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Knowledge and Political Interest: Politico-Epistemic Injustice in the United States Under Capitalist Democracy

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

KNOWLEDGE AND POLITICAL INTEREST:
POLITICO-EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE IN THE UNITED STATES
UNDER CAPITALIST DEMOCRACY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, IL

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I advanced to doctoral candidacy in the latter half of 2019, mere months before the COVID-19 pandemic began. I have written the bulk of this dissertation in the midst of a global health crisis that upended all our ways of life, disrupted the routines and support systems on which we all depend, and claimed millions of lives. Processing our collective global trauma, grieving our losses, and contracting COVID myself (in the pre-vaccine days, y'all!) have made writing this dissertation challenging above and beyond the ways that dissertations are supposed to be challenging. I have therefore depended on many people in writing this project, and I feel that I owe those people extra special thanks for their support during these extra special circumstances.

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For all the Drs. Friedman and Lewis in my life –
sorry I didn't become an optometrist.

Brothers and sisters, our democracy has been hijacked.

— Zack de la Rocha, 2000 Democratic National Convention

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INTRODUCTION

I have written the bulk of this project in the midst of a particularly challenging moment in the history of my nation – the United States of America – and the world; at the time that I am writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has killed 850,000 Americans and 5.5 million people globally. This is a tragedy with which we, as a global community, have not yet begun to reckon. We are still muddling through the mundanities of coping with an altered way of life – bemoaning the loss of routine and the absence of relied-upon conveniences – but unable, as yet, to process the deeper losses and absences that have resulted from this virus.

The pandemic has provided us glimpses of humanity’s heroism and resilience; medical practitioners and grocery store workers alike have kept us alive, people have worn masks and stayed inside to protect loved ones and community members, and scientists have created an effective vaccine in record time.

Yet, the pandemic has also revealed some of our biggest failures, made even plainer by the sheer scale of the pandemic’s toll; many people experienced avoidable illness, and by current estimates more than 200,000 Americans died preventable deaths from COVID-19. This is to say nothing of the other, even further-reaching consequences of the pandemic in the United States; hundreds of thousands of people lost jobs, lost access to healthcare, went into medical debt, foreclosed on homes, and went hungry. The United States, one of the wealthiest nations in the world, was unable to provide even the most basic necessities to its polity during a global crisis, and these failures revealed deeper problems in our nation’s policies and practices; why is

healthcare tied to employment? Why are so-called “essential workers” underpaid and overworked? Why is there so little support for working parents? Why are so many people unable to financially weather a medical emergency or period of unemployment? The pandemic has thrown existing problems for the people of the United States into sharper relief, and it reveals a deep fissure between the needs of the polity and the nation’s policies. To quote political theorist David Schweickart wildly out of context: “This is truly an unprecedented moment. Another world is possible. And we know what needs to be done to achieve this other, *better* world. ...*Why, for God’s sake, are we not doing what needs to be done?*”

This disconnect between the polity’s needs and interests and the nation’s policies is a problem, and it is a problem about which political theorists are concerned. These questions about why national interest and national policy differ so greatly are pressing, as policy outcomes consistently fail to address the needs and interests of the polity; one example from recent American news is President Joseph Biden’s \$3.5 trillion budget plan, which at the time that I write is under negotiations in Congress. Specific parts of Biden’s legislation are extraordinarily popular with Americans across party lines, such as reducing drug prices, tax increases on the wealthy, including dental and vision coverage in Medicare, paid family leave, and clean energy initiatives. These are policies that would make life better for the American polity, both immediately and in the coming decades, but the bill is very likely to fail in Congress and many of those policies are likely to be struck down. Why is it that policies that are so important to the American people aren’t enacted at the level of government?

Philosopher and political theorist Jason Brennan offers one possible explanation: the American public is too ignorant to elect leaders that will craft policy in the best interest of the

polity. His answer to this question falls into the field of political epistemology, or the study of political knowledge; he identifies a problem with how our government interacts with knowledge as created and expressed by the polity.

In his 2016 book *Against Democracy*, Brennan is diagnosing a political state of affairs, namely that our government does not function as it should to address the needs and interests of the people in the United States' present democracy. The problem, on Brennan's view, is democracy itself; the people, he thinks, are insufficiently educated to elect competent leaders. He argues instead that the United States should eschew its democratic government in favor of an "epistocracy".

"Epistocracy" translates to "rule of the wise," which means that an epistocratic government is one in which only the best educated citizens are permitted to participate in political decision-making (Brennan 2016, 14). Brennan proposes several different potential forms of epistocracy, ranging from reserving voting rights for educated citizens to "epistocratic veto", in which educated citizens may "veto rules passed by the democratic body" (Brennan 2016, 15). He most strongly endorses an epistocracy in which the government issues voting licenses for members of the polity that pass a voting qualification exam (Brennan 2016, 133-134; 211).

In arguing against democratic government and for epistocratic government, Brennan reasons that, since political decisions bear heavily on the lives of the polity¹, we ought not entrust

¹ I want to address a semantic point at the beginning of my elucidation of Brennan's argument; Brennan often uses the term "citizens" to talk about the body of people that participate in politics and are subject to governance by a political body. He relies on this term because his characterization of political activity centers on voting, a point that I will address in a later chapter, and only citizens are permitted to vote. I object to this terminology because it is not only citizens of a country who are affected by governments and political action, but also resident aliens, immigrants who have not been naturalized, citizens and/or residents of other nations,

those decisions to just anybody. Instead, we should ensure that only those with high levels of “political knowledge” (Brennan 2016, 14) participate in politics. Brennan’s argument centers on his contention that a polity has a right to “competent government” (Brennan 2016, 140), which he explains as follows: “Political decisions are presumed legitimate and authoritative only when produced by competent political bodies in a competent way and in good faith” (Brennan 2016, 142). The competence of one’s political body is particularly important since, on Brennan’s view, an incompetent political body can make poor decisions that result in bad consequences. He writes that it is “unjust...to forcibly deprive [citizens] of life, liberty, or property, or significantly harm their life prospects, as a result of decisions made by an incompetent deliberative body, or as a result of decisions made in an incompetent way or in bad faith” (Brennan 2016, 141).

Brennan’s argument here is that incompetent political bodies are more likely to make decisions that will “harm [the] life prospects” of the polity as a whole. He writes that “[i]f we, the electorate, are bad at politics...then people die. We fight unnecessary wars. We implement bad policies that perpetuate poverty. We overregulate drugs or underregulate carbon pollution” (Brennan 2016, 24).

On Brennan’s view, democracy fails the competence test because most people are not, in his estimation, politically competent. “Few voters,” according to Brennan, “have any significant social scientific knowledge” (Brennan 2016, 28). “Social scientific knowledge,” on his view, refers to specialized, theoretical knowledge about politics and political theory, economics, and

and refugees. Even though voting may be inaccessible to these populations, there is nevertheless political activity and opportunities for political influence that are open to them. I have retained Brennan’s use of the term “citizens” in direct quotes from his text, but where I use my own words, I prefer to refer the people belonging to a political body as a “polity,” borrowing from Charles Mills’ *The Racial Contract*. I feel that this term better captures the multitudes that are administrated by political institutions.

sociology. This is the sort of knowledge that, on Brennan's view, we need to be taught by experts in order to become political experts ourselves.

Some political theorists are critical of Brennan's epistocratic account, and I am inclined to take those critiques seriously given that, historically, attempts to limit suffrage in the United States have been unjust and harmful. One such theorist is David Schweickart, on whose critique of Brennan I will expand here.

In his essay "Against Democracy? Libertarianism, Capitalism, and Climate Change Denialism," Schweickart is critical of Brennan's libertarianism and the purchase it has found in both the popular American imagination and in American politics; libertarian attitudes about both financial and educational attainment open the door for views on political participation that Schweickart identifies as problematic.² The libertarian notion that educational attainment is solely and ought to be the result of affective investment underestimates the social and historical structures that have denied opportunities for educational attainment to women, racial minorities, and the economically marginalized. In particular, Schweickart points to particular passage of Brennan's epistemic account in which Brennan claims that "Whites on average know more than blacks,...men know more than women,...and high-income people know more than the poor" (Brennan 2016, 226). The implication here is that, if wealthy white men "know more" than other, differently positioned subjects, then they ought to be the ones allowed to vote.

² Schweickart is also critical of the network of libertarian thinkers and foundations, largely funded by wealthy members of the far-right, that present libertarian ideology as mainstream in conservative politics. Both Schweickart and political researcher Nancy MacLean are careful to distinguish libertarianism from conservatism in the United States.

In explaining this claim, Brennan acknowledges that social inequalities contribute to individuals' political knowledge or lack thereof; he writes that “[p]olitical knowledge and economic literacy are not evenly spread among all demographic groups” (Brennan 2016, 33). The kind of social scientific knowledge that Brennan thinks is necessary to participate effectively in political decision-making is “strongly positively correlated” with having a college degree, being in the top half (and especially top 25%) of income earners, being white, and being male. Conversely, this kind of political knowledge is “strongly negatively correlated” with having no college education, being in the bottom 25% of income earners, being black, and being female (Brennan 2016, 33). Brennan also cites some statistics saying that “high-income middle-aged men” – although Brennan does not identify their race, we are to assume that these men are white – “do about 2.5 times better than low-income young black women in surveys of basic political knowledge. Other attempts to measure political knowledge, including more advanced knowledge of economics or the social sciences, produce similar results” (Brennan 2016, 132). These results are related to the correlations that Brennan cites earlier; since low-income black women are systematically marginalized in academic settings, it stands to reason that they will not have attained the comprehensive technical education that Brennan argues is necessary for competent political participation.

While Brennan admits that the uneven distribution of political knowledge by demographic is a potential objection to an epistocratic form of government, he ultimately denies that it is a defeating objection. He writes that one “worry” about the unequal distribution of so-called political knowledge is that “it will cause epistocracy to advance disproportionately the interests of the already advantaged” (Brennan 2016, 133). In response to this worry, Brennan sets

up a thought experiment: he asks his readers to imagine that the United States were to issue voting licenses to either ten thousand randomly selected rich white men, or ten thousand randomly selected poor black women. He asks us to choose between these two scenarios, knowing that we the president would have to follow the policies put forth by either group but without knowing the nature of those policies before choosing. Brennan argues bluntly that the president should “take the advice of the rich white men over the poor black women” (Brennan 2016, 133). He defends his view by saying that he doesn’t “think white men are morally superior...or that their interests count for more. Rather, I am engaging in rational statistical discrimination. There is ample and persistent evidence that right now, rich white men know more about politics than poor black women” (Brennan 2016, 133).

He argues that, although epistocracy would likely overrepresent the views of rich white men and underrepresent those of poor black women (among others), it is not because epistocracy itself is flawed; rather, on Brennan’s view, racism, sexism, and economic marginalization are separate problems that need to be addressed some other way. He uses the disproportionate exclusion of black people from the medical profession as an analogy, saying that, while black people “make up 13.1 percent of the US population but only 3.8 percent of medical doctors...the problem is not with the medical licensing itself. Rather, there are underlying and historical injustices that reduce the chance that blacks will become doctors” (Brennan 2016, 134). Brennan transposes this claim to his proposal for voter licensing, saying that “voter licensing would lead, at least at first, to systematic underrepresentation by blacks and the poor... But part of the reason voter licensing would disproportionately exclude blacks and the poor is that they are already

mistreated” (Brennan 2016, 134). He cites a number of reasons for this “mistreatment,” including disproportionate policing and drug arrests.

Brennan finally concludes that “[i]f it turns out that poor minorities overwhelmingly disqualify as voters under an epistocracy, this does not automatically demonstrate that epistocracy sends a racist or classist message. Rather, it shows us that there is some underlying injustice in that society, and we should try to fix that underlying injustice” (Brennan 2016, 135). The implication here is that racism, sexism, and economic marginalization are issues that are separate from politics, and they therefore need to be addressed outside of the political sphere prior to extending political participation to people other than (statistically) wealthy white men. Brennan reinforces this implication later in his argument when he revisits his proposal to license voters. He admits that, were the United States to follow his plan, “the people who pass the exam would be disproportionately white, upper-middle- to upper-class, educated, employed males” (Brennan 2016, 228). He brags that “[t]he problem here isn’t that I’m racist, sexist, or classist. My moral credentials are of course impeccable, and on implicit bias tests, I score many standard deviations lower than the average person” (Brennan 2016, 228). Rather, he contends, “the problem would be that there are underlying injustices and social problems that tend to make it so that some groups are more likely to be knowledgeable than others. My view is that rather than insist everyone vote, we should *fix* those underlying injustices” (Brennan 2016, 228). Brennan does not propose a method for “fixing” the underlying injustices of racism, sexism, and classism, but rather continues to argue that these problems should be considered separately from the efficacy of our political system.

