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Democracy as an Unfolding History: Temporalities, 'Ex-Post' Normativity, and Institutional Design in Pierre Rosanvallon's Democratic Theory

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Abstract: This article examines how Pierre Rosanvallon's democratic theory brings together temporality and normativity to develop a framework for institutional design aimed at deepening democracy, understood as the expansion of citizens' appropriation and exercise of political power. To this end, it analyzes three volumes of Rosanvallon's tetralogy on the transformations of contemporary democracy – 'La Contre-démocratie', 'La Légitimité démocratique', and 'Le Bon gouvernement' – showing how each mobilizes specific temporalities. In contrast to the 'ex-ante' normativity advanced by authors such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, Rosanvallon defends an 'ex-post' normativity grounded in historical experience. The article highlights the limitations of participatory and deliberative models of democracy, before presenting Rosanvallon's alternative: a 'democracy of exercise'. This new model continuously expands citizen control through three complementary dimensions: 01. counter-democratic practices; 02. independent institutions that translate the 'general will' into permanent spaces for accountability; and 03. normative standards governing the conduct of officeholders. The article concludes that, once democracy is understood in terms of its historicity and multiple temporalities, democratic indeterminacy appears not as an obstacle but as the driving force behind a second, 'utopian realist' democratic revolution – one capable of deepening citizen participation without succumbing to depoliticization or populism.

Keywords: Pierre Rosanvallon; Theory of Democratic Indeterminacy; temporality; 'ex-post' normativity; institutional design.

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Introduction

This paper investigates how Pierre Rosanvallon's democratic theory brings together temporality and normativity to propose an institutional design that deepens citizens' capacity to understand and exercise power. To this end, it focuses on three of the four volumes of his tetralogy on the transformations of contemporary democracy: 'La Contre-démocratie' (2022 [2006]), 'La Légitimité démocratique' (2024 [2008])[1], and 'Le Bon Gouvernement' (2015)[2].

Although temporality and normativity occupy a central place in Rosanvallon's work, they have received relatively little scholarly attention. The two edited volumes devoted exclusively to the French theorist – Guénard and Al-Matary (2015) and Flügel-Martinsen, Martinsen, Sawyer, and Schulz (2019) – address these dimensions only tangentially. Weymans (2015; 2007) has examined the relationship between Rosanvallon's democratic theory and those of Claude Lefort, Marcel Gauchet, and Quentin Skinner, while Selinger and Conti (2016) and Selinger (2020) have explored his concepts of people and representation, as well as the decline of political parties and trade unions and its impact on parliamentary democracy. Yet none of this scholarship addresses the roles of temporality and normativity in Rosanvallon's work. One exception is Cintra (2022), who analyses Rosanvallon's use of historical narrative. Cintra (2022) identifies a dual temporality at work: a 'temporality of difference', which emphasizes the discontinuity between the modern and contemporary periods, and a 'temporality of identity', which points to the persistence of a temporal thread linking these two eras.

This article builds on Cintra's (2022) analysis of Rosanvallon's treatment of temporality by advancing two analytical moves. First, it narrows its empirical focus to three of the four volumes of Rosanvallon's tetralogy. This choice is justified on both analytical and epistemological grounds. Much of Rosanvallon's œuvre consists of intellectual history, whose historically situated character is not in dispute; in these works, time is treated in a relatively classical manner. The same cannot be said of the tetralogy, which takes the form of a political theory that, while historically informed, retains a normative dimension. Within the tetralogy, temporality and normativity are handled in a complex way that departs from both a simple linear development and an 'ex-ante' universalist normativity.

[1]Unless otherwise indicated, references are to the Brazilian editions of Rosanvallon's works, translated into Portuguese by the author of this article. For the sake of consistency with the language of the article, direct quotations follow the published English translations when available. When no published English translation is available, translations into English are my own.

[2]This analysis deliberately excludes 'La Société des égaux' (Éditions du Seuil, 2011a). Although the latter is not entirely disconnected from the overarching argument, its emphasis on the question of justice disrupts the thematic continuity between the issue of proximity, developed at the end of 'La Légitimité démocratique', and democratic executive action, examined in 'Le Bon Gouvernement'. I have examined 'La Société des égaux' elsewhere; see Cunha (2024).

Our interest, therefore, lies in two related questions. First, how does Rosanvallon weave together multiple temporalities throughout the tetralogy? Second, how does he connect these temporalities to his normative arguments? More specifically, we ask: 01. How does the articulation of multiple temporalities allow Rosanvallon to develop an 'ex-post' normativity that preserves the aporetic dimension of the political, in contrast to an ahistorical, universalist, 'ex-ante' moral philosophy? 02. To what extent does the institutional design he proposes at the end of his analysis – the 'democracy of appropriation' – overcome the shortcomings of participatory and deliberative theories as models for deepening democracy?

To address these questions, the article is organized into three parts. The first examines the centrality of history and temporality in Rosanvallon's methodological writings. The second investigates how these concepts are empirically mobilized in 'La Contre-démocratie' (2022), 'La Légitimité démocratique' (2024), and 'Le Bon Gouvernement' (2015). The third critically examines his normative model of a 'democracy of appropriation', contrasting it with deliberative and participatory paradigms.

Temporality and normativity in the conceptual history of 'the Political'

In several respects, Rosanvallon's work aligns with traditions of historically informed political theory that developed in two main 'waves' during the twentieth century (VINCENT, 2004). The first emerged in the interwar period, with thinkers such as Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and Hannah Arendt, in reaction to the hegemony of behavioralism. The second took shape in the 1960s and 1970s with the Cambridge School, which rejected the search for perennial problems, and the German 'Begriffsgeschichte' tradition, which analyzed how concepts structure our understanding of the social world. Yet Rosanvallon's intellectual trajectory and concerns differ markedly from those of the first wave, and he does not fully embrace the premises of either the Cambridge School or 'Begriffsgeschichte'. While acknowledging the methodological innovations introduced by both traditions, Rosanvallon (1986, p. 103) argues that the Cambridge School's contextualist focus fails to draw a sufficiently clear distinction between perennial themes and issues that arise from pressing contemporary concerns. Thus, while situating himself within the broader tradition of historical political theory, Rosanvallon (1986) advances an original methodological perspective that he terms a 'conceptual history of the political'.

