italian philosopher to describe different forms of subjection 'in which sub-and supra-individual physical, affective and intellectual human elements are inserted as cogs into larger assemblages or machineries that may include but are never limited to technical machines'. Machinic enslavement is everywhere in late capitalist societies and as O'Shaughnessy explains, an acknowledgment of the growing power of the machinic is a necessary step in any attempt to revive democracy. The machinic is an important critical term that allows us to understand intricate processes of social subjection that have discredited the liberal understanding of the unified, rational, and autonomous individual. Cinema plays an important role here since its engagement with its own machineries can make

visible processes of machinic enslavement that remain unobserved. This applies even to films with an anthropocentric narrative such as *Ma part du gateau* (*My Piece of the Pie* Klapisch, 2011), and *Lucy* (Besson, 2014) but also to others that privilege the visualisation of assemblages and broader apparatuses of control such as Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Abendland* (2011). The other film discussed by O'Shaughnessy is Sylvain George's *Vers Madrid: The Burning Bright* (2012) which deploys cinematic specific elements to explore the construction of a non-fused collective, a collective body in process, in the Spanish occupy movement. The film departs from the mainstays of film dramaturgy and makes use of experimental strategies associated with the work of Dziga Vertov. In doing so, it explores the processes of building a political movement based on collective participation that can challenge the top-down democratic model.

Richard Rushton's article focuses explicitly on questions of democracy in the European Union. Rushton draws on Étienne Balibar's idea that the EU can only survive if it becomes more democratic and favours the idea of the *demos* over the *ethnos*. His essay starts by exploring how European films have reflected on the idea of a European community. He begins with a discussion of Jean Renoir's *La Règle du Jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939), which lamented Europe's eventual restoration of aristocratic privileges at the expense of democracy, and then moves to a brief analysis of more optimistic films such as Louis Malle's *Amants* (*The Lovers*, 1958), and Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Trois couleurs: Bleu* (*Three Colours Blue*, 1993) which seem to be more positive regarding Europe's capacity to turn to a community of freedom. Rushton then turns to Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Chevalier* (2015), which he sees as a representative of the European zeitgeist, where democracy has been put under pressure through the imposition of austerity measures. These measures are not just economic ones but turn into apparatuses of control, measuring, and judging modes of behaviour that do not conform to modes of neoliberal conduct. According to Rushton, the film aptly shows how neoliberal

governance poses threat both to individual and collective freedom, since individuals are judged on the basis of their capacity to conform to 'the rules of the game', leading them to eventually abandon the idea of the *demos* in favour of the *ethnos*.

As discussed above, the post-democratic environment is imbricated in the production of exclusions and the fuelling of nationalisms as evidenced by the rise of the far-right in Europe following the 2007-8 financial crisis and the current refugee crisis. James Harvey's essay addresses the issue of nationalism with reference to Artur Zmijewski's video installation *Democracies* (2009) that consists of twenty short documentary videos examining nationalist symbols in a variety of public spaces in Europe, in Israel, and Palestine. Harvey draws attention to Zmijewski's utilisation of the observational documentary mode to reflect on the ways nationalist groups are constructed. The installation draws on experimental techniques of framing and editing so as to invite us to reflect on the performative construction of nationalist collectives. *Democracies* simultaneously deploys and deconstructs the observationalist documentary mode so as to render visible processes of collective identity formation but also to critique 'mediatised knowledge'. Zmijewski has clarified the reasons why he chose this ironic title:

> I chose the title 'Democracies' because it's a lie: They are not all democracies. Are the Autonomous Palestinian Territories a democratic country? I do not think so – they are occupied and fully dependent on Israel (are under its military control, in fact) and on the international community. Is Israel democratic? Maybe, but only if we add the term 'colonial' – it's a 'colonial democracy', or maybe a 'military democracy'. Northern Ireland is still under British occupation. Of course it is a democracy, but an occupied territory. Maybe Poland is a democratic country? Sure it is, but in this democracy women do not share equal rights with men. One of the basic democratic rules is to observe the equality of citizens. That's why I described these movies as 'Democracies' – because of the lack of democracy in these countries (cited in Lübbke-Tidow 2009, 23-4).