We should be suspicious of Brennan's claim here; while his epistocratic system *in principle* aims to produce the best political outcomes using the best knowledge, it would *in fact* result in mass disenfranchisement of people already experiencing political marginalization along lines of race, gender, and economic status. This should be enough to give us pause, to force us to ask whether his epistocratic proposal really has political merit.

At its core, Brennan's argument is diagnosing a problem; our political system is failing us, and it is failing us in a systematic way. Ultimately, I agree with Brennan's diagnosis; our political system *is* failing us. But I disagree with Brennan on two core points; I think he's wrong about *why* our political system is failing to produce effective policy and I think he's wrong about what we should do about it.

My project in this dissertation is, like Brennan's, a project in political epistemology. I am also interested in asking questions about the relationship between political knowledge and effective policy, and in figuring out how the United States can best leverage the knowledge – or knowledges – at our disposal to address the needs and interests of our polity. But I will offer a different perspective to Brennan's; my aim in this project is to complicate Brennan's account of political knowledge and to offer a new diagnosis for the United States' policy failures. I am concerned that Brennan's narrow view of what counts as political knowledge would reinforce, rather than mitigate, what I identify as a serious problem for the functioning of democracy in the United States, specifically that our present political institutions are epistemically saturated by knowledge(s) developed in contexts of wealth and economic privilege. Brennan's reliance on formal education as a precondition for political participation is likely to exclude economically

marginalized³ subjects – as well as those for whom economic marginalization intersects with and characterizes other kinds of social marginalization – from voting and other modes of political engagement, a state of affairs that already obtains in less formal ways.

My core argument in this project is that Brennan’s epistocracy would only reify existing structures of political power that result in misguided and ineffective policy because the kind of knowledge he considers important to politics is already overrepresented in American political institutions. *What we need is more democracy, not less.*

In pursuing questions about political knowledge and its role in legislation, I draw on three principal areas in philosophy: social epistemology, critical theory, and democratic theory. I will use social epistemology – as well as some developments by feminist and anti-racist epistemologists – to discuss what we mean when we talk about political knowledge and the people who have it. My project concerns the effect of wealth – or the lack thereof – on one’s epistemic possibilities, and this is an area that has been undertheorized in social epistemologies. Social epistemologies often focus on the interaction between what Linda Alcoff calls “visible identities” of race or gender and knowledge-making, but rarely do they discuss economic positioning directly except to say that class and visible identity often interact to produce unique

³ I use the language of “economic marginalization” rather than language of “class” in this project, although I draw heavily from Marxist thinkers that rely on class positioning as a way of describing certain kinds of marginalization or alienation. I prefer the language of “economic marginalization” because it represents a more general category of people who may be marginalized not just *within* but also *by* the class structure itself. Economic marginalization can apply to those who are working class, who are gig workers, etc., but it can also describe those whose relationship to the class structure itself is fraught: the unemployed, the unhoused, those who are disabled in ways that preclude waged labor. Importantly, economic marginalization is a relative category, which means that it can also apply to people who are middle class in the sense that they are economically marginalized relative to the ultra-wealthy. Painting with this broad a brush will become important later in my project, as I discuss opportunities for political knowledge-making and -contribution that are largely *only* accessible to the ultra-wealthy. The language of economic marginalization gives us opportunities to describe features of our present political system that fail not just waged workers, not just gig workers, but perhaps even larger swathes of the American polity than the language of “class” allows us to identify.

experiences of oppression or marginalization. My aim in this project is in part to broaden the scope of social epistemology to include an analysis of economic positioning as it relates to situated and communal knowledge-creation.

My use of critical theory in this project centers on the work of Jürgen Habermas, whose discourse ethic has been the subject of much warranted criticism from social philosophers and political theorists alike. I am interested in retrieving some of his work on discourse in this project, although perhaps not in the way he intended. I take many of the criticisms of Habermas' work on discourse to be pointing out that his discourse ethic and its modifications are too ideal, impossible to instantiate in a world as complex and often irrational as our present lifeworld. I find these objections valuable and do not wish to contradict them; I, too, find Habermas' discourse ethic as a *prescriptive* project to be too idealized. Where I find it useful to recuperate some of Habermas' work is in a *descriptive* capacity; if we read Habermas' work on discourse, not as recommending a course of communicative action but rather as describing the ideals that operate in the background of our interpersonal and political discursive gestures, his discourse ethic and its modifications become useful as a diagnostic tool for evaluating where our political discourse systematically fails to live up to the ideals we claim to espouse as political participants and interlocutors. Placing Habermas in dialogue with social epistemologists reveals ways that our present political discourse often fails, systematically and predictably, to live up to the ideals Habermas describes.

My use of democratic theory in this project serves to illuminate some alternatives to Brennan's epistocracy; Brennan himself concedes that the choice between democracy and epistocracy is ultimately an instrumental one and that we ought to employ the system that uses

the knowledge at our disposal for maximum political effect. The implicit claim of most democratic theory is that democracies are inherently inclusive or diverse, but my aim in this project is to demonstrate that even within the scope of what we would call “democracy,” there is room to be more or less epistemically inclusive. Our present capitalist democracy is not as epistemically diverse as it might be, and certain theories of what constitutes democratic government are more responsive to public deliberation and knowledge-making than others. By placing democratic theory in conversation with social epistemology, we can evaluate the efficacy of particular kinds of democracy at incorporating and responding to public knowledge.

Thinking social epistemology, critical theory, and democracy in tandem has allowed me to describe, at least in part, the complexity of the relationship between knowledge, wealth, and politics. Understanding the interaction between all three is, in my opinion, necessary for an accurate and thorough critique of our present political state of affairs and for devising a just and viable way forward in improving that state of affairs.

In complicating Brennan’s account of and solution for the present difficulties of United States politics, I divide my project into six chapters. In the first, I present alternative epistemic accounts from feminist and anti-racist epistemologists that point to a richer and more varied picture of just what counts as political knowledge. In this first chapter, I argue that political knowledge is socio-politically situated, incomplete, and fallible, and therefore that a) formally educated members of the polity are still likely to display significant epistemic gaps, and b) that almost all members of a polity have properly and importantly political knowledge to contribute.

In my second chapter, I offer an alternative – although still partial – diagnosis for the fissure Brennan identifies between national interest and national policy; specifically, I argue that,

in large part, policy fails to address the needs and interests of the polity because our political institutions are epistemically saturated by knowledges developed in contexts of wealth and privilege. Because wealth is increasingly concentrated in the United States over the past 50 years, much of the United States polity is what I call “economically marginalized” relative to the wealthiest in our nation, but their political knowledge is proportionately worse represented in public debates, mass media, and legislation.

In my third chapter, I will argue that this worse representation of political knowledge from economically marginalized communities constitutes an epistemic injustice. I will apply theories of epistemic injustice along racial and gender lines to economic marginalization, contending that epistemic injustice can indeed occur along economic lines.

In my fourth chapter, I develop a taxonomy of harms that result from economic epistemic injustices in the political sphere. I identify four major categories of harms that result from epistemic exclusion along economic lines: moral harms, procedural harms, material harms, and legitimization harms.

In my fifth chapter, I investigate alternative political systems to Brennan’s epistocracy that will do the best job of incorporating the knowledges available in the United States polity into legislation. I ultimately conclude that an experimentalist deliberative democracy – rather than epistocracy or aggregative democracy – is the political ideal toward which we should be working in order to maximize the efficacy of the epistemic resources at our nation’s disposal.

In my sixth and final chapter, I prefigure some ways to more closely approximate the ideals of experimentalist deliberative democracy. I begin the chapter by proposing some reforms to our present capitalist democracy, but ultimately, I argue that capitalism as a mode of social

and economic organization is an obstacle for democratic government. In this final chapter, I contend that the precondition for political democracy is economic democracy.

Ultimately, my disagreement with Brennan boils down to this: I don't think most people are politically incompetent and I don't think Brennan has provided an adequate explanation for the gap between the US polity's needs and US policy. I think the American polity is a great deal more knowledgeable than he gives us credit for, but I think that capitalist modes of socioeconomic organization preclude policy that reflects that knowledge. What follows is an alternative explanation to Brennan's diagnosis of our nation's failures and a gesture toward how, as a nation, we might begin to do better.

CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

In his 2016 book *Against Democracy*, Jason Brennan argues that epistocracy, rather than democracy, would be the most effective form of government in the United States. He makes this claim because he believes the majority of the polity to be ignorant, not in possession of what he calls “social scientific knowledge.” Brennan’s account of political knowledge is motivated by his diagnosis of a political problem; specifically, Brennan is arguing that our political system isn’t working to address our needs and interests effectively. He attributes this problem to widespread ignorance among the polity, or a general lack of political knowledge. His argument is that ignorant people have too much say in our political decision-making process because even people that are, in Brennan’s own estimation, politically ignorant are granted the right to vote.

My aim in this chapter is to complicate Brennan’s view of political knowledge by asserting two main points: first, what counts as political knowledge extends far beyond the formalized education that Brennan takes to be central in good political decision-making. Second, I will argue that Brennan fails to account for ways in which subjects with access to formalized education might nevertheless be systematically ignorant about important aspects of our broader social context that create and contribute to political issues. In so doing, I will draw on accounts of both politics and knowledge by social, feminist, and anti-racist philosophers who center the importance of situatedness and relationality in their theories to argue that both politics and

accounts of political knowledge must consider the broader social context in which our political problems arise.

In his book, Brennan espouses a fairly narrow view of political knowledge; he assumes that political knowledge is always the sort of thing one learns in school – specifically through specialized university education – and that possessing political knowledge will always (or at least usually) yield definitive answers to political questions. In this chapter, I will contend that Brennan is mistaken about what political knowledge is and the kind of work it can do in political decision-making. In making this argument, I'll spend some time discussing what we mean by “political knowledge” and why I think Brennan takes too narrow a view of the kinds of that knowledge count as properly political. I will then offer an alternative account of political knowledge that is grounded in feminist epistemologies. This alternative account better captures the various kinds of knowledge that bear on our political decisions. I will ultimately contend that our knowledge is *situated*, which is to say that knowledge comes from lived and communal experience, and thus is varied in a way Brennan fails to address.

Brennan on Political Knowledge and Authority

Brennan's account of just what counts as political knowledge is fairly minimal and is rarely made explicit, but we can find some clues in both his critique of democracy and his advocacy for epistocracy. He begins his chapter on political knowledge by arguing that, in our present democratic system, “a well-informed vote produces the same results as a badly informed, misinformed, or irrational vote” (Brennan 2016, 23).¹ Brennan argues we should be concerned about this state of affairs; our votes mean very little because so many people participate in

¹ I will contend later than Brennan is wrong to reduce political participation to voting alone; political participation can take many forms, including protest, debate, legislation, lobbying, donating, and disseminating information.

voting, and a “well-informed vote” means just as much (or rather, just as little) as an “irrational vote.” Here, Brennan implicitly opposes the “well-informed” and the “irrational”; seemingly, when one has become sufficiently well-informed, one will no longer be irrational (or vote irrationally) on this view. Some people, he thinks, will always be irrational because they lack the education necessary to become well-informed.

It’s not clear what Brennan means by “irrational,” but we can take some clues from a previous chapter, in which he outlines three “tenets” of epistocracy as put forth by David Estlund. Brennan writes,

Estlund claims that defenses of epistocracy typically rest on three tenets: truth, knowledge, and authority.

Truth tenet: There are correct answers to (at least some) political questions.

Knowledge tenet: Some citizens know more of these truths or are more reliable at determining these truths than others.

Authority tenet: When some citizens have greater knowledge or reliability, this justifies granting them political authority over those with lesser knowledge. (Brennan 2016, 16)

Brennan endorses the first of these two tenets, which tells us something of his account of political knowledge. The truth tenet demonstrates that, on Brennan’s view, there are such things as “correct answers” to political questions, implying that political knowledge is the sort of thing that can be framed as a question or something about which we can ask a question that has a definitive answer. Indeed, in later chapters, Brennan argues that most voters are ignorant because they are unable to answer questions about politics; he gives some examples of such questions, like asking voters how much the US spends on foreign aid. In framing political knowledge as something about which we can ask a question that has a definitive correct answer, Brennan takes a fairly narrow view of the kind of knowledge that is relevant to politics; there are few resources

in his account to help us understand political negotiation or compromise, for example, because most political questions should have definitive answers on his view.