As is well known, Rosanvallon systematized this perspective in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (2003), where he assigns a central role to history and temporality. Rosanvallon understands 'the political' both as a field and as a work. In the first sense, the political refers to the space in which the multiple dimensions of individuals' lives intersect, providing an overarching frame for their discourses and

actions while also referring to the very existence of a society. In the second sense, the term describes the process whereby a human group, initially reduced to the status of a mere 'population', gradually acquires the attributes of a genuine community. This process unfolds through struggles over the formulation of rules – explicit or implicit – that determine what may be shared and participated in, thereby shaping the life of the 'polis' (ROSANVALLON, 2003, p. 12). For Rosanvallon (2003, p. 13), the social world can be fully understood only by taking into account this 'nervous center', which generates the very process through which society is instituted. Consequently, a conceptual history of the political is a history of the conditions of its 'mise à l'épreuve' – that is, an inquiry into its antinomies, margins, and reversals. In Rosanvallon's theory (2003) of democracy, this translates into sustained attention to the fractures, tensions, and limits that constitute democratic life. Democracy is therefore understood through its crises or the problems that call for resolution, rather than through comparison with an ideal model.

It is at this point in Rosanvallon's lecture that his claim that "it is not merely a matter of saying that democracy has a history", but, more radically, that "democracy *is* a history" (ROSANVALLON, 2003, p. 17), takes on its full significance. Rosanvallon declares (2003, pp. 31-32): "I should like, above all, to draw attention to another contradiction that, in my view, has not been sufficiently considered: that concerning the relations between democracy and time". Hitherto, studies of the political had treated time as an essentially neutral variable. Yet, as Rosanvallon explains, if democracy is a regime of self-institution of the social, time must be conceived as an 'active and constructive variable'. He continues (ROSANVALLON, 2003, p. 32): "Politics is indeed also a *mise en forme* – a shaping – of social time, simultaneously marked by the work of memory and the impatience of the will; it is at once rootedness and invention". This involves more than a simple tension between short-term temporalities – of will and urgency – and long-term temporalities – of law, memory, and economic planning. Democratic forms stand in relation to a plurality of temporalities. Rather than adopting a unidimensional approach centered exclusively on electoral legitimacy, Rosanvallon (2003) suggests that the complexification of forms of sovereignty is intrinsically tied to recognizing and addressing the multiple temporalities that make up human experience.

The question of temporality is closely linked to Rosanvallon's (2003) understanding of the problem of normativity. Although the issue receives only brief attention in his inaugural lecture, it is developed more systematically in his essay 'The Political Theory of Democracy' (2019). In the lecture, Rosanvallon (2003) rejects the very notion of normativity. Classical normative theories, he argues, seek to establish 'a priori' the criteria that should govern rational deliberation, popular sovereignty, justice, or the legitimacy of legal norms. Although this characterization arguably simplifies the historical and conceptual complexity of authors such as Rawls (1999) and Habermas

(1996)[3], it remains useful for clarifying the target of Rosanvallon's argument and the alternative conception of democratic normativity he seeks to develop. According to Rosanvallon's 2003 lecture, such a perspective overlooks the aporetic and indeterminate dimension of the political, reducing it to a procedural approach that places thinkers such as Rawls (1999) and Habermas (1996) closer to the realm of law and morality than to politics itself. In 'The Political Theory of Democracy' (2019), he develops this critique further by introducing a fundamental distinction between two forms of normativity: 'ex-ante' normativity, exemplified by the universalist and prescriptive approaches of Rawls (1999) and Habermas (1996), and 'ex-post' normativity, which Rosanvallon (2019) himself defends and which privileges historical experience and the legitimation processes constructed 'a posteriori':

> There are two different conceptions of normativity. Normativity is most often understood as a coherent set of concepts or values defined a priori, in a way that defines a question in universalistic terms. This is ex-ante normativity [...] But another conception of the political is also possible – one that tries to make sense of the conflicts and perplexities that structure the definitive concepts of the political [...] What are the implications of considering these terms in the historical and sociological conditions in which they were formulated, in order to attain a different kind of normativity, an ex-post normativity, corresponding to a different definition of universalizing concepts? A theory of democracy understood in this way can be approached in concrete terms. But it must begin with the indeterminacy of the word "democracy" itself (ROSANVALLON, 2019, p. 24).

The next section examines how Rosanvallon (2022) brings together multiple temporalities to understand the transformations of contemporary democracy across its various dimensions.

The multiple temporalities in the tetralogy on the transformations of contemporary democracy

In 'La Contre-démocratie', the first volume of Rosanvallon's tetralogy (2022), he analyses civic engagement in democratic societies through the lens of distrust in democracy. He defines 'counter-democracy' as "a complex assortment of practical measures, checks and balances, and informal as well as institutional social counter-powers [that] has evolved in order to compensate for the erosion of confidence, and to do so by organizing distrust" (ROSANVALLON, 2008, p. 04). For Rosanvallon (2008), understanding democracy requires taking this universe of democratic mistrust seriously. He identifies three principal manifestations of the phenomenon: powers of oversight, forms of prevention, and the testing of judgments. Thus, counter-

[3]The author is grateful to Reviewer 02 for noting that Rosanvallon's opposition between 'ex-ante' and 'ex-post' normativity may rest on a somewhat simplified reading of the historical and conceptual complexity of Rawls's (1999) and Habermas's (1996) respective approaches.

democracy constitutes a second dimension of democracy – a continuous form of civic engagement that complements the more familiar, yet intermittent, dimension of electoral participation.

