CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Hyperdemocracy, the Cognitive Dimension of Democracy, and Democratic Theory

“Hyperdemocracy” is a term already in use by students of politics. It was used, for example, by José Ortega y Gasset in The Revolt of the Masses to describe a condition in which “the mass [of people] acts directly, outside the law, imposing its aspirations and its desires by means of material pressure.”¹ More recently, “hyper-democracy” has been seen, by communications scholar Brian McNair, as a form of political unpredictability that is an outcome of “cultural chaos” in the media, typified by “ideological competition rather than hegemony [and] increased volatility of news agendas.”² Neither writer makes the concept central to his analysis or defines it very clearly, and each places it within an ideological framework, respectively conservative and liberal.

The present book will differ from these predecessors in both respects. While I cannot be sure that my understanding of hyperdemocracy differs from every one of the ten-thousand-plus other uses of the term that a Google search returns, there appears to be room for a book-length treatment of this topic, as distinct from the brief and tangential mentions offered by Ortega and McNair. The arguments of Ortega and McNair are by no means irrelevant to mine, but I propose to situate mine, as they did not theirs, within the theory of democracy. I will also seek to extract the proposal of hyperdemocracy from the normative frameworks in which these earlier mentions appear. I will argue that the condition of hyperdemocracy is not fully captured by conservative or liberal, or indeed radical, ideological approaches.
In this introductory chapter, I will undertake three tasks. The first is of course to give my own interpretation and definition of hyperdemocracy, in section 1.1. In section 1.2, I will explain my focus on a particular subset of the implications of hyperdemocracy for democracy, namely those concerning what I will call the “cognitive dimension of democracy.” Given the centrality of the cognitive dimension of democracy in democratic theory, this is no drastic narrowing of the field. It is, however, a way of giving focus to the analysis to follow, and of illustrating while not yet exhausting the analytical potential of the hyperdemocracy concept. In section 1.3, I will examine the nature of democratic theory itself, seeking in the process to break down putative subdisciplinary barriers, especially between “normative” and “empirical” approaches, that have sometimes impeded progress and led to somewhat artificial debates.

Since I conceive of the book as a whole as an exploratory introduction to the idea and the study of hyperdemocracy, this introductory chapter will not do more than set the scene for the later development of the argument. I will outline the structure of the remaining chapters in the final section; a structure that makes use of the framework of democratic theory that I develop in section 1.3.

1.1 The Idea of Hyperdemocracy

The prefix “hyper-” denotes both great magnitude, something beyond “super-,” and also excess—a medical meaning that has entered popular usage probably thanks to the identification of “hyperactivity” as a disorder, giving us the adjective “hyper.” I certainly want to exploit these meanings and connotations by proposing the term “hyperdemocracy”—otherwise I would have chosen a different word—but neither “more democracy” nor “an excess of democracy” entirely capture the meaning intended.

In order to capture it, we can ask what “more democracy” might mean. It might refer, in the first place, to the extension of democracy. But what does this mean? At its simplest, the extension of democracy refers to the adoption of democratic government by countries that previously lacked it, as in the democratic transitions at the end of the Cold War. But it might also mean not the spatial but the topical extension of democracy, as when topics such as human reproduction or women’s rights become matters for democratic debate and mobilization. More radically, democratization might be extended functionally beyond the polity and, for instance, into the workplace or the school. In these latter senses, topical and functional, we might instead speak not of the extension but of the intensification of democracy. But this last term is best applied to a particular kind of democratization,