Reason also plays a substantial role in Brennan's account of political knowledge; on Brennan's view, we can determine a "correct" political answer if we have learned a sufficient amount of "specialized social scientific knowledge" (Brennan 2016, 28).² This is to say that, on Brennan's view, social scientific knowledge, learned in a university setting, bestows rationality or teaches us to reason within the confines of particular political rules, which in turn will lead the beholder to the right political answer. One such example might be that I am taught the general principle that reducing the amount corporations pay in taxes will leave that corporation open to expand its business, thereby creating more jobs. When asked to make a decision about economic policies that would affect corporate tax rates, then, I would reason from that principle that I should lower corporate taxes. One immediate problem I see with this claim is that the social sciences are themselves interpretive disciplines. This is to say that even within the social sciences themselves, academics disagree about the validity of interpretive frameworks or concepts. The premises from which we begin reasoning, then, might yield different answers depending on the theory I have learned or with which I align my own views; I might disagree, for example, that cutting corporate taxes actually creates jobs, and therefore reason that I should raise corporate taxes instead.

Brennan's endorsement of Estlund's "knowledge tenet" tells us that, on Brennan's view, political knowledge is something that some people have and some do not. Some people know how much the US spends on foreign aid and some don't.

² I have discussed Brennan's account of social scientific knowledge already in my introduction.

Brennan explains this disparity in political knowledge in terms of rational choice theory; he thinks that, because our votes matter very little in a statistical sense, some members of the polity make the choice not to “invest” in acquiring political knowledge (Brennan 2016, 30-31). In short, Brennan thinks that I might choose to become interested in politics the same way I may choose to take up playing mandolin. However, because the chances that my vote will make a difference are statistically slim, it doesn’t make much sense for me to choose to become educated about politics on Brennan’s view; in his estimation, mandolin might be a more useful skill.

What’s especially important to understand about Brennan’s account of “investing” in acquiring political knowledge is that his claim is that political knowledge is something separate from other kinds of knowledge; it is a discipline unto itself. Thus, we can only acquire political knowledge by being explicitly educated about politics, as in a university context.

Brennan acknowledges that there are patterns separating the knowledge-havers from the knowledge-have-nots; Brennan writes that “[p]olitical knowledge and economic literacy are not evenly spread among all demographic groups” (Brennan 2016, 33). Rather, wealthy white men are among those most likely to “invest” in the kind of education Brennan thinks is necessary for political knowledge, while low-income women of color experience barriers to receiving college education, and thus would be less likely to possess the kind of knowledge Brennan thinks is politically useful. Thus, wealthy white men are more likely to fulfill the requirements of Estlund’s “knowledge tenet” because they are better positioned to know the “correct answers” to political questions in virtue of their more advanced degree of educational attainment. Brennan thinks it is regrettable that these racial, gendered, and classed disparities exist, but he doesn’t think they defeat his proposal that only the best educated should vote; because on his view

formalized political education provides the recipient with generalizable principles from which to reason the correct answers to political questions, in principle a homogenous voting body will be able to get at the right answers just as well as a heterogenous one, provided both groups are sufficiently well-educated. As I will show later in this chapter, social and feminist epistemologists will object strongly to this contention that epistemic agents are in principle interchangeable.

Brennan, along with Estlund, rejects the third tenet of epistocracy, the “authority tenet,” claiming that being an expert in something is not “sufficient reason for a person to hold power over others” (Brennan 2016, 16). However, Brennan thinks we can retrieve the project of epistocracy based on his proposal of an alternative tenet: “the *antiauthority* tenet” (Brennan 2016, 17, emphasis his). This third thesis is as follows:

Antiauthority tenet: When some citizens are morally unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent about politics, this justifies *not permitting* them to exercise political authority over others. It justifies either forbidding them from holding power or reducing the power they have in order to protect innocent people from their incompetence. (Brennan 2016, 17)

Essentially, Brennan is arguing here that, although expertise doesn’t *confer* political authority, *lack* of expertise might *preclude* political authority. In other words, on Brennan’s view, people without political knowledge ought not have the right to vote. Brennan later uses this argument to justify his proposal that we ought to license voters using some sort of competency exam.

It’s important to note here that Brennan thinks only the best educated people should be allowed to vote because he believes it would produce the best political outcomes; those with the most formal social scientific knowledge, on his view, will be best able to discern the “correct” answers to political questions and thus would be likely to make the best possible political choices

for the polity as a whole (even if the best educated don't demographically represent the polity as a whole).

I see a few problems with Brennan's account of political knowledge here, but I'd like to start by examining what Brennan means by "political" and what he means by "knowledge."

Politics & Knowledge

What do we mean when we say that something is political? Brennan seems to be treating politics as a field of study, something that is highly technical and that requires a tremendous amount of training in the social sciences. This is why, on Brennan's view, we can choose whether or not to "invest" in acquiring said "social scientific knowledge"; if I "invest" adequately in learning about the field of politics, eventually I can get at the "correct answers" to political questions, either through rote memorization (I could recite the names of the candidates running for congressional office in my state) or through explicit reasoning (I could reason that, if the government makes direct payments to citizens who lost jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens might use that money to continue participating in the market, thereby potentially mitigating economic downturn during the pandemic).

However, I am concerned that Brennan's understanding of the realm of the political is too academic; he seems to be reducing the functioning of our political system to the functioning of our governing bodies (congress, the presidency, etc.). In reducing politics to the functioning of government, Brennan's account seems to leave out the broader purpose or context of government; politics is, at its core, about the organization and administration of a diverse, relational polity. A more complete account of politics, then, will start from the assumption that the political process always already includes people with varying needs and interests based on

their social positioning. Iris Marion Young provides one such account, and I will depend on her understanding of politics and its goals in this chapter.

Young, following critical theorist Jürgen Habermas, proposes what Young calls a “decentered” conception of politics (Young 2000, 46). She contrasts this approach with a “centered”³ approach to politics, which “implicitly thinks of the democratic process as one big meeting at the conclusion of which decisions are made, we hope justly” (Young 2000, 46). On the centered view, then, politics is the sole or at least primary mode of determining what people’s lives will look like, what sorts of possibilities they will have, and the nature of the relationships between the people and the institutions that govern their lives. The decentered approach, on the other hand, understands politics as embedded in a broader social context, in some ways *defining* and in some ways *being defined by* that context. Young writes that “according to this concept, we cannot conceive of the subject-matter of democracy as the organization of society as a whole. Society... outruns political institutions, and thus democratic politics must be thought of as taking place within the context of large and complex social processes the whole of which cannot come into view, let alone under decision-making control” (Young 2000, 46). Young also adds that there is “no final moment of decision” in our politics such that we can definitely determine whether our political decisions are right or wrong (Young 2000, 46); the political process is instead a perpetual state of negotiation, deliberation, and coordination between various institutions of government, social groups, and individuals.

The goal of politics, on Young’s view, is to promote justice, which on her account means the political representation of the needs and interests of the polity so that those needs and

³ She cites Habermas’ characterization of a “centered” political approach from *Between Facts and Norms*, 296-307.

interests can be met. Young's insistence upon the complex and mutually-constitutive relationship between politics and the broader social context in which politics take place complicates what it means for politics to promote justice; justice cannot mean "the common good" because the notion of a common good can serve to further exclude or marginalize already precarious people or groups. Young argues that understanding the political process as "seeking a common interest or common good regards differences of identity, culture, interests, social position, or privilege as something to be bracketed and transcended in public discourse and decision-making"; the ethos of the "common good" mandates that these differences be privately held or cared for (Young 2000, 42).

Groups whose interests differ from those which are sociopolitically normalized complicate the notion of politics as seeking the "common good". There are structures of race, gender, religion, sexuality, (dis)ability, class, and other pervasive social relations that inform our needs and interests; if politics merely seeks the "common good," those groups that "have greater symbolic or material privilege" are likely to see their interests generalized, whereas "the less privileged are asked to put aside the expression of their experience...or their grievances and demands must be suspended for the sake of a common good whose definition is biased against them" (Young 2000, 43). A just politics must therefore account for the social context in which it takes place in order to better represent and address the structurally-determined needs and interests of a polity that is race-, gender-, class-, ability-, sexuality-, and religion-diverse. Young later argues that the goal of our political process should be to promote "agreement" on issues of justice between differently-situated groups (Young 2000, 118), but I would relax her standard for political success here to something like "coordination" or "cooperation." It is necessary for

differently-situated groups with different interests to politically coordinate in order to solve weighty political problems, but demanding “agreement” seems to preclude the possibility of legitimate disagreement from marginalized political factions; indeed, I will discuss the imperative for political dissent in a later chapter.

From Young’s view, we see that when we say something is political, we cannot merely designate the established institutions of government; we are also referring to the social institutions and relations that form the background of our collective experience. The goal of politics is to address the needs, interests, and collective problems that are produced by this broader social structure through the coordination of a diverse polity. This is a much wider conception of politics than Brennan’s, who espouses a more “centered” understanding of politics and government wherein government exists to make laws and decisions, and the task of the polity is to legitimize or legitimate government. As we see from Young, by contrast, the function of politics cannot only be limited to decision-making, but must also include the representation of the needs and interests of a diverse polity who stand in complex structural social relations with one another and the coordination of the polity to address those needs and interests.

Social & Feminist Critiques of “Traditional” Political Epistemology

Having expanded our definition of what we mean by “politics” or “the political,” we can now ask whether Brennan’s account of knowledge is appropriate for understanding politics. Once again, I’m skeptical that Brennan’s account of knowledge is sufficiently broad to incorporate the full scope of political activity. If politics has to do with our lived social experiences and the institutions that result from that shared way of life, surely political knowledge can’t be reduced to that which can be learned in universities about the social sciences

and the structure of government. Fortunately, feminist epistemologies can provide alternative conceptions of knowledge that better suit our wider understanding of politics by foregrounding ways in which our knowledge is situated in lived experience and communities of meaning. I will outline a few of these epistemologies here.

Lorraine Code provides a helpful overview of feminist contributions to epistemology and of social epistemology more generally in her essay “Ignorance, Injustice, and the Politics of Knowledge.” She contrasts what she calls “S knows-that-*p*” epistemology – or what we might think of as “traditional” epistemology in the western philosophical canon – with social and feminist epistemological projects. S knows-that-*p* epistemology, on Code’s view, is best suited for describing propositional knowledge that depends on direct perception of objects (Code 2014, 149). For example, I might perceive a pencil on a table and say “I know that this pencil is yellow.” S-knows-that-*p* epistemology most closely corresponds to the epistemic model from which Brennan seems implicitly to be working; political knowledge can be described in words and framed as a question for which there is a correct answer. This is not to say that this propositional aspect of knowledge is not important – or, for that matter, importantly political – but rather that propositions are not the *only* important feature of political knowledge, as we will see when Code elaborates her critique.

On Code’s view, the S knows-that-*p* epistemic model fails to adequately describe the majority of knowledge practices as they actually occur in several ways. First, this epistemic model is “remarkably limited” in its capacity to “connect with complex and variously interpretable knowledge projects” (Code 2014, 149). This is to say that the S knows-that-*p* model is too simplistic to describe the ways in which people engage in knowledge practices; only a

certain kind of knowledge can be gained by observing objects in this way. If we apply Code's critique here to Brennan's account of political knowledge, she would likely say that thinking of politics as an academic discipline rather than as an evolving structuring of human life would be to oversimplify the political project in general; knowing about politics is more than knowing facts about how much is spent on foreign aid every year. Rather, political knowledge evolves because the configuration and administration of human beings evolves; political knowledge is not merely propositional but also interpersonal and affective.

Second, the S-knows-that-*p* formula tacitly assumes "S" (the subject) to be a privileged knower, specifically one that is "male, white, neither too old nor too young, propertied, able-bodied, reasonably educated and articulate, and well-off, materially, to *have* a pencil and a table and...other taken-for-granted things..." (Code 2014, 150). This critique is particularly salient in Brennan's case, since Brennan himself acknowledges that knowledge of the kind he considers to be political is the kind of knowledge wealthy white men are more likely to possess. Code's argument here is that we should be concerned about any account of knowledge that either implicitly or explicitly excludes knowers that are not wealthy white men. More broadly, though, Code is claiming that epistemic "exchanges have to negotiate structures of power and privilege, which claim no legitimate place in orthodox theories of knowledge (Code 2014, 152). If politics concerns a diverse polity characterized by relations of power, then any account of political knowledge must acknowledge these relationships as well.