The first counter-democratic practice – powers of oversight – encompasses vigilance, denunciation, and evaluation. Rosanvallon (2019) shows how a wide range of actors engage in these practices, including citizens, social movements, the press, independent authorities, audit and evaluation bodies, and various monitoring and rating agencies. Powers of oversight emerge as an extension of the authority periodically conferred through elections, reflecting a desire to prolong the effects of this type of power through a more continuous and sustained form of oversight. Given the inherent fragility of the electoral relationship between representatives and the represented, oversight plays a crucial role in complementing democracy, albeit in an indirect and diffuse fashion. The second modality of distrust concerns forms of prevention. Confronted with citizens' limited capacity to engage in direct action or make binding policy decisions, the ability to sanction those in power emerges as an especially effective strategy. Rosanvallon describes this as "negative social sovereignty" (2022, p. 34) or "critical sovereignty" (ROSANVALLON, 2022, p. 140), which reflects the structural tension between power and opposition – a struggle that has unfolded for more than a century at both collective and individual levels. The third and final counter-democratic practice is embodied in the 'people as judge', whose most visible manifestation is the judicialization of politics. The growing prominence of judges, courts, and constitutional tribunals reflects, to a considerable extent, the perception that politicians have been insufficiently responsive to societal demands. In this context, recourse to the judiciary operates as a mechanism for enhancing accountability and responsiveness. Taken together, these three counter-democratic dimensions provide a broader understanding of contemporary democracy.

In 'La Contre-démocratie', Rosanvallon (2022) weaves together multiple temporalities by reconstructing the specific historical trajectory of each counter-democratic practice. Powers of oversight can be traced back to the revolutionary era of the late eighteenth century; forms of prevention have their roots in the Middle Ages; and the testing of judgments reaches back to classical Greece. Each of these modes of action follows its own temporality, undergoing transformations over time before converging in the present. By systematizing these practices and situating them within their respective historical-temporal dimensions, Rosanvallon (2022) highlights their exponential growth in recent years. This growth challenges the widely held thesis that citizens are becoming increasingly depoliticized or passive. What has emerged instead are new forms of civic participation – extensively studied by political scientists in their specificities, yet rarely understood as components of a coherent structure of democratic distrust. By historicizing these practices and articulating their distinct temporalities, Rosanvallon (2022) shows that the first major transformation of democracy at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century is not its weakening, but rather the rise of a new form of participation and engagement.

Having examined democracy as civic engagement, Rosanvallon (2024) turns in 'La Légitimité démocratique' to democracy as a political regime. To understand and explain the transformations of democratic legitimacy, he returns to the era of the French and American revolutions. From the late eighteenth century to the 1980s, the legitimacy of democracy rested on two foundations: first, elections, and subsequently, the public administration. Together, these constituted what Rosanvallon (2024) calls a 'system of double legitimacy'. The first modality – foundational legitimacy – rests on the fiction that democracy is legitimate only when it achieves unanimity. This conception hindered deeper reflection on the irreducibility of conflict and division within democratic regimes and remained dominant until the mid-nineteenth century, when hopes still persisted that universal suffrage might produce a unified society. Rosanvallon (2024) points out that only with the rise and consolidation of modern political parties did competition and division gradually come to be accepted as intrinsic to democracy rather than pathological. Yet this development also fueled fears that such divisions might exacerbate harmful fragmentations. In democracies that experienced waves of anti-parliamentarism between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the defense of the general will acquire new meanings and took on new forms.

This trajectory gave rise to a second form – legitimacy through identification with social generality – grounded in the association between the general will and public administration. The legitimacy of civil servants derived from their office and encompassed not only regal functions but also a social role: the capacity to discern societal needs and promote the general interest. The expectation was that this new administrative elite would not crystallize into a caste or social class, but would remain a functional, meritocratic grouping. In this sense, the competitive civil-service examination emerged as a second pillar of legitimacy, complementing – and, to some extent, competing with – elections.

In the 1980s, the system of double legitimacy began to unravel as a result of three developments: citizens' growing distrust of their leaders, a widespread perception of state ineffectiveness, and the rise of neoliberal rhetoric. Rosanvallon (2024) situates these developments within two bigger structural changes. First, the disappearance of any prospect of revolutionary change fundamentally altered expectations about the future. Second, the rise of a reconfigured form of individualism, together with the consolidation of post-Fordist capitalism, fragmented the foundations of collective solidarity. These transformations marked a transition from an "age of generality" to an "age of particularity" (ROSANVALLON, 2024, pp. 118-121). Both foundational legitimacy and legitimacy through identification with social generality were radically affected, giving way to new forms of legitimacy: impartiality, reflexivity, and proximity.

As Rosanvallon (2024) explains, impartiality achieves generality by distancing itself from particular interests and conceiving power – echoing Claude Lefort – as an empty place. It thus represents a negative form of generality that ought to guide the role of

oversight and regulatory authorities. These bodies exercise a form of control that constrains executive and administrative power, thereby reshaping the classic separation of powers. Their legitimacy depends on their independence from the executive, politicians, and interest groups, while simultaneously maintaining consistency and coherence in their actions.

Reflexivity, for its part, seeks to advance generality by diversifying the expressions of social sovereignty. Its purpose is to address certain structural limits of electoral-representative democracy, especially those linked to three constitutive fictions of modern democracy: that an electoral choice fully reflects the general will; that there is an automatic continuity between election and governmental action; and that the elected majority can stand for the people as a whole. Reflexivity therefore aims not only to mitigate the risks of an 'immediate' democracy but also to diversify both the modalities and the temporalities through which popular sovereignty is exercised. Among reflexive institutions, constitutional courts occupy center stage.

Proximity, finally, gives concrete expression to generality by cultivating an 'attention to particularity', thus responding to citizens' new expectations. Rosanvallon (2022) observes that citizens, increasingly attentive to the behavior of their rulers, wish to be heard, recognized, and included in political decision-making. They demand that political power be directly connected to the realities of everyday life and that the particular circumstances of their situations be taken into account rather than subsumed under abstract rules. Rosanvallon (2024) concludes his study by outlining the principles of what he calls a 'democracy of appropriation', a theme to which we return in the third part of this article[4].

The articulation of distinct temporal orders likewise occupies a central place in 'La Légitimité démocratique'. In this second volume of the tetralogy, one can identify an initial long-term temporality stretching from the revolutions of the late eighteenth century to the close of the twentieth century. Over this period, foundational legitimacy and legitimacy through identification with social generality developed in a largely linear fashion, until their collapse at the end of the century with the structural transition to the 'age of particularity'. Subsequently, each new form of legitimacy is examined according to its own temporal logic. While these new temporal orders remain connected to that original long-term temporality, they also transcend it, extending into the twenty-first century. Their dynamics cannot be dissociated from their temporal dimension, for they are not organized through the simple aggregation of preferences based on unanimity, nor according to any logic. On the contrary, within what

[4]It is important to recall that, for Rosanvallon (2024), democracy is constitutively marked by indeterminacy insofar as it remains a permanently unfinished project. For that very reason, attempts to fully 'realize' democracy have often produced less democratic outcomes. In this sense, the very paths that may contribute to democratic improvement may also generate forms of democratic degradation. This is precisely the case with the new figures of democratic legitimacy: legitimacy through impartiality may drift into technocracy, while legitimacy through proximity may slide into populism.