Zmijewski's attention to questions of past and present histories of colonialism and their negative effects on present democracies can also be further nuanced and developed when considering the present refugee crisis in Europe. Being attentive to histories of colonialism but

also to processes of economic dependency might enable us to consider how even post-war European democracies relied on the underdevelopment of peripheral nations. Democracy in Western Europe was stabilised by means of trade relations and processes of what Immanuel Wallerstein calls 'unequal exchange' (2004, 12). The term describes the division of labour between strong economic countries (the core) and the weak ones (peripheries). Because the former have the capacity to trade on terms beneficial to them, they stabilise trade deals and exchanges that enable the influx of surplus-value from the periphery to the core. According to Wallerstein, this influences negatively not just the economies of the peripheral states but their overall development. This is the reason why many peripheral states were run by dictatorships on friendly terms with core democratic countries. We can thus see, how even democratic conditions in Europe were/are linked to problematic undemocratic ones in other peripheral states. We can summarise Wallerstein's point as such: development in the core produces underdevelopment in the periphery. The former is dialectically interrelated to the other.

Thinking in these terms can offer a strong counter-narrative to the dominant idea that the present refugee crisis has affected Europe, which supposedly bears no responsibility for the plights of those seeking a better life in European host countries. Thomas Austin in his essay mentions Slavoj Žižek's relevant point that the refugee crisis can be understood solely if we consider engrained class divisions taking place on a global scale. The last two articles address the issue of the refugee crisis on European cinema. Austin examines questions of agency, voice and representation in four documentaries made by white Europeans. Some of them adopt a Eurocentric approach and offer little narrative agency to the refugees, while others offer a more nuanced representation that accords them narrative agency and affirms their capacity for resistance. Questions of agency preoccupy also Dorota Ostrowska's article, which focuses on the Czech One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival which has programmed numerous films about the refuge crisis. Ostrowska suggests that the programming

choices of the festival privileged the migrant gaze over the humanitarian one according to which refugees are pictured as passive and agentless victims. As opposed to media representations of the migrants as an anonymous and fused mass, films screened as part of the One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival emphasise 'an individualized and dignified' migrant gaze.

All the articles in the issue encourage us to consider cinema's capacity to respond to the post-democratic experience in a historical period that cinema as an institution has lost its past cultural force. Many of the films discussed here are certainly not popular in the commercial sense yet they do address anxieties and questions faced by the people. As Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau have aptly suggested, the term popular is not to be restricted to films which are commercially successful, but it can also refer to all these audio-visual objects that 'express the thoughts, values, and feelings of the people' (1992, 2). We are convinced that the case studies discussed in this issue belong to this category and capture the structures of feeling of a challenging historical period. As guest editor of this issue, I would like to thank the authors, the anonymous reviewers, and the editor of the journal Owen Evans.

Bibliography:

Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.

Crouch, Colin. 2004. *Post-Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2011. *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*. Cambridge: Polity.

Hennessy, Rosemary. 2018. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge.

Harvey, James. 2018. *Nationalism in Contemporary Western European Cinema*. London: Palgrave.

Kapur, Jyotsna, Wagner, Keith B.. 2011. *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*. London, New York: Routledge.

Lübbke-Tidow, Maren. 2009. "Artur Zmijewski: A Conversation on "Democracies"', *Camera Austria* 107, pp.23–35.

Mazierska, Ewa. 2013. *Work in Cinema Labor and the Human Condition*. London: Palgrave.

Mazierska, Ewa, Kristensen, Lars (eds). 2018. *Contemporary Cinema and Neoliberal Ideology*. London: Routledge.

Rancière, Jacques. 2009. *Hatred of Democracy*. London: Verso.

Reich, Robert B. 2009. "How Capitalism Is Killing Democracy", in *Foreign Policy*, https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/12/how-capitalism-is-killing-democracy/, accessed 01/06/2019.

Rosenberg, Justin. 2013. "The 'Philosophical Premises' of Uneven and Combined Development", in *Review of International Studies*, 39: 3, pp. 569-597.

Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.

Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2004. *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.