Third, Code contends that the S-knows-that-*p* model is too individualistic; she argues that, on this model, "S *is and should be* a solitary knower...reliant on his reason alone...protected against potentially compromising influences..." (Code 2014, 151). Code's

comments here apply to Brennan's model of political knowledge directly, since Brennan reduces political participation to voting, which is a solitary mode of political engagement. In reducing political participation to voting, Brennan is implying that political participation occurs at the level of the individual, and thus it is only individuals that can possess and communicate political knowledge. Importantly, Brennan also relies on "reason" in his account of political knowledge; on his view, social scientific education confers or unlocks our capacity to reason the "correct answer" to a political question.

In his overall project, Brennan fails to appropriately foreground the sociality of political knowledge; although he does touch on the communal dimension of knowledge-making in his analysis of deliberative democracy, he dismisses the practice of discourse or communal deliberation too easily. In his section on deliberative democracy, he cites studies claiming that real deliberation doesn't often live up to the ideals proposed by Habermas and other ideal thinkers, arguing that deliberation can instead be corrupted by unconscious bias and pressure or coercion from powerful individuals or interest groups (Brennan 2016, 62-66).

While Brennan may be right that deliberation rarely if ever proceeds in an ideal manner, his argument here misses the point in two ways: first, he fails to ask about the broader causes of these systematic disruptions to deliberation – why, for example, do a few powerful individuals have so much influence over the outcome of deliberation? Brennan should be asking why it is the case that some important situated knowledges are being smothered in political deliberation. I will discuss this important point further in my next chapter. Second, Code's critique here reveals an important insight about political knowledge; because politics is a communal enterprise concerning the organization and administration of entire populations, we cannot ignore ways in

which our political knowledge is itself communal. Our opinions are informed by the others with whom we are in contact and by institutions of which we are a part, including but of course not limited to political parties. We must therefore expand our view of political participation to include communal modes of engagement: debate, protest, lobbying, etc.⁴ Political knowledge, as political engagement, is possible only through our association with others. Brennan is not, therefore, acknowledging ways in which political knowledge, simply in virtue of *being political*, is always already a communal practice or process.

It is telling, therefore, that Brennan is ultimately unable to dismiss deliberative democracy on principle; rather, he argues that he is “an instrumentalist about the choice between democracy and epistocracy” (Brennan 2016, 67). He concedes that he would endorse deliberative democracy if it could be shown to work better than an epistocratic model. This is a substantial concession for Brennan, and demonstrates Code’s insight that we can’t get around or wholesale disregard the sociality of political knowledge practices.

Code’s final critique is that on the S-knows-that-*p* model S’s embodiment and situatedness is not taken into account; Code writes that “[e]ven should his embodiment be tacitly recognised, the assumption is that he will function as an interchangeable placeholder in the making and circulation of knowledge” (Code 2014, 151). This is to say that, on this model, knowledge is constant or stagnant, and could therefore in theory be grasped by anyone (or, on Brennan’s view, anyone who “invests” in acquiring said knowledge). Although a knower’s embodiment is important insofar as their sense organs are necessary to perceive facts about the world and their situation relevant insofar as it determines what kind(s) of knowledge to which

⁴ I will discuss the various modes of political participation in Chapter 2.

the knower has access, the specific embodied situation of the knower is largely left out of the picture in *S-knows-that- p* epistemology. Brennan seems to endorse this *S-knows-that- p* model with regard to situatedness; on his view, there is no reason that, in principle, anybody (any body) could not acquire political knowledge. Rather, he thinks that barriers to political knowledge are incidental to our particular social organization. What Code acknowledges in her critique is that the very functioning of our political system positions certain embodied subjects better or worse for acquiring knowledge about that system. Political knowledge therefore cannot be purely learned or purely about “reason”; rather, the social interpretation and positioning of our bodies plays a role in what kind of knowledge I can acquire and in what ways I might acquire that knowledge.

Political Knowledge in Social & Feminist Epistemologies

Social and feminist epistemologies, on Code’s view, help to address some of the gaps in *S-knows-that- p* epistemology. Social epistemology’s focus on the inherent social dimension of knowledge acquisition serves to ameliorate *S-knows-that- p* epistemology’s focus on the individual knower; Code writes that social epistemology “claims its title, in part, from the centrality it accords to testimony as a source of knowledge, where ‘testimony’ refers to a range of practices from simply telling one another the time of day to the complex verbal and written reports that are the substance of knowledge-conveying exchanges between and among people in the real world...” (Code 2014, 152). Social epistemology recognizes and theorizes the ways in which we acquire knowledge, either directly or indirectly (such as through books and newspapers), through others; Code contends that “knowledge...just is social knowledge: socially

achieved, deliberated, adjudicated and enacted...” yet no less rational for it (Code 2014, 151).⁵ Social accounts of knowledge practices take “epistemic negotiation and deliberation” to be of paramount importance (Code 2014, 153). Including and theorizing this social dimension of knowledge is important for the project of epistemology on Code’s view because it introduces a level of complexity that more accurately describes real epistemic exchanges and concerns; she writes that because “[t]estimony is by definition interactive...it brings such complex matters as trust, credibility, responsiveness and responsibility, epistemic character and ‘situation’ into focus in knowledge-making and knowledge-circulating practices” (Code 2014, 152). Theorizing the social dimension of knowledge practices and their complexity in turn helps social epistemology avoid the problem of over-simplification that Code identifies with S-knows-that-*p* epistemology; examining matters of trust, responsiveness, and situation help us to identify real issues facing our own practices of knowledge-making and understanding.

The social dimension of epistemic practice extends to the level of systems as well; Code contends that social epistemology pays attention to “analysing social structures and relationships that thwart or enable practices of achieving knowledge, and...critically engaging with sedimented social-political assumptions that play into the making and circulating of knowledge...” (Code 2014, 153). This is to say that, unlike S-knows-that-*p* epistemology, social

⁵ S-knows-that-*p* epistemology often draws a false distinction between social knowledge and rationality, where rationality must be the individual process of reasoning a conclusion from premises. Code argues that this definition of rationality is too narrow; it is rational, for example, to believe people whom we trust when they communicate knowledge to us. For instance, if my husband were to tell me on a hike that I shouldn’t step just there because there are rattlesnakes lurking just out of sight, it is rational for me to heed his warning because I trust him and because my survival might depend on it.

George Yancy extends this claim to the level of community in his discussion of Black epistemologies or Black communities of knowing; Yancy argues that the very survival of Black people in the United States depends on a set of communal knowledge about race and racism. For their own safety, people of color need to be able to identify racist gestures, and so they rely on each other’s accounts and experiences. Code’s point is that this kind of community knowledge-building is rational, but maybe not rational in the way that Brennan would use the term.

epistemology has room to accommodate and theorize the effect of social systems of knowledge practices and the ways in which they affect individual knowing. Code's point here draws attention Brennan's dependence on individual rationality in his epistemic account; he has failed to acknowledge that his own "social scientific knowledge" is itself the product of a kind of epistemic community (an explicitly academic one), and further that there might be other communities and kinds of knowledge that remain, at least for the moment, un- or under-theorized in an academic context.

Social epistemology in turn makes room for feminist epistemic projects, which Code argues delve even further into issues of embodiment and situation in epistemic contexts.⁶ Feminist epistemology serves to address the importance of embodiment and situation in knowledge-making practices; feminist epistemology, contrary to S-knows-that-*p* epistemology, begins from the assertion that "knowers are always somewhere, and both constrained and enabled by their situation, which itself becomes a focus of epistemological evaluation and analysis" (Code 2014, 151). This foregrounding of the epistemic consequences of one's situation is central to "standpoint theory," an epistemic theory that grew out of feminist and anti-racist epistemologies.

Standpoint theory presupposes a non-essentialist account of identity, which is to say an account of identity that is grounded in social and historical relation; our identities are grounded in our position with regard to other subjects (Wylie 2003, 28). These positions are often

⁶ However, Code is careful not to conflate social and feminist epistemology; while social epistemology makes room for feminist projects, Code notes that social epistemology journals and edited volumes often lack female contributors and authors explicitly working in feminist epistemology. In her article entitled "Testimony, Epistemic Difference, and Privilege," Lisa Bergin argues that social epistemology by itself often also fails to account for the complexity of discursive testimonial exchanges, and can therefore be improved by feminist epistemic theory.

hierarchical because they exist within relations of power (Wylie 2003, 31). Standpoint theory wants to make a related claim about knowledge and knowledge production; knowledge is situated (Wylie 2003, 31). This is to say that “social location systematically shapes and limits what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit understanding...” (Wylie 2003, 31). I would add here that our social location not only “*limits* what we know”⁷ but also serves to *enable* knowledge or knowledge production. What I mean here is that certain kinds of knowledge, or certain avenues for knowledge production, are unique to particular social locations, and so our social location simultaneously makes certain kinds of knowing possible for us and denies us access to others. Standpoint theory therefore “throw[s] into relief the contingent, historical nature of what we count as knowledge and focus attention on the processes by which knowledge is structured” (Wylie 2003, 28).

In her paper “Why Standpoint Matters,” Alison Wylie reviews some of the key tenets of standpoint theory. Standpoint theory’s “central and motivating thesis is an inversion thesis,” she writes; “those who are subject to structures of domination that systematically marginalize and oppress them may, in fact be epistemically privileged in some crucial respects” (Wylie 2003, 26). This thesis constitutes an “inversion” because its central claim runs counter to the intuitive insight that marginalized or oppressed subjects may also experience epistemic marginalization or oppression. Oftentimes this intuitive thesis is correct; epistemic marginalization does follow from, or is constitutive of, oppression more generally, as when marginalized subjects are denied access to education. Brennan’s assertion that wealthy, white men are usually best equipped for political decision-making rests on this intuitive thesis; he thinks that, because wealthy, white

⁷ Emphasis mine.

men have the most access to the best education, they should make the majority of political decisions, whereas women of color – historically least likely to have access to education – wouldn't possess the kind of knowledge that Brennan thinks is important for political decision-making.

However, the “inversion thesis” complicates our understanding of what constitutes political knowledge and who possesses that knowledge; Wylie's claim is that, with regard to certain issues or in certain domains, oppressed subjects may develop epistemic advantages over their oppressors. She contends that marginalized subjects “may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience” (Wylie 2003, 26). Part of this epistemic advantage may stem from the fact that people marginalized along axes of “race, class, and gender” have to “negotiate the world of the privileged” (Wylie 2003, 35), while privileged subjects rarely have to negotiate the world(s) of the marginalized.⁸

Further, on Wylie's view, the social location of marginalized subjects may confer some epistemic advantages; she contends that “[t]hose who are economically dispossessed, politically oppressed, social marginalized and are therefore likely to be discredited as epistemic agents...may actually have a capacity, by virtue of their standpoint, to know things that those occupying privileged positions typically do not know, or are invested in not knowing (or, indeed, are invested in systematically ignoring and denying)” (Wylie 2003, 32). Wylie's argument here is that systematically marginalized subjects, in virtue of their experiences *as marginalized*, are

⁸ Shannon Sullivan's discussion of white habits of ontological expansiveness explains a little of why this might be; she argues that part of what constitutes white privilege is that whiteness seeks to expand its borders by gentrifying BIPOC areas, demanding conformity to white standards of speech and dress, and by gate-keeping (both literally and figuratively) its spaces and culture.

positioned to have access to knowledge that is either unavailable to privileged subjects in virtue of their own social positioning or that privileged subjects actively avoid (or are “invested in not knowing”).⁹ In short, marginalized subjects have access to knowledge and ways of knowing that privileged subjects don’t, despite privileged subjects’ better access to formalized education.

José Medina further systematizes these insights about the epistemic advantages of marginalized social positioning in his account of epistemic virtues of the oppressed and epistemic vices of the privileged. Medina writes that “[a]lthough it is certainly true that the economically and socio-politically privileged enjoy epistemic benefits that more disadvantaged members of society do not, it is not the case that the economically and socio-politically privileged accumulate only epistemic benefits” (Medina 2013, 29). In fact, the economically and socio-politically privileged accrue several epistemic disadvantages, which Medina explains in

⁹ I want to draw attention to Wylie’s use of the term “investment” here; both Brennan and Wylie talk about knowledge acquisition in terms of an “investment,” and Wylie’s use serves to illuminate some of the more insidious implications of Brennan’s use of the term. When Brennan argues that certain people make the rational choice to “invest” in acquiring political knowledge, he’s referring to a literal investment of time and money; because on his view political knowledge is the sort of thing we learn in a university setting, political knowledge requires a substantial financial investment. Political knowledge is therefore, as Brennan acknowledges, the purview of the privileged because privileged subjects are more socially and financially able to attain university education. Wylie is applying the term “investment” to the same subset of people as Brennan is: privileged subjects. However, the character of the “investment” to which she is referring is subtly different; she isn’t talking about an investment of time or money, but rather a mental/affective investment, and specifically an investment in “*not knowing*” (emphasis mine). On Wylie’s view, then, even as privileged subjects invest their time and money in acquiring knowledge, they invest equally in shielding themselves from knowledge that might chip away at both at their privileged view of the world and their privileged position more generally. This second kind of investment, investment in *not knowing*, is largely unconscious and habitual; thinkers like Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan argue that privileged subjects are socialized in their racialized and gendered identities to unconsciously perform habits of thought and behavior that can manifest in ignorance about structures and experiences that might challenge their privileged worldview (see Tuana 2004, Sullivan 2006).