Rosanvallon (2024) terms the 'decentering of democracies', the new forms of generalities – negative (impartiality), unfolding (reflexivity), and attention to particularity (proximity) – depart from the older system of dual legitimacy precisely because they are neither fixed nor permanently secured. Instead, they constitute 'operations of generalization' constantly being reconstituted and renewed.

We hypothesize that one specific dimension of temporality is especially important for understanding the relationship between time and democracy: the dimension associated with reflexivity/unfolding (démultiplication), which points directly to the very idea of sovereignty. This dimension cuts across much of Rosanvallon's œuvre. The idea was first formulated in 'La Démocratie Inachevée' (2000) – a work that falls outside the central corpus analyzed here – through the concept of 'complex sovereignty'. It was further developed in 'La Légitimité démocratique' (2024) through the notion of reflexivity, and ultimately consolidated in 'Le Siècle du populisme' (2021 [2020]) as a counterweight to populist immediacy. Condorcet is the principal intellectual reference for this strand of Rosanvallon's (2021) thought.

In 'La Démocratie inachevée', Rosanvallon (2000) discusses the idea of complex sovereignty in the context of a critical moment of the French Revolution: the proclamation of 'Patrie en danger' and the creation of the 'Comitê de Salut Publique', developments that seemed to bring the Rousseauian utopia of direct democracy to fruition. It is in this setting that Condorcet raises a crucial question: how can the immediate sovereignty of the people be reconciled with the need for an institutional organization of power? (ROSANVALLON, 2000, p. 61). In other words, how can Rousseau's vision be made compatible with representative mechanisms? Condorcet's response lies in the conception of representative democracy – a novel and still ill-defined idea at the time. In the draft of the 1793 Constitution, he proposed a series of concrete measures, including direct election, short terms of office, and the multiplication of elective functions. Yet Condorcet acknowledged that such measures were insufficient. For him, 'representative democracy' requires, above all, the 'démultiplication' of popular sovereignty – that is, a pluralization of the modes through which sovereignty is exercised, rendering it more complex. From this perspective, sovereignty ceases to be regarded as a unitary and immutable principle and instead comes to be understood as a historical construct that brings together multiple political temporalities (ROSANVALLON, 2000, p. 67). It encompasses the short-term temporality of referendums or censure, the institutional rhythm of elections, and the long-term horizon of constitutional formation. These diverse expressions of a single sovereignty serve to balance and mutually control one another. As Rosanvallon (2000) emphasizes it is precisely this complexity that gives substance to the real people, conceived not as a monolithic entity but as an intrinsically plural collectivity.

In 'La Légitimité démocratique', Rosanvallon (2024) returns to the problem of sovereignty, this time focusing on reflexive institutions, specifically constitutional courts. His analysis examines constitutional review through the lens of reflexive

democracy, distinguishing it from two alternative perspectives. The first is the liberal view, represented by Benjamin Constant and Sieyès, which conceived constitutional review as a "salutary brake" or a "limit on sovereignty" (ROSANVALLON, 2024, p. 245). The second is the positivist view, defended by Hans Kelsen, which conceives it as a means of organizing the legislative process, with judges acting primarily as "switchman" (ROSANVALLON, 2024, p. 246). The reflexive-democratic conception understands constitutional review as a means of reinforcing citizens' power. Rosanvallon (2024) traces this tradition from Thomas Jefferson and Hérault de Séchelles to contemporary theorists such as Christopher Eisgruber, Stephen Holmes, Larry Kramer, Dominique Rousseau, and Gunther Teubner.

What is particularly significant here is the way Rosanvallon (2024) brings together temporality and the concept of the general will. For Rosanvallon (2024), the general will loses both coherence and substance when it is reduced to a logic of immediacy. Direct popular sovereignty cannot serve as a permanent principle of democratic life; at most, it may be invoked under exceptional circumstances. Were the popular will to be expressed directly and continuously, the general will would dissolve into nothing more than momentary impulses, losing both depth and stability. The following passage, though lengthy, illustrates this idea with particular clarity:

> One consequence of this logical paradox of immediacy is the notion that democracy acquires meaning only as a historical construct. It is a function of time. This qualification, a consequence of the logical impossibility of immediate democracy, is corroborated by sociology. The people, as collective political subject, is itself a figure of time. It is in substance a form of history [...] Hence it is important to insist on the need for plural temporalities in democracy. Constructing a history, like managing the present, implies a need to articulate very different relations to social time. The vigilant time of memory, the long term of constitutional law, the limited time of a parliamentary mandate, and the short term of public opinion must constantly be juggled and adjusted so as to give substance to the democratic ideal. The various temporal expressions of the general will must be allowed to interact with one another in order to construct the general will. Willing together is not simply a matter of choosing or deciding in common, as in an election [...] But the expression of a collective will is more than that. An instantaneous choice (of individuals or policies) has to be related to a longer-term perspective defined by general values and goals linked to the type of society that people desire. The people set themselves the goal of defining the meaning and direction of things. Will is a complex disposition, which links these various elements. Hence it is a temporal construct, the fruit of experience and the expression of a projected future (ROSANVALLON, 2011, pp. 132-133).

Rosanvallon (2021) returns to this argument in 'Le Siècle du populisme', where he contrasts a complexified democracy with the polarized democracy embodied by populism. In the latter, the emphasis on immediacy and polarization promoted by populist leaders erases the temporal depth required to forge a genuinely general will.

Such a will, he insists, can emerge only through the "operations of generality" discussed above, which combine the "power of no one" with the "power of anyone" through independent authorities and constitutional courts (ROSANVALLON, 2021, p. 274).