Wylie’s account of “investment,” then, reveals the way in which Brennan’s “investing” in knowledge is conditioned by a background of sociopolitical and -economic privilege. In short, those who are able to choose to “invest” in acquiring social scientific knowledge of the kind that Brennan thinks is relevant to politics are always already “invested *in*” certain kinds of knowledge or certain ways of knowing that preclude other kinds of knowledge or ways of knowing. This is “rational ignorance,” to use Brennan’s own term, but of a different kind; it is rational for privileged subjects to ignore knowledge that would call that privilege into question, but rational ignorance is not necessarily deliberate in the way that Brennan thinks.

terms of what he calls “epistemic vices” (Medina 2013, 30). He outlines three principal vices associated with privilege, which mirror the epistemic virtues associated with marginalization: epistemic arrogance, epistemic laziness, and closed-mindedness. A subject may develop epistemic arrogance when a subject has been “epistemically spoiled” to such a degree that they begin to think of themselves as “cognitively superior” (Medina 2013, 30-31). Epistemically arrogant subjects presume their knowledge is universal and infallible (Medina 2013, 30). Epistemic arrogance precludes the possibility of dissent because the arrogant subject will not recognize any perspective but their own. Medina’s insight here complicates Brennan’s assertion that there is a “correct answer” to political questions or problems; the supposed universality of social scientific knowledge on Brennan’s view seems to suggest that dissenting to the rational principles of social science would be impossible. However, it is the case that even social scientists might disagree with one another, and further that the social sciences as an interpretive framework don’t capture the full complexity of our sociopolitical context, such that one could rationally dissent to the political solutions proposed by social scientists.

Epistemic laziness is what Medina calls a “socially produced and carefully orchestrated lack of curiosity” on the part of privileged subjects toward those sociopolitical injustices about which privileged subjects do not need to know (Medina 2013, 32-33). Medina’s claim here is that part of what constitutes privilege is that “there are entire domains that those in a position of privilege do not need to familiarize themselves with”; Medina uses an example from Wylie 2003 in which Wylie examines the ways in which economically privileged subjects do not necessarily need to become well-versed in domestic tasks, for example (Medina 2013, 32). Importantly, privileged subjects are likely to develop epistemic laziness concerning their own privilege; part

of what it means to be privileged is that the privileged subject can be ignorant of how their privilege operates in the world. Charles Mills gives a salient example of this kind of epistemic laziness with regard to the operation of whiteness; he writes that white people are guilty of what he calls “an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance,” which is “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions...producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills 1997, 18). He elaborates that part of what whiteness is or, rather, “part of what it means to be constructed as ‘white’...is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities” (Mills 1997, 18). Mills’ point here is that whiteness needs to be opaque to itself in order to maintain white privilege/supremacy. For this reason, white people, as racially privileged, are positioned to display epistemic laziness with regard to that very racial privilege.

Medina characterizes closed-mindedness as a kind of avoidance: “intense but negative cognitive attention...epistemic hiding” (Medina 2013, 34). Medina thinks that privileged subjects develop the vice of closed-mindedness as a way to “preserve privilege” by remaining in the dark about “experiences, perspectives, or aspects of social life that require an enormous amount of effort to be hidden and ignored” (Medina 2013, 34). Closed-mindedness, then, acts as a “defense mechanism” for privileged subjects against “things that are difficult to accept or even to acknowledge” with regard to their own privilege (Medina 2013, 34).

These three epistemic vices coalesce to create what Medina terms the “actively ignorant subject” (Medina 2013, 39). Active ignorance, on Medina’s view, is “an ignorance that occurs with the active participation of the subject and with a battery of defense mechanisms, an ignorance that is not easy to undo and correct...” (Medina 2013, 39). Although Medina claims

that actively ignorant subjects may develop and practice epistemic vices without realizing it, they are still blameworthy for those vices insofar as they “contribute to create and maintain bodies of ignorance”; he continues, saying “[t]hese subjects are at fault for their complicity (often unconscious and involuntary) with epistemic injustices that support and contribute to situations of oppression” (Medina 2013, 39).

At this point, I would like to pause to ask: what does taking situation and historical context into account mean for Brennan’s view of political knowledge? It seems that, at the very least, Brennan’s well-educated, white, male, wealthy, privileged subject who is well-versed in social scientific knowledge in virtue of having “invested” in a university education might have some serious gaps in his¹⁰ knowledge. Further, it seems that these gaps are gaps in *political* knowledge insofar as this privileged subject is unable to understand how his privilege functions in the relationships and institutions of which he is a part. He is likely to be unable to understand what his racial, gendered, and economic identities mean in the context of the political institutions in which he participates.

Medina also helps us to understand ways in which marginalized subjects – again, despite institutional and social barriers to educational attainment – might nevertheless possess some epistemic advantages. He describes these advantages in terms of what he terms “epistemic virtues,” which correspond to the “epistemic vices” of the privileged. He continues,

The epistemic advantages of the privileged tend to be rather explicit: access to information, access to educational institutions, capacity to disseminate knowledge and to command epistemic authority, having a credible voice, and so on. Some of the epistemic disadvantages of the oppressed are equally obvious and well known; they are in fact the mirror image of the advantages just listed (lack of access to information and to educational institutions, obstacles or prohibitions against the

¹⁰ I use “his” here deliberately to reference Brennan’s acknowledgement that these subjects are often male.

dissemination of knowledge, lack of a credible voice and authority, etc.). But critics in race theory and feminist theory have shown that the situation is more complicated than it may seem, for privileged elites also have epistemic disadvantages, whereas oppressed subjects (of their out-of-the-mainstream standpoints) can enjoy some epistemic advantages. Race theorists and feminist theorists have identified the blind spots of those in privileged positions and some important epistemic advantages of those who have been marginalized in, and often excluded from, epistemic practices. (Medina 2013, 29)

Here, Medina is relying on standpoint theory to contend that, although there are serious epistemic consequences that accompany and constitute identity-based oppression, there do exist some epistemic advantages associated with living in and through oppressive sociopolitical structures, as well as some epistemic *disadvantages* associated with benefitting from those structures. Importantly, on Medina's view, although "the social positionality of agents does matter for the development of their epistemic character," social positionality is "not a sufficient condition" for developing particular virtues or vices. This is to say that, although the experiences associated with a privileged identity are more likely to result in the development of epistemic vices, for example, simply occupying a privileged identity is not enough to make someone epistemically vicious. Thus, epistemic vices and virtues "are not universal and automatic" features of privilege and marginalization, but instead are features of our "cognitive psychology" that we develop as a result of our socialization, our interactions with social structures and systems, and our experiences (Medina 2013, 39-40).

Medina characterizes the epistemic advantages of the oppressed or marginalized as epistemic virtues, and gives several examples of virtues that people occupying marginalized identities are likely to develop: epistemic humility, epistemic diligence/curiosity, and open-mindedness (Medina 2013, 42). He defines epistemic humility as "attentiveness to one's cognitive limitations and deficits," arguing that this recognition of the gaps in one's knowledge

can “facilitate learning processes and...overall cognitive development” (Medina 2013, 43). In other words, the marginalized subject is likely to recognize that she occupies a specific perspective on the world and acknowledge that this perspective implies certain limitations to the kind of knowledge she can have or to her ways of knowing.

Epistemic diligence, on Medina’s view, is a virtue related to epistemic humility; those who recognize “the cognitive deficits of their perspective” are also more likely to “feel an intellectual curiosity that motivates them to fill in their cognitive gaps and to overcome their cognitive limits” (Medina 2013, 43). Further, conditions of oppression are likely to reward curiosity on the part of marginalized subjects; Medina argues that “[o]ppressed subjects frequently find themselves forced to acquire deep familiarity with certain domains, developing forms of expertise that no one else has” (Medina 2013, 44). There are two kinds of expertise a marginalized subject might develop; the first is a kind of expertise in navigating her own marginalization, and the second is an expertise in understanding and navigating the world of the privileged.

George Yancy, in his chapter entitled “Elevators, Race, and Social Spaces,” provides a useful example of the first type of expertise; Yancy, a Black man, describes the experience of entering an elevator and encountering a white woman inside. She tenses up, clutches her purse closer to her, and fakes a smile. Yancy reads her reaction as a racist one wherein she judges his Black body to be aggressive, hypersexual, and “evil as such” (Yancy 2008, 845). When he relates his experience to his class of mostly white students, several students object that Yancy might be reading racism into a situation where it does not exist; perhaps the white woman in the

elevator was merely afraid of being alone with a man in general, or perhaps Yancy merely read the situation wrongly.

In response, Yancy contends that his many experiences with reactions just like the white woman's in the elevator, as well as the countless similar situations experienced and related to him by members of his Black community, afford him some expertise in identifying racist gestures; he writes that his judgment of the white woman's racism "is a social epistemological one, one that is referred reasonable within the context of a shared history of Black people noting, critically discussing, suffering and sharing with each other the traumatic experiential content and repeated acts of white racism" (Yancy 2008, 849). This shared understanding and testimony helps to constitute what Yancy calls a Black "epistemological community" (Yancy 2008, 849). Indeed, Yancy argues that it is a matter of survival for Black people to be able to identify racist situations since white people – both historically and presently – employ violence toward racist ends (Yancy 2008, 849). In short, the survival of Black people in America depends on their being good at identifying racism, where, as we have seen, privileged white people need not be cognizant of their own racist gestures in the same way (or indeed need *not* to recognize their own racist gestures in order to preserve their racial privilege). Yancy, as well as members of his Black epistemic community, have thus developed a kind of "expertise" in identifying white racism as a result of their many lived experiences of marginalization and oppression at the hands of white people. This is an example of the ways in which marginalized subjects "often need to know more than...their oppressors" (Medina 2013, 44).

Medina discusses the ways in which marginalized subjects are also likely to develop expertise in navigating the world of the privileged; he writes that "[r]elations of oppression

create certain cognitive needs,” specifically ones that require marginalized subjects to familiarize themselves with the practices, attitudes, languages, and behaviors of the privileged (Medina 2013, 44). In this way, the epistemic diligence of marginalized subjects is related to the third and final epistemic virtue Medina thinks marginalized subjects are likely to develop: open-mindedness. Oppressed subjects are, on Medina’s view, often more open-minded than privileged subjects because they are “encouraged and...even forced to see reality not only through their own eyes, but also through the eyes of others whose perspectives and social locations matter more” (Medina 2013, 44). Medina refers to DuBois’ account of double-consciousness as paradigmatic of the open-mindedness of the marginalized (Medina 2013, 44).

These three epistemic virtues – humility, diligence, and open-mindedness – converge in what Medina calls “subversive lucidity”; he writes that subjects that develop these virtues are particularly “lucid” in that they are “likely to detect and overcome blind spots and to develop new forms of lucidity that can enrich social cognition” (Medina 2013, 44-45). In other words, subjects that have developed these virtues are likely to know more, know better, and to fill in gaps in our collective social knowledge.

Once again, it seems that Medina’s argument here reveals some gaps in Brennan’s account; not only are educated and privileged subjects not as epistemically infallible as Brennan wants to argue, but we now see that it is also the case that marginalized subjects possess certain kinds of knowledge that privileged subjects do not. What’s more, this knowledge is properly political; insofar as politics is the coordination and administration of populations, the “subversive lucidity” of marginalized subjects can help draw attention to issues that arise in the coordination and administration of populations that go unnoticed by privileged subjects.

Young makes this claim even more explicit in her discussion of what she calls a “politics of difference”; she argues that social difference, far from hindering political decision-making, is actually a “political resource” in that incorporating social difference in political discourse helps polities arrive at greater objectivity on issues of justice. Young begins her argument from the understanding that politics must account for the fact that the people making up a polity are situated differently along lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, and ability. These situations contribute to the production of varied political interests and needs, which the polity as a whole must address in order for a political decision to be just. When we negotiate political decisions, then, we need to be as objective as possible in order to account for the varied consequences of those political decisions on variously-situated people and groups.

Young criticizes what we might think of as a “traditional” western philosophical account of objectivity, which she characterizes as the “view from nowhere” (Young 2000, 113); “[m]odern thought,” she writes, “has often conceptualized objectivity as achieved by transcending particularities of social position and experience, abstracting from them to construct a standpoint outside and above them that is general rather than particular” (Young 2000, 113). This “traditional” epistemic account understands objectivity to be a general or generalizable position that is free from bias. This “view from nowhere” understanding of objectivity lies at the heart of Brennan’s suggestion that only the best educated should participate in political decision-making; he reasons that those who have attained a formal education will be less likely to be influenced by bias when they have encountered more general political principles and theories.¹¹

¹¹ There are a couple problems with Brennan’s reasoning here: first, those principles and theories are themselves situated in broader academic debate, so we are still relying on situated frameworks of understanding even (and perhaps *especially*) in the social sciences. Second, as we will see in a moment, even if our principles and theories

However, on Young's view, this "bracketing" of one's social location is an inadequate account of objectivity for two reasons that she identifies: first, there's no real way to ensure that in my "monological method of bracketing" I have not "carried over assumptions and conclusions derived from my particular standpoint into the supposedly objective general standpoint" (Young 2000, 113); in short, her first concern is that we're not as good at bracketing our own biases as we think we are.¹² Young's second concern is that, even if we *could* magically bracket out our social location, objectivity of this kind would still be inadequate for our political purposes because "in political communication our goal is not to arrive at some generalities... Instead, we are looking for just solutions to particular problems in a particular social context" (Young 2000, 113). Her concern, then, is that the "view from nowhere" doesn't do us much good when the purpose of political decision-making is to address issues that are particular to our current moment and sociopolitical situation; while Young says we can appeal to general principles in our decision-making process, ultimately our political decisions are "particular judgements about what ought to be done...in the context of particular social relationships" (Young 2000, 113). In seeking objectivity, then, "participants in a political discussion cannot transcend their particularity" (Young 2000, 113).

How, then, can we maximize objectivity in our political decisions?

Young thinks we can achieve greater objectivity in our political decisions through more explicit recognition of our situatedness, which both informs our needs/interests and also, as we

were perfectly objective, Young contends they are inadequate for the purposes of addressing the particularities of our political decisions, which bear on particular (rather than ideal or general) polities.

¹² Habermas suggests that participants in formal moral discourse take part in what he calls "therapeutic discourse" to counteract bias. The suggestion is impractical for a number of reasons, not least of which that it isn't clear that our therapists would be any better at being objective!

have seen from Wylie and Medina, produces varied experiences and knowledges from which people then form political judgments. These varied knowledges are, on Young's view, important for negotiating political issues as a collective; she writes that "processes of political communication ought...move people from a merely subjective to a more objective way of looking at problems and solutions... [I]nstead of understanding issues only from the point of view of my partial and parochial experience and interests, I move to a point of view that aims to make a judgement of justice that places my interests among others" (Young 2000, 113). Young's argument here is that, since policy outcomes address the needs and interests of differently situated people in different ways, hearing from lots of differently situated people during the political decision-making process will make us more objective. "On this account," Young argues, "objectivity is an achievement of democratic communication that includes all differentiated social positions" (Young 2000, 114). She is careful not to contend that objectivity is merely the "sum" of differentiated views, but rather, with Hilary Putnam, she argues that objectivity comes from "critical, reflective, and persuasive interaction" between people with differentiated "situated knowledges" (Young 2000, 114).¹³

Young argues that differentiated situated knowledges, in helping us to maximize political objectivity, are therefore a political resource. Including a diversity of knowledges serves four main functions that Young identifies: first, she argues that "[i]nclusion of differentiated groups is important...as a means of demonstrating equal respect" for those groups. Second, she contends that inclusion of differentiated social groups helps "to ensure that all legitimate interests in the

¹³ Young refers to Donna Haraway's feminist account of situated knowledge here. See Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

polity receive expression” (Young 2000, 115). These first two functions, Young argues, are baseline functions of democratic inclusion more generally, but she identifies two further functions of epistemic inclusion: “it motivates participants in political debate to transform their claims from mere expressions of self-regarding interest to appeals to justice,” and “it maximizes the social knowledge available to a democratic public, such that citizens are more likely to make just and wise decisions” (Young 2000, 115).

Young elaborates on these last two functions of epistemic inclusion. First, Young contends that epistemic diversity frames political discourse in terms of justice. She argues that “having to be accountable to people from diverse social positions with different needs, interests, and experience” means that we can no longer frame our political assertions in terms of self-interest; since others do not share our self-regarding interests, we have to appeal to a shared ideal of justice in order to convince others to cooperate with our political strategies (Young 2000, 115). Even if we don’t agree about what will further the aim of promoting justice, we must all frame our arguments in terms of promoting a just outcome. This necessity promotes cooperation and coordination between political factions with disparate aims and interests, even if that cooperation is uneasy or strained.

I propose a fifth function of epistemic inclusion in addition to the four that Young proposes, which is drawn from Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres’ account of “race as a political space” in *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*. Specifically, I also propose that epistemic inclusion serves to motivate political action or activism. Similar to Young, Wylie, and Medina, Guinier and Torres argue that “racial group consciousness” is a “political asset” in that racialized group identity can serve both to illuminate

salient political issues that bear on the lived experience of a racialized group and to motivate political action or activism. Guinier and Torres provide examples specifically of Black race consciousness as a political identity, arguing that, in the midst of intersecting racial, economic, and political marginalization, “rather than internalizing this social dysfunction as being their ‘own fault,’ many blacks have developed a critical perspective on ‘the system’” (Guinier & Torres 2002, 75). Here, the authors are making a claim similar to the inversion thesis in standpoint theory where racial (or gender, class, etc.) marginalization presents an opportunity to develop a critical consciousness of the functioning of particular social systems or institutions.

Where Guinier and Torres go further than Young is in their contention that “racial solidarity among black people has often been the source of political or social activism” (Guinier & Torres 2002, 78). Their argument here is that not only does marginalized group identity provide some important insights but also that a community in possession of such political knowledge is a site for concrete political activism. They further argue that this activism is its own kind of importantly political knowledge. Guinier and Torres contend that “racial bonds that are enhanced by cultural bonds can...connect people of color to common social identities and mobilize them to political action” when group identities either become or imply social movements; they write that “when their group identity becomes a political identity, people are more willing to participate in the group’s activities, to identify with its practices, and to make sacrifices for its cohesion” (Guinier & Torres 2002, 79-80). This is to say that marginalized group membership can be an important site for the identification and execution of a political mission, where people are culturally and socially committed to that mission.

Guinier and Torres provide a number of examples of the political mobilization of social groups, most notably the unionization efforts of Black workers,¹⁴ but they also focus on more cultural institutions, namely Black church culture. They cite Frederick Harris in arguing that “the cognitive, discursive, and cultural resources of the black church are as important as its institutional networks for social movement and political mobilization” (Guinier & Torres 2002, 80). The Black church environment gives individuals who are otherwise politically marginalized to take on important leadership roles, including “the opportunity to make speeches, contribute money to a candidate, and work for a political campaign” (Guinier & Torres 2002, 80).

The activism of Black churches also extends to community care, like collecting food and money for precarious members of the community and leading prayer. Guinier and Torres contend that “these activities, normally thought of as routine events in church life, are relevant skills that provide active church members, many of whom are black women, the political education necessary to challenge their marginality” (Guinier & Torres 2002, 80). These skills, practiced in the context of a racial and cultural community, are themselves a kind of political knowledge that bears not only on local community care but that can also be applied to broader-scale political activism; Guinier and Torres call these skills a “form of cognitive, political, and moral literacy” (Guinier & Torres 2002, 81). This is not the kind of knowledge that one might find in a sociology classroom, but which is nevertheless deeply relevant to political decision-making and action. This kind of knowledge, born out of “racial solidarity,” can make “blacks and other people of color more politically effective, not just politically active” (Guinier & Torres 2002, 81). We can imagine that these advantages may also extend to other marginalized group;

¹⁴ Guinier & Torres 78-79. Their discussion of the 1984 Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union in South Carolina and antecedent unionization efforts in Los Angeles are particularly rich examples.

gender solidarity or class solidarity can do some of this work as well. For this reason, I argue that group inclusion serves this fifth function of motivating activism by drawing on cultural and communal resources for understanding and using concrete means to address political issues.

These functions of inclusion serve to motivate Young's ultimate contention that epistemic inclusion in a democratic context makes democratic decisions "more just and wise" (Young 2000, 115). This is because, on Young's view, the necessity of "confrontation with different perspectives, interests, and cultural meanings teaches each the partiality of [our] own and reveals to [us our] own experience as perspectival" (Young 2000, 116). This "contextualizing of perspective" is vitally important in political decision-making because, as both Young and Medina argue, people in privileged – or "structurally superior" – positions tend to "take their experience, preferences, and opinions to be general, uncontroversial, ordinary..." (Young 2000, 116). This is to say that marginalized perspectives are necessary for contextualizing dominant ones and drawing attention to ways in which the socio-politically generalized interest does not necessarily promote justice for the marginalized. Young's view here not only supports Medina's account of the epistemic advantages of the oppressed, but also provides concrete reasons why these epistemic advantages are politically salient; they serve to illuminate important gaps in privileged worldviews and draw attention to issues of justice that are often overlooked or even purposefully ignored by the privileged.

We can now return to Brennan's claim that only allowing the best educated to vote will produce the best political outcomes for the polity in general. Wylie's and Medina's accounts complicate Brennan's claim that the best educated people will be able to reason out or get at the best political strategies. Indeed, because those who are best educated also tend to be the most

privileged, Wylie's and Medina's accounts of the epistemic disadvantages or "vices" of the privileged suggest that it is precisely those well-educated, privileged voters who have serious gaps in their knowledge that prevent them from understanding their own sociopolitical privilege. Medina would say that these privileged subjects are "blind"¹⁵ to the realities of their situation. I would therefore argue that, given these epistemic "blind spots," it is not the case that limiting the right to vote only to the best educated among us would result in the best political outcomes for the polity in general; it seems that issues related to race, gender, and income would likely be left out or mishandled. Since these issues have a tremendous impact on the lived experience of the polity in general, to restrict voting to the best educated would be to exclude important situated knowledge, and, in so doing, to fail to address the needs and interests of those people whose knowledge is excluded from political decision-making. In short, Brennan's epistemic account leaves out opportunities for marginalized subjects who have developed epistemic advantages or virtues to contribute important knowledge to the political process. We must therefore reject the antiauthority tenet, and with it Brennan's epistemic account more generally.

On a feminist epistemic account that foregrounds the importance of situated knowledges – and systematic ignorance – we can draw two important conclusions. First, Brennan's account of political knowledge is too narrow to incorporate the full scope of knowledge that bears on our political needs and interests because it ignores the centrality of social relations in developing knowledge. Second, Brennan's account fails to account for ways in which privileged subjects with access to formalized education are likely to nevertheless be systematically ignorant about

¹⁵ In the introduction to *Epistemology of Resistance*, Medina includes a note about why he relies on language of "blindness" rather than "insensitivity". I borrow his language here, but I remain concerned about the use of visual impairment as a metaphor.

the needs, interests, and experiences of people who are marginalized. Rule of the best educated is therefore, contrary to Brennan's assertion, unlikely to result in the best possible political outcomes, especially for those marginalized along lines of race, gender, and class whose needs and interests are less likely to be represented in the traditionally white, male, and wealthy academy.

CHAPTER TWO

ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO THE EXPRESSION OF POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

In my previous chapter, I read Jason Brennan's argument for epistocracy as a diagnosis of a problem with our current democratic system; Brennan contends that our democracy doesn't work well because large swathes of the polity are politically ignorant. Brennan attributes this ignorance to rational choice theory by contending that, because our votes are statistically insignificant, most people choose not to invest in acquiring political knowledge, which he defines as "social scientific knowledge" that we acquire through specialized higher education. In response, I argued that Brennan is wrong about what counts as political knowledge; political knowledge is grounded in the particularities of our social and structural relations, and thus there must be a plurality of political knowledges that can contribute meaningfully to the project of coordinating and administering a polity in order to address its varied needs and interests. Social scientific knowledge is just one of these kinds of knowledge.