'Le Bon Gouvernement' develops a theory of democratic executive action. The book opens with the claim that "our regimes are democratic, but we are not governed democratically" (ROSANVALLON, 2018, p. 01). In other words, a regime may possess all the formal attributes of a democracy while its exercise of executive power remains undemocratic in practice. For Rosanvallon (2015, p. 09), the principal driver of contemporary disenchantment with democracy is precisely the phenomenon of "bad government": citizens are not heard, decisions are taken without consultation, leaders lie with impunity, ministers evade responsibility, political systems are closed and unaccountable, and administration remains opaque. Yet this dimension of democracy – the democratic exercise of executive power –, he notes, has never been adequately theorized. Whereas this issue could be treated as secondary during the era of parliamentary-representative democracy, it has become central today, with the growing concentration of executive power and the rise of a second form of democracy – the presidential-governing model.

Rosanvallon (2015) calls the growing protagonism of the executive the 'presidentialization of democracies', a shift that disrupts the established characteristics and forms of the democratic regime. In this presidential-governing era**,** democracy depends, on the one hand, on society's capacity to control the executive and, on the other, on the qualities of the ruler. The central issue thus becomes the relationship between rulers and the ruled. For the ruled, the challenge is to ensure that this relationship remains functional by creating conditions under which governmental action can be appropriated by citizens rather than experienced as a form of domination. The difficulty, Rosanvallon (2015) observes, is that the only answer so far has been to elect the executive. Contemporary democracy is therefore a "democracy of authorization", in which power is merely delegated but not exercised in a continuous and participatory manner anymore (ROSANVALLON, 2015, p. 20). Against this backdrop, Rosanvallon (2015) seeks to establish the foundations of a democratic relationship between governors and the governed. He begins by identifying three principles that should structure this relationship – legibility, responsibility, and responsiveness – and by analyzing two personal qualities indispensable to a good ruler: integrity and truthfulness. These attributes, he argues, are vital for building a democracy sustained by mutual trust.

The book begins with a largely historical overview of the political and legal transformations that, beginning with the French Revolution, diminished executive power while elevating the rule of law and impersonality. Over the nineteenth century, Europe constructed a parliamentary regime in which the executive was subordinate to, and derived its legitimacy from parliament. Rosanvallon (2015) then traces the

processes and historical circumstances that favored the executive, leading to its personification and eventual 'presidentialization'. This development began in the early twentieth century and was driven by several factors: the rise of anti-parliamentarianism; the belief that growing social complexity required a strong executive; the development of a political psychology that justified the need for a power capable of controlling the 'masses'; and the imperatives of war.

In the remainder of the work, the French theorist explores the two fundamental dimensions of a permanent democracy. The first, termed a "democracy of appropriation" (ROSANVALLON, 2015, p. 186), concerns the relationship between rulers and the ruled. The second, called a "democracy of trust" (ROSANVALLON,2015, p. 186)**,** addresses the personal qualities essential to a good ruler. The analysis of the relationship between rulers and the ruled is situated within a broader debate on the criteria that have historically defined 'good government'. Since Antiquity, this theme has been addressed by a variety of intellectual traditions, and 'Le Bon Gouvernement' can be read as a contemporary mirror for princes.

According to Rosanvallon (2015), the first principle that must govern the relationship between rulers and the ruled is legibility: the ruler's actions must be transparent and intelligible, enabling citizens to understand the rules, institutions, and social dynamics that shape political life. Distance from institutions tends to reinforce citizens' condition of subordination. The second principle is responsibility. Rosanvallon (2015) notes that, in many democracies, there is a widespread perception that politicians are neither punished for their errors nor held adequately accountable. What democracy requires is not a charismatic leader but a ruler endowed with a 'reflective will', capable of grasping social complexity and engaging with the debates that traverse society. A responsible governor is not merely one who is accountable for his or her actions, but one who encourages society to reflect upon itself and to seek solutions to its internal conflicts. Finally, rulers must be responsive: they must know how to listen to society and act effectively to meet its demands, for it is precisely the absence of responsiveness that fuels the steady rise of authoritarian forms of populism.

With respect to the essential qualities of a good ruler, Rosanvallon (2015) highlights truthfulness and integrity. The concept of truthfulness – 'parler vrai' – goes beyond the simple moral injunction not to lie. It entails not only transparency but also the capacity to chart paths, outline horizons, and account for actions undertaken. Democratic politics requires that public life and collective choices be rendered intelligible through political communication, thereby strengthening citizens' control over their own lives and fostering a more engaged relationship with politics. Integrity, in turn, is directly linked to the problem of corruption, traditionally viewed as the moral and institutional subversion of the political order. With the presidentialization of democracies, however, this problem has intensified. Politics has ceased to be structured around programs and has become increasingly centered on individual leaders. This personalization has blurred the distinction between officeholders and the offices they

occupy, helping to explain society's growing aversion to ethically reprehensible behavior. In this context, integrity becomes, for Rosanvallon (2015), an essential category for defining the horizon of political good.

In its treatment of multiple temporalities, 'Le Bon gouvernement' (2015) follows the model already employed in 'La Contre-démocratie' (2022) and 'La Légitimité démocratique' (2024). Rosanvallon (2015) begins with a long-term temporality, tracing back to the mid-eighteenth century to examine the dialectic between parliament and the executive in the history of Western democracies. He then traces the historical formation of the elements that constitute a 'good' democratic government, both in terms of appropriation and of trust. By situating these concepts within a broader historical trajectory, he demonstrates how they have been transformed and adapted across different political contexts.

'Ex-post' normativity and institutional design: appropriating democracy beyond participation and deliberation

In this closing section, we contend that the normative dimension of Rosanvallon's (2021, 2015a, 2013, 2000) theory is inseparable from his articulation of distinct temporalities, through which democracy is conceived simultaneously as civic engagement, as a political regime, and as executive action. This normative horizon of his theory seeks both to transcend the participatory and deliberative models of democratic thought and to delineate an institutional design for a 'democracy of appropriation'.

In the twentieth century, the tragic events of the 'age of catastrophe' (1914-1945), to use Eric Hobsbawm's expression (1994), contributed to reducing the democratic ideal to a procedural mechanism of selecting leaders. That period suggested that the distorted pursuit of the democratic ideal could culminate in totalitarianism. In this context, curbing mass participation in politics came to be seen as a necessary safeguard. This perspective, however, was eventually abandoned. Two theoretical currents subsequently emerged in an effort to refine democracy and expand opportunities for citizen participation: participatory and deliberative models.

Theories of participatory democracy emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in response to the perceived limitations of overly restricted citizen engagement in representative institutions. Their aim was not to revive direct democracy but to refine political representation by developing more qualified citizens. These models distanced themselves from both communitarianism and liberalism by emphasizing the value of popular participation as a pedagogical process through which citizens acquire the qualifications required for democratic life. Their proponents advocated for expanding democratic mechanisms into everyday settings, promoting the decentralization of power and, in some instances, favoring forms of self-management. C. B. Macpherson,

Carole Pateman, and Benjamin Barber were among the leading contributors to this perspective. Barber (1984), in particular, developed the celebrated concept of 'strong democracy', conceived as a community of autonomous citizens sustained by a robust civic culture. His depiction of democracy as 'a way of living', rather than 'a way of life', remains emblematic. At the time, these ideas generated considerable enthusiasm by drawing inspiration from nineteenth-century associational traditions, council movements, and the utopian visions of Fourier and Proudhon. As Barber observes (1984, p. 151): "In participatory politics, conflicts are resolved without recourse to external bases, through a continuous process of self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming private, dependent individuals into free citizens, as well as particular interests into public goods".

Deliberative democracy emerged as participatory democracy declined in the 1980s and was consolidated during the 1990s through contributions from philosophy, constitutional theory, sociology, and political science. From the mid-1990s onward, deliberative democracy became what Floridia terms a "working theory" (FLORIDIA, 2018, p. 36), operating simultaneously as a political ideal, a theoretical model, and an analytical paradigm. Its core theoretical claim is well known political decisions must be duly justified, shifting the focus of democratic legitimacy from voting and interest bargaining toward public discourse. In this context, the reasons advanced by citizens and their representatives must be grounded in principles that can be accepted by free and equal members of a political community. Only in this way can collective decisions express mutual respect and claim democratic legitimacy. Furthermore, such justifications must be accessible – that is, public in both form and content – ensuring transparency and intelligibility within a plural society. Deliberation is conceived as a dynamic and ongoing process that does not conclude with the enactment of laws, for no democratic decision possesses permanent validity; rather, decisions must remain open to revision and reversal by new majorities.

Among the most influential theorists – and perhaps the main systematizer – of the deliberative model is Jürgen Habermas. In 'Popular Sovereignty as Procedure' (1996), Habermas challenges the traditional conception of sovereignty as an indivisible and absolute power – one that can be appropriated by rulers or majorities – on the grounds that it lends itself to authoritarian forms of government. In contrast, he proposes that popular sovereignty be understood as an institutionalized communicative process within a democratic 'Rechtsstaat', in which legal norms acquire legitimacy through public debate and rational consensus. Habermas (1996) distinguishes communicatively generated power from administrative power. The former is exercised through a mode of 'discursive seizure' of administrative power, yet it does not seek to seize the political system. Rather, it operates by imposing its imperatives through a body of reasons that the legal-administrative apparatus can process instrumentally but cannot ignore because of its juridical structure (HABERMAS, 1996, p. 304). This conception envisions a democracy that extends beyond periodic elections and is sustained by ongoing rational debate between

citizens and institutions. Habermas (1996) also emphasizes that public and private autonomy are interdependent, maintaining that popular sovereignty can be fully realized only when citizens participate in deliberative processes while their individual rights remain protected. Popular sovereignty is thus reconceived not as a substantive, unitary power but as an institutionalized procedure of public deliberation, ensuring that collective decisions are formed in a rational, inclusive, and legitimate manner.

The critical literature on these two theories of democracy is vast, making it impossible to address it comprehensively within the scope of this article[5]. We therefore focus on Rosanvallon's critique of these models, followed by an examination of his normative arguments. In our view, his critique of participatory and deliberative democracy and the normative dimension of his theory in 'La Contre-démocratie' (2022) and 'La Légitimité démocratique' (2024) are complementary and must be analyzed together.

The first argument concerns the electoral-representative dimension of democracy and the need to deepen it. However, Rosanvallon (2022) regards both the participatory and the deliberative approaches examined above as insufficient. In 'La Contre-démocratie' (2022), he criticizes the imprecision of the term 'participation', which encompasses everything from participatory budgeting to neighborhood councils. According to Rosanvallon (2022), the problem with these participatory experiments is their essentially functional character, as they are confined to local issues. Worse still, he warns of a depoliticizing effect: the routinization of such processes diminishes their transformative impact, despite their pedagogical value and their role in preparing citizens for political engagement. Rosanvallon therefore concludes that participation should neither be sacralized nor regarded as a sufficient means of achieving democratic progress (ROSANVALLON, 2022, p. 317). In 'La Légitimité démocratique' (2024), he emphasizes that although debates on participation have evolved between the 1960s and the early twenty-first century, they remain inadequate to bring about genuine democratic renewal. As he recalls, many initiatives designed to broaden participation emerged primarily as government strategies for securing legitimacy, rendering participation a mere "means of government" (ROSANVALLON, 2011, p. 206). Consequently, these practices neither challenge the centrality of representative institutions nor expand citizens' influence within political institutions; instead, they serve as a complement to the representative system, aiming to make it more interactive, transparent, and accountable. Moreover, Rosanvallon (2011) observes that participatory experiences tend to occur either on an excessively narrow scale or on an excessively broad one, as in the case of European institutions. In both instances, participation remains detached from the nation-state level, curtailing its potential for structural democratic transformation.

[5]Habermas (2023) has addressed some of these critiques in his recent book A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics (Polity Press).