Brennan's concern, however, remains: the current instantiation of democracy in the United States seems to be doing a bad job of addressing the needs and interests of the polity. As I write this chapter, the COVID-19 pandemic rages on while millions of Americans have limited or no access to healthcare, the defense budget far eclipses the budget for schools that are at this moment doing without personal protective equipment, and mass evictions and foreclosures are looming. It's clear that something has gone wrong when our nation's policies are so utterly out

of synch with our collective needs. With the wealth of knowledge(s) at our collective political disposal, how can we explain these failures?

Brennan explains the failures of democracy in the United States by claiming, again, that most of the polity is politically ignorant and, further, that political deliberation serves to exacerbate this ignorance. Brennan contends that, since a single vote can only decide an election in the extremely unlikely event of a tie, members of the polity choose to remain rationally ignorant. This is to say that members of the polity make the deliberate choice not to pursue education in what Brennan calls “social scientific knowledge,” which he argues includes at a minimum an introductory college class worth of knowledge in economics, civics, American government, US history, and constitutional law (Brennan 2016, 81).

Further, Brennan argues that political deliberation only exacerbates this ignorance. Citing Tali Mendelberg’s 2003 study, Brennan argues that political deliberation tends to be ineffectual at best, and at worst can result in poor outcomes for participants, and thus Brennan argues that we ought to eschew deliberative democracy as a worthwhile system of governance. Importantly, however, he does concede that, if deliberation could be sufficiently modified such that it was more effective – which on his view means that it results in more just policies for the polity in general – deliberative democracy could be a workable political system on his view (Brennan 2016, 73). This is a significant concession on Brennan’s part, and in a later chapter I aim to show that it is, in fact, possible to implement some concrete changes to the functioning of our democracy to more closely instantiate ideal deliberative practice in our democratic institutions.

Brennan cites a number of examples of ways in which political deliberation proceeds unfairly, and thus results in worse political outcomes. For instance, Brennan argues that “[h]igh-

status individuals talk more are perceived as more accurate and credible, and have more influence...” (Brennan 2016, 63), and further that these high-status individuals obtain their status because they are “often chosen in sexist or racially biased ways” (Brennan 2016, 65). Brennan further contends that in some instances individuals are bullied into changing their views and later regret it, while on the other hand “[d]eliberation tends to move people toward more extreme versions of their ideologies rather than toward more moderate versions” (Brennan 2016, 65). Brennan’s critique of deliberation tends to boil down to one major assertion: while in ideal deliberation of the kind that critical theorist Jürgen Habermas describes in his discourse ethic, which I will discuss in a moment, individuals are or ought to be receptive to reasons and will respond to what Habermas calls the “unforced force of the better argument”, Brennan contends that “[i]n actual deliberation, some groups get a greater voice than others” (Brennan 2016, 65).

Brennan’s point here is well-taken; actual instantiations of political discourse rarely if ever proceed ideally, and it is almost always the case that some individual, group, or interest wields greater influence, manipulates the discourse either through abuse of power or biased language, or is more likely to succeed for reasons related to social prejudice. Where I disagree with Brennan, however, is in his assertion that because deliberative democracy is flawed, it should be thrown out altogether. I am dissatisfied with Brennan’s analysis of the failures of political deliberation; although he explains *that* they are flawed, he doesn’t explore *why* deliberation fails to instantiate the ideal. He seems to be assuming that there is something inherent in human psychology that makes it difficult for us to deliberate fairly and effectively about political issues, but this explanation is too simplistic; Brennan is not considering the

systematic and institutional barriers that prevent us from communicating and creating political knowledge through deliberation.

In this chapter, I will offer one possible explanation for the failures of our current political system in the United States. This will not – and ultimately cannot! – be a comprehensive diagnosis, but rather I will offer a broad framework for thinking about how contemporary US politics fails, predictably and systematically, to address the needs and interests of much of its polity. In so doing, I will first need to address Brennan’s understanding of political participation; in reducing political participation to voting, Brennan is ignoring the plurality of modes of political engagement, as well as its many barriers. Drawing from Jürgen Habermas’ *Europe: The Faltering Project*, I will outline three broad modes or stages of political engagement: public opinion, dissemination of information in the public sphere, and legislation. These three stages of political engagement are, in essence, three stages of political knowledge-making as well; for Habermas, these stages are always already intersubjective and cooperative opportunities to examine an issue and come to a collective conclusion, in this case a conclusion about a political issue. This intersubjective negotiation requires us to share our reasons, perspectives, and knowledges. Discourse of this kind is important to the political process because, ideally, it ensures that the needs and interests of all those who will be affected by a political decision are represented in the process of negotiation and knowledge-making.

The problem, of course, is that political communication does not proceed ideally; too often, particular people and populations are left out of the process of political knowledge-making, and their needs and interests are not sufficiently addressed in political discourse and legislation. I will contend that we can, in large part, explain the failures of our democracy to

meet our varied needs and interests because by understanding ways in which economic inequality acts as a barrier to political participation and knowledge-making for the economically marginalized. In my next chapter, I will further argue that the undue influence of the wealthy – and the converse barriers to participation for the economically marginalized – in our political system constitutes a set of epistemic injustices, or injustices to members of the polity in their capacity as knowers.

Brennan on Political Participation

Brennan's book does not include a thorough-going account of what constitutes political participation. However, his entire project advocating for epistocracy centers on the problem with uninformed or under-educated members of the polity voting; he is concerned that members of the polity who lack what he calls "social scientific knowledge" may wield outsize influence on the outcomes of elections and thus on national policy. We can therefore understand Brennan to be primarily interested in political epistemology as it relates to voting and voting rights; he is asking questions about who has political knowledge, who doesn't, and who should therefore have the right to contribute their knowledge to the governance of the general polity by casting a vote. Brennan's main argument is that the failure of our government to address so many people's needs and interests can be chalked up to a lack of political knowledge on the part of much or most of the voting public.

There are two main problems with Brennan's assertion here. The first, as I covered in my previous chapter, is that formal social scientific knowledge is not the only kind of knowledge that is relevant to politics if, as we established, politics has to do with the coordination and administration of a polity in order to address that polity's needs and interests. Our political

system must also account for and respond to situated knowledges of the kind that social and feminist epistemologists describe in order to effectively address the needs and interests of the polity. The second problem, which I will discuss in this chapter, is that Brennan has erroneously truncated the expression of political knowledge to the act of voting and has thus misdiagnosed a problem with the United States government. Brennan thinks that our government sometimes (or perhaps even often) fails to meet the needs of the polity because it is *too* democratic; on his view, our present political system allows people to vote who ought not, and the resultant leaders and policies are derived from uneducated choices.

I think Brennan's diagnosis here is too simplistic because he is not considering the broader landscape of political participation beyond the act of casting a vote. We participate in politics in a myriad of ways; certainly, voting is one (and an important one, especially in what is ostensibly a democracy!), but other expressions and sites for the creation of political knowledge can be as far-ranging as donating money to a candidate or cause, lobbying, running for office, unionizing, engaging in community organizing, and protesting. By analyzing some additional modes of political participation and knowledge-making, I argue that we begin to see a pattern that emerges with regard to the kinds of people who are allowed to communicate their political knowledge and thus the kinds of political interests that are represented in government; specifically, I contend that economic inequality in the United States makes political participation – in a variety of forms beyond just casting a vote – less accessible to those who are relatively economically marginalized. I will argue against Brennan that we can attribute the very problem Brennan is identifying to a *lack* of democracy in our political institutions; our government is systematically failing to meet our needs and address our interests because our political

institutions are set up explicitly to silence those with less economic power and privilege relative to their wealthier counterparts. The needs and interests of the economically marginalized are therefore systematically disregarded in political contexts, leading to worse policy outcomes for economically marginal individuals and communities.

Political Knowledge-Making

In order to understand why the abundance of political knowledge at our collective disposal is not reflected in our policy outcomes, we first need to understand what opportunities exist for members of the polity to communicate and create political knowledge. I rely on Habermas for this task, who describes three stages of political discourse that represent opportunities to intersubjectively create and express political knowledge. These three stages are: everyday discourse, dissemination of information in the public sphere via the mass media, and legislative debate. I will spend some time expounding these three stages and then demonstrate that, at every stage, income inequality results in a depression of knowledge contribution on the part of those who are economically marginalized relative to their wealthier counterparts in the United States.

Habermas' staged theory of political discourse serves as a modification or amendment of his original "discourse ethic," which he expounds in various works, most notably *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1985). Communicative action, on Habermas' view, is essentially the process of forming or performing "comprehensible and acceptable speech acts for purposes of unconstrained interaction based on mutual understanding and/or agreement" (Ingram 2010, 84). This is to say that, in order to communicate at all, our speech must be understandable and accessible to others based on the norms and patterns already established in what Habermas calls

the “sociocultural lifeworld” in *ToCA*. Habermas’ account of discourse comes into play in his theory of communicative action when everyday communication breaks down; when we are unable to understand each other, or when we disagree about some norm or set of norms in our lifeworld, we need to enter into a more formalized mode of communication in order to resolve our communicative or normative difficulty, namely discourse.

Discourse, as a formalized version of communicative action, must conform as closely as possible, on Habermas’ view, to an ideal procedure. This procedure, which he calls the “ideal speech situation” (Habermas 1985b, 25), is intended to promote “speech free of external and internal constraints...” (Habermas 1985b, 42). He writes,

Participants in argumentation have to presuppose in general that the structure of their communication, by virtue of features that can be ascribed in purely formal terms, excludes all force – whether it arises from within the process of reaching understanding itself or influences it from the outside – except the force of the better argument (and thus that it also excludes, on their part, all motives except that of a cooperative search for the truth). (Habermas 1985b, 25)

Discourse is therefore “a form of interaction *subject to special rules*,” which include the mandate that the participants be “relieved of the pressure of action and experience, in a hypothetical attitude” (Habermas 1985b, 25). They must also use reasons, and only reasons, to defend their claims. In this way, “the structures of an ideal speech situation [are] immunized against repression and inequality” so that the structure of argumentation can determine the rightness of specific arguments outside of the constraints inherent in the sociocultural lifeworld (Habermas 1985b, 25).

Discourse, if it is allowed to continue for long enough and if it adheres to the requirement for a lack of constraints on the participants, can address “the truth of propositions and the rightness of moral norms” which constitute “universal validity claims” on Habermas’ view

(Habermas 1985b, 42). Again, the consensus must be “arrived at in discussion free from domination”; even in democratic governments, “majority decisions are held to be only a substitute for the uncompelled consensus that would finally result if the discussions did not always have to be broken off owing to the need for a decision” (Habermas 2014, 7). Discourse in its ideal form, therefore, is completely free from any compulsion, deals in universally valid claims arrived at by purely reasonable discussion, and continues until a consensus has been achieved.

Habermas’ discourse ethic has been subject to critique by a number of philosophers working in social and political theory on the basis that it is too ideal¹; although Habermas acknowledges that the ideal speech situation is a counterfactual (Habermas 1985b, 42), which is to say that it can never actually be instantiated, he nevertheless contends in the *Theory of Communicative Action* that we do and ought to assume that the ideal speech situation obtains when entering into a discursive exchange. His focus on consensus relies on the notion that participants in discourse are unforced, uncoerced, and unmotivated by social bias. Criticisms of Habermas’ discourse ethic center on the impossibility of these ideal circumstances for discourse; not only are participants situated in ways that promote or engender personal bias, but they also transact with institutions and social configurations that preclude ideal speech requirements like equal speaking time or reciprocity in argumentation.

Later Habermas provides a modified account of deliberation that is more focused on political decision-making and does not assume the ideal speech situation on the part of ordinary participants. This later account, which he lays out in his 2009 *Europe: The Faltering Project*, is

¹ Some notable examples of discourse ethics critiques and modifications come from philosophers including Elizabeth Anderson, José Medina, William Rehg, and Johanna Meehan.

still an ideal or idealized account of political discourse, but because it is a more applied account, it is useful as a diagnostic tool; we can examine ways in which actual political decision-making deviates in systematic ways from what we can treat as Habermas' prescriptive account of deliberative democracy in order to identify problems with or barriers to participation in our political system.

We can understand Habermas' account of political deliberation as a process of political knowledge-creation and -sharing; political agents assemble in various configurations to intersubjectively form opinions and conclusions about political issues based on the agents' experiences in the lifeworld. Habermas argues for a tripartite understanding of political deliberation wherein political deliberation is refined through each of the three stages that he identifies: everyday communication, mass communication in the public sphere, and institutionalized discourse. Habermas understands this deliberative procedure as performing a legitimating function for the political decisions our governments make; political knowledge and opinion is first and foremost derived from those who are governed (Habermas 2009, 160).