With respect to deliberative democracy, Rosanvallon (2022) acknowledges its significance for revitalizing democratic theory in 'La Contre-démocratie', while also emphasizing its limitations. The first concerns its ineffectiveness in contexts of political polarization. Drawing on empirical studies, he argues that deliberation often reinforces preexisting positions rather than leading participants toward more consensual stances. Furthermore, inequalities in the resources available to participants undermine the ideal of equality that underpins the deliberative process, posing a significant obstacle to its efficacy (ROSANVALLON, 2022, p. 318). In 'La Légitimité démocratique', Rosanvallon (2022) advances a critique that marks a departure from his own theoretical proposals. First, he distances himself from Habermas's notion (1996) of the 'general will'. Although Habermas (1996) reconceives the general will as a 'discursive dissemination', he nonetheless maintains a monistic view of popular sovereignty: the locus of sovereignty is merely relocated from a cohesive social body to a dispersed communicative space. By contrast, Rosanvallon (2024) advocates a radical pluralization of the ways in which "social generality" – the term he prefers to "general will" – is constructed. Social generality is neither the simple aggregation of individual preferences toward unanimity, nor a monistic entity that exists as a stable property of a collective body or fixed structure. In Rosanvallon's (2024) words, generality must be construed as a dynamic process of "generalization of the social", functioning as a regulative horizon rather than as a substantive entity, as traditional conceptions of the general will and the general interest would suggest (ROSANVALLON, 2024, p. 360).

There is, however, another dimension in which Rosanvallon (2024) seeks to transcend what he regards as the shortcomings of the deliberative model. This imperative arises in the context of a profound transformation in our relationship to politics in the twenty-first century. This period marks the end of two centuries during which the political field was understood chiefly in its institutional dimension. "The locus of democratic activity", Rosanvallon (2011) observes, "seems to be shifting to civil society, and people seem to be looking for new ways to express themselves" (ROSANVALLON, 2011, p. 208). Citizens no longer limit their democratic involvement to casting ballots; they also monitor, contest, and judge political power, thereby reactivating the dynamics described in 'La Contre-démocratie' (2022). Rosanvallon (2022) therefore concludes that these diffuse forms of engagement constitute a network of invisible institutions and informal structures that actively influence the organization of contemporary democracy.

In that work, Rosanvallon (2022) had already argued that the consolidation of these counterpowers could potentially help overcome the limitations not only in electoral-representative democracy but also in participatory and deliberative models. This project, however, faces a considerable challenge: because these mechanisms are largely diffuse, they cannot be fully constitutionalized. Nonetheless, he identifies institutional avenues through which these counterpowers might be realized. In the case of powers of oversight, this could be achieved by developing and strengthening

nonpartisan activist organizations, citizen evaluation boards, independent observatories, and investigative commissions composed in part of randomly selected citizens, as well as by establishing independent public authorities (ROSANVALLON, 2022, p. 322). With respect to forms of prevention and the testing of judgments, innovation is even more constrained, given that these practices are closely tied to highly institutionalized bodies such as the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. Rosanvallon (2022) argues that the appropriate response is to strengthen the continuous requirement that these bodies explain and justify their decisions, as well as in using popular juries in matters concerning the functioning of democracy.

Returning to his critique in 'La Légitimité démocratique', Rosanvallon (2024) identifies two fundamental political functions of what he calls 'interactive democracy', which corresponds to the third figure of the legitimacy of proximity: the work of justification and the exchange of information. The first refers to a perpetual confrontation between the explanations offered by those in power and the interventions of society. It is important to underscore how this proposal differs from deliberative democracy.

As Rosanvallon (2024) argues, the latter has focused on the conditions under which citizens deliberate democratically, while paying insufficient attention to issues such as openness, citizens' access to and understanding of the matters under debate, and the capacity to engage in genuine discursive exchange. In other words, whereas deliberative democracy is structured around a ritualized confrontation between majority and opposition, interactive democracy emphasizes a broader and more dynamic exchange between governors and the governed, one that is grounded in the recognition of the interlocutors' legitimacy and the coherence of their arguments. This process gives rise to what Rosanvallon calls "rapprochement through confrontation" (2024, p. 364), whereby everyday practices of justification acquire a significance comparable to that of electoral competition. The second function – communication – operates simultaneously as an instrument of governance for those in power and as a form of recognition for society. Through this dynamic, the two poles are brought into closer relation: power becomes less remote to citizens, while society becomes less unpredictable to governors. At the same time, this rapprochement plays a crucial psychological and cognitive role.

These dual functions enable a citizen appropriation of power – a notion central to the normative dimension of Rosanvallon's theory. This appropriation of power occurs through the continuous requirement that public authorities justify their decisions and through the ongoing circulation of information. This process, in turn, empowers citizens by deepening their understanding of the world and providing them with the language and interpretive frameworks through which to make sense of their experiences. Citizens thus appropriate power not by literally 'taking' or 'commanding' it, but by pressing it to redefine itself and to operate differently. Democracy of interaction also reshapes classical democratic institutions, such as representation. From this standpoint, the logic of the electoral mandate – the idea of acting on behalf

of another – gives way to a cognitive and informational process through which society is built by a continuous flow of exchanges. Rosanvallon's (2024) model transcends the traditional distinction between participation and deliberation. The notion of permanence is essential to distinguishing interaction from deliberation. The new interactive framework entails an ongoing work of inclusion, reaction, and interpretation. In other words, the "general will" gives way to the recognition that democracy depends on a continuous effort of "generalization of the social" (ROSANVALLON, 2011, p. 215).

Although Rosanvallon (2024) emphasizes in 'La Légitimité démocratique' that his aim is to provide only a theoretical framework for a renewed democracy, he proposes one possible institution capable of serving as an interface between power and society: the 'public commission'. Its role would be to map needs and demands, clarify analyses, initiate debates, and define the terms of political choice. Here, Rosanvallon (2022) returns to the institutional proposals made in 'La Contre-démocratie', as such commissions could take various forms, ranging from citizens' juries and specialized 'estates-general' to broadly open forums or small expert panels. To describe their function, he invokes the metaphor of "enzymes of public interaction", highlighting their capacity to catalyze and energize the democratic process (ROSANVALLON, 2011, p. 340). In this way, decisions emerging from discussions, trials, and preparatory work conducted in these public settings would enjoy greater legitimacy.

Turning to 'Le Bon Gouvernement', the concept of 'democracy of appropriation' emerges as a response to the separation between governors and the governed, seeking to correct, compensate for, and organize that divide. Its fundamental principle is to enable citizens to exercise control and influence on power in a broader and more continuous fashion than is possible through the mere delegation of power via electoral mandates. For democracy to be truly dynamic, the spheres of power and society must be clearly differentiated, each performing specific and yet complementary functions. Rosanvallon (2015) identifies three principal modalities through which this democracy of appropriation can be realized. In the realm of citizen activity, he draws on arguments from 'La Contre-démocratie' to highlight distrust as an essential element of political participation. At the institutional level, 'La Légitimité démocratique', presents institutions of indirect democracy as fulfilling roles that complement and transcend the majoritarian logic of elections, thereby giving institutional form to expressions of the general will. Finally, with regard to governmental conduct, officeholders are obliged to act in accordance with democratic principles, going beyond the legitimacy conferred by electoral mandates alone. This commitment is reflected in the exercise of power itself, ensuring that the day-to-day practices of government embody democratic values such as transparency, accountability, and respect for citizenship.

This model of democracy transcends both the participatory and the deliberative models, which Rosanvallon (2015) still associates with a 'democracy of identification',

by incorporating their respective contributions to address two central shortcomings of the majoritarian electoral system. First, it establishes permanent democratic forms, thereby overcoming the intermittent nature of electoral expression. Second, it relativizes and complements the majoritarian principle by introducing stronger requirements that political decisions serve the general interest and take all members of society into account. In this way, Rosanvallon's tetralogy (2024, 2022, 2015, 2011) outlines a realist-positive theory of democracy: realist because it starts from the actual practices of government and takes the distance between governors and the governed as a fundamental datum; yet positive in that it proposes concrete avenues for a genuine social reappropriation of power.

The normative vision advanced in 'Le Bon Gouvernement' represents the culmination of the theory of democratic indeterminacy. Throughout its development, Rosanvallon (2015) has highlighted and elaborated democracy's aporias and paradoxes rather than sought to resolve them. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, this form of democracy – a 'history in the making', since both unrealized and unfinishable – stands, in Rosanvallon's view (2015), on the threshold of a second revolution. While the first revolution was marked by the achievement of universal suffrage and the consolidation of representative institutions, thereby establishing a 'democracy of authorization', the present moment calls for a shift to a 'democracy of exercise', whose theoretical, historical, and normative horizons were examined in the previous section.

In conclusion, it is important to underscore the potential of this normative vision. We argue that, by conceiving normativity 'ex-post', informed by historical experience, rather than 'ex-ante' on the basis of moral and ethical principles alone, Rosanvallon opens up realistic possibilities for deepening democracy. From this perspective, Nadia Urbinati's critique (2010, p. 66) – which associates Rosanvallon with the so-called 'friends of democracy' who, she contends, aim to preserve democracy by limiting popular participation – seems misplaced. On the contrary, we maintain that the theory of democratic indeterminacy proposes a genuine citizen-led appropriation of democracy, without succumbing either to the temptation of the impolitical or to the populism advocated by some radical democratic theorists.

The notion of appropriation becomes clearer in the author's sketch of the institutions that might underpin the 'democracy of exercise'. Rosanvallon (2015) proposes three new bodies designed to deepen democracy by complementing those already existing within representative democracy: a 'Council for Democratic Functioning', 'public commissions', and 'citizen oversight organizations'. He also advocates the adoption of a 'Charter of Democratic Action', conceived as a new Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

The 'Council for Democratic Functioning' would have the mandate to oversee the integrity of officeholders and the transparency of government actions and institutions. It would also safeguard whistle-blowers and possess its own investigative powers, as

well as the authority to issue binding injunctions against both public administrations and individuals. Another of its responsibilities would be to publish an annual report on the state of democracy, to which officeholders would be required to respond by addressing its criticisms and recommendations. In essence, it would act as a 'fourth power', deriving its democratic legitimacy from its collegiate structure, accountability hearings before representative assemblies, continuous communication with the public, and the transparency of its operations (ROSANVALLON, 2015, pp. 386-387).

The 'public commissions' would be permanent bodies dedicated to evaluating the democratic quality of public policy formulation and management processes. They could be organized around different policy areas in order to extend the reach of state institutions and democratize functions that are currently carried out, at least in part, by parliamentary assemblies and are often subject to partisan considerations. Moreover, these commissions would play an active role in fostering public debate and could be composed either of experts or of citizens selected by lot (ROSANVALLON, 2015, pp. 387-388).

Finally, 'citizen oversight organizations' would take the form of associations or public-interest foundations devoted to defending democratic life. Their central role would be to combat the various forms of falsehood, dissimulation, and manipulation that corrode contemporary public discourse. More important than the precise operational details of these citizen oversight organizations is the way in which they would foster citizens' appropriation of power: by ensuring the legibility of political action, holding public officials accountable, promoting institutional transparency, and securing the minimum conditions necessary for dialogue between governors and the governed, as well as for effective public debate.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have sought to demonstrate how Pierre Rosanvallon's 'theory of democratic indeterminacy', grounded in the articulation of multiple temporalities and an 'ex-post' conception of normativity, offers not only a diagnosis of the aporias confronting contemporary democracy but also an institutional framework capable of translating this complexity into effective practices of democratic deepening. Beginning from the premise that democracy is 'a history in the making', marked by structural tensions and paradoxes, we have shown that, for Rosanvallon (2019, 2013, 2003), these tensions cannot be resolved either through the simplification of democracy or the 'ex-ante' prescription of universal moral principles. Rather, they require acknowledging the historical character of political conflicts and recovering the normative potential of emergent practices. In the realm of civic engagement, we highlighted the centrality of counter-democracy as a means of permanently embedding constructive distrust within the fabric of democratic politics. At the institutional level, we analyzed how democratic legitimacy reflects a process of 'decentering' that extends beyond the ballot box, encompassing independent

authorities and constitutional courts and thereby expanding the horizon of the general will. Finally, in our discussion of 'Le Bon Gouvernement' (2015), we illustrated how the 'democracy of exercise' synthesizes these developments by proposing principles and institutions that render the relationship between governors and the governed both continuous and dynamic.

In doing so, Rosanvallon (2015) advances a 'second democratic revolution' that transcends both minimalist formalism and the shortcomings of participatory and deliberative models, enabling citizens not merely to choose their representatives but also to appropriate the political process. By rooting his proposal in historical experience and in the 'operations of generalization' that constitute democracy itself, he avoids the pitfalls of the impolitical and of populism, while pointing toward realistic and normatively rich avenues for addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century. Finally, his vision constitutes an open invitation to concrete experimentation: only practice, in diverse contexts, will confirm which of Rosanvallon's imperatives prove most effective in deepening democracy.

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