Political deliberation begins, on Habermas' view, with expressions of public opinion and interest; he calls this stage "the level of 'everyday communication in civil society' ...in 'arranged' or informal publics" (Habermas 2009, 159). On Habermas' view, this stage can occur either "face-to-face" or virtually, but it is not formal or formalized in that the interlocutors do not attempt to replicate an ideal speech situation. Indeed, Habermas considers protest to be a spontaneous expression of this kind of everyday political communication. This stage of political communication takes place in the context of existing communities, relationships, and social norms, or what Habermas calls the "sociocultural lifeworld".

Habermas does not argue this explicitly, but I offer a friendly addition to his understanding of everyday communication: I want to understand everyday discursive exchange a little more broadly than Habermas might in order to account for non-linguistic expressions of political opinion or preference and the ways in which those expressions nevertheless importantly comprise the broad state of political discourse. Essentially what I'm arguing here is that I, as a member of the polity, can "speak" my political opinion non-verbally, and that these actions nevertheless serve as a way for me to contribute my political knowledge and preferences to the general discourse. Voting might be a classic example of this kind of political participation because it conveys a general public political sentiment, and I would also include the act of contributing to a campaign or political cause under the umbrella of "expressions of public opinion and interest," since financial support is one method by which members of the polity can express their endorsement or disapproval of a candidate, policy, or issue. In aggregate, non-verbal expressions of political sentiment like votes and financial contributions serve as a metric for triangulating trends in public opinion; we can understand some of what is happening in the public discourse by analyzing, for example, what kinds of populations voted for which candidates, or which candidate received the most donations and from whom.

This "everyday" communication is then taken up in the second stage, which Habermas calls "the level of 'media-based mass communication'" (Habermas 2009, 159). At this level of political deliberation, the needs and interests of the broader public are refined or "filtered" into general "public opinion," which is then disseminated back to a "more or less passive public of readers, listeners, and viewers" (Habermas 2009, 159). Mass communication takes a number of forms; Habermas explicitly mentions newspapers, television news broadcasts, radio, film, and

television as potential avenues for this kind of political communication, which can take place in more or less explicit ways, but he also alludes to newer forms of mass communication like social media. Rarely at this stage does the public get to talk back. Rather, the polity expresses its approval or disapproval of a media outlet in their capacity as consumers; they can either consume or refuse to consume particular kinds of media. I might express my assent with a particular political agenda by consistently watching Fox or NBC News, for example, but I am unlikely to participate in their broadcasts or be invited to contribute my own views. Depending on the kind of media I consume, I am likely to be exposed to a particular political agenda or set of issues that I adopt as important to me or to my political identity.

Finally, the issues that the media designate as important for and to the public are debated in the third stage, “the level of ‘institutionalized discourse’...where the binding decisions concerning political programs and their implementation are prepared” (Habermas 2009, 159). This third stage most closely resembles Habermas’ ideal speech situation in that it generally takes place in a formalized setting like a Parliament or Congress (Habermas 2009, 160). In these kinds of settings, officials elected to represent the interests of the polity are expected to present and respond to reasons during their collective deliberation. These governing bodies reach decisions on issues raised by the public and distilled by the media, which in turn become laws or regulations that bind the polity as a whole.

Habermas holds that if political discourse functions in this (still ideal) way, it performs a legitimating function for government and its legislative decisions. Because the public’s views are meaningfully represented through all three stages of political discourse, he argues, even if the government creates legislation that doesn’t please every citizen, that legislative decision

nevertheless accounts for the needs and interests of the polity as a whole, and thus the polity as a whole is bound by that decision and by the authority of the legislating body. Importantly, as I will discuss in chapter 4, if some members of or groups in the polity at large are systematically left out of political discourse, Habermas will contend that the governing body is faced with a legitimation problem.

I want to briefly draw attention to some important features of Habermas' account here that I think Habermas himself does not emphasize well enough. First, although this tripartite account of political communication is much more applicable to actual political communication than Habermas' discourse ethic, it is nevertheless an ideal or idealized version of how political communication *should* go. The polity, the media, and the government all play prescribed roles at each stage, and this account assumes that, should each entity fulfill its role, the government can and will respond appropriately to the needs and interests of the polity. We can, however, point to ways in which actual political communication deviates greatly from Habermas' prescriptive model. Instead of treating these deviations as defeaters of Habermas' account,² I plan to use Habermas' model as a diagnostic tool; if this is how political communication *should* proceed, in

² There certainly are good reasons to treat the ideal character of Habermas' account as a problem for his view. Writing on Habermas has given me occasion to think more deeply about the role of ideal theory in political philosophy, and I have tentatively come to regard ideal theory as important mostly in a diagnostic capacity. In politics and political philosophy, we have a tendency to rely on idealistic rhetoric in order to make a political point or argument, but we rarely ask questions about the kinds of ideals we espouse or indeed whether they are worth pursuing at all. There does, however, seem to be some utility in identifying the ideals that we, as a polity, *claim* to espouse and showing concrete ways in which we fail to instantiate those ideals; this strategy can help us to identify systemic problems in our political life that otherwise may have remained masked by idealistic rhetoric. Habermas' account, although he may not have intended it to be so, is helpful in this critical task; this tripartite model of political communication is implicit in our discursive interactions. We assume that our everyday political communication is relatively unhampered, that the media (or at least some media) are trustworthy in their representations of our political concerns, and that our elected officials aim to represent the needs and interests of the people. By foregrounding these implicit assumptions using Habermas' tripartite account of political discourse, we can better understand the ways in which political communication – predictably and systematically – fails to meet our collective needs.

what ways has our own political system in the United States failed to live up to the ideal and how can we better approximate the ideal such that our political system is more successfully representing and responding to the needs of the polity?

Second, Habermas refers to this process of political deliberation as a “cycle of political communication” that “circulates” through these three stages. Although he doesn’t return to this point deliberately enough, in my opinion the cyclical character of political decision-making is central to his account; there is some overlap or exchange between all three of Habermas’ stages of political communication, and they don’t always proceed linearly. This is even more true in the decade and change since Habermas wrote *Europe: The Faltering Project*; as I write this chapter, protests against corrupt policies for policing and state violence against Black Americans are going on all over the country, which signal that policies agreed-upon in the third stage of political decision-making on Habermas’ model are now fodder for first-stage political communication. Further, our increasing dependence on social media blurs the line between stages one and two of Habermas’ model; opportunities for the creation of mass communication in what Habermas calls “the public sphere” are now in some ways more diffuse than ever, even as the entities that provide opportunities for social media communication are consolidating. Because these stages of political deliberation are sometimes fungible or shifting, it can be difficult to gauge exactly who can participate in political decision-making or knowledge-sharing and just how much. My aim in this chapter is to argue that, at *all three stages* of Habermas’ model of political communication, the contributions of the economically marginalized are systematically stifled by powerful economic interests, even where seemingly the dissemination of political knowledge is more accessible than ever before.

Economic Inequality in Political Participation and Knowledge-Making

Again, Habermas' account of political discourse and decision-making is an ideal one; each stage of political discourse works toward a particular end and informs the stage that comes after it such that, eventually, the concerns of the masses are taken up by the legislating body. Research in political science, however, is repeatedly demonstrating that actual political communication in the United States rarely – if ever – proceeds in the way Habermas prescribes. One major factor in disrupting ideal political discourse is economic inequality in industrialized nations like the United States.

Political scientist Frederick Solt provides an overview of the effects of economic inequality on political participation. According to Solt in 2008, “economic inequality has been rising in nearly all of the advanced industrial democracies over the past two decades,” (Solt 2008, 48) and this trend has continued through the present day. Solt wants to understand how these rising levels of economic inequality interact with our political system and provides an overview of three possible theories already discussed in political scientific literature: the conflict theory, the resource theory, and the relative power theory. Ultimately, Solt concludes that the evidence gleaned from multi-national, long-term studies of democratic engagement suggests that the relative power theory best describes the effects of economic inequality on political participation. I will summarize these theories below.

Proponents of the conflict theory³ anticipate that economic inequality “should be expected to increase people’s engagement in politics” (Solt 2008, 49). Widening gaps between the haves and the have-nots should, based on this theory, lead to class conflict that manifests in

³ Meltzer and Richard 1981, Oliver 2001, Brady 2004

political conflict; Solt writes that, on this view, “higher levels of inequality cause divergences in political preferences that fuel debates about the appropriate course of policy; these debates then cause higher rates of political mobilization” (Solt 2008, 49). Proponents of this theory think that political conflict will be most evident with regard to “redistributive policies” that would serve to mitigate economic inequality (Solt 2008, 49); most wealthy members of the polity would likely oppose such policies, on this view, while the economically marginalized would be motivated to actively promote those kinds of policies. The result should therefore be what Solt calls a “conflictive politics” (Solt 2008, 49) where both the wealthy and the economically marginalized are actively engaged in politics from opposing, economically motivated, stances.

Proponents of the resource theory⁴ contend that the effect of economic inequality on political participation varies depending on one’s economic situation, specifically income level; Solt writes that, on this view, “[g]reater inequality should...be expected to result in less political engagement among the relatively poor, but more political engagement among the better off” (Solt 2008, 50). This is because, according to the resource theory, “to be engaged in politics requires resources,” including time and money to take part in electoral politics by donating to or campaigning for a candidate (Solt 2008, 50). The resource theory maintains that the economically marginalized will likely choose not to make these kind of time and financial commitments, whereas the wealthy will do so at greater rates as economic inequality rises.

Based on Solt’s multi-national study, however, it seems that the data support neither the resource nor the conflict theory of democratic participation; instead, the data support a third theory, called the “relative power theory” (Solt 2008, 48). Solt’s data is drawn from an analysis

⁴ Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder 2003

of an array of wealthy democracies and their levels of income inequality, drawn from the LIS Gini index of household income inequality. Solt's data includes data from the United States, which displays the highest rate of economic inequality of any democratic nation in the study. Solt's data analyzes these democracies based on three dependent variables: political interest, political discussion, and electoral participation.

Across all three variables, Solt finds that the data supports the relative power theory, which argues that "economic inequality powerfully depresses political interest, discussion of politics, and participation in elections among all but the most affluent and that this negative effect increases with declining relative income" (Solt 2008, 48). This is to say that, according to the relative power theory and confirmed by Solt's data, economic inequality leads to decreased political participation for *everyone*, although political participation decreases for the economically marginalized far more than for the most affluent. Therefore, although political participation in general goes down as inequality rises, the extent to which you are likely to participate in politics is determined by your wealth *relative to* someone else's, with the most economically marginalized being least likely to participate; Solt writes that, as inequality increases, political participation in all three categories is "consistently negative but shrinks as income increases. This effect remains statistically significant at incomes in the four poorest quintiles of households (Solt, 57). This is a particularly important insight; it is not only my income that determines my ability to participate in politics, but rather my income as it is situated in a broader economic context, and specifically an unequal economic context. Solt writes, "[o]ne's political engagement...is shaped not only by how much money one has, but also by how much money everyone else has" (Solt 2008, 58).

The consequence of this unequal depression of political participation is that “where income and wealth are more concentrated, power will also be more concentrated and...the less affluent will therefore be more likely to find that the issues debated are not those that interest them...” (Solt 2008, 48-49). Policy issues of interest to the economically marginalized, by contrast, are “unlikely even to be debated within the political process” because economically marginalized members of the polity may not even be able to raise them in the public sphere. Solt very neatly summarizes the findings of his study thus: “because it increases the relative power of richer citizens, economic inequality undermines political equality” (Solt 2008, 57).

We see from Solt’s analysis that economic inequality creates opportunities for unequal participation in politics by the wealthy while simultaneously dampening political participation by the economically marginalized. What remains unclear from Solt’s analysis is the reason for this participatory discrepancy; since political participation in an ostensibly democratic country like the United States is in principle accessible to everyone, why does economic inequality have this destabilizing effect?

A 2016 article by Daniel Laurison seeks to understand why economic inequality tends to depress political participation especially for the economically marginalized in the United States. Laurison offers three possible approaches to studying political participation: an individualist approach, an institutionalist approach, and what he calls a “relational” approach. Laurison advocates for this third view, but I contend that Laurison needs to meaningfully consider both the relational *and* institutionalist approaches in order to gain a fuller picture of why or how economic inequality excludes the economically marginalized from processes of political knowledge-making.

In developing his account, Laurison begins by defining political engagement as including “voting in elections, helping a political campaign, donating money to a candidate or cause, contacting officials, petitioning, protesting, and working with other people on issues” (Laurison 2016, 685, quoting Uhlener 2001), as well as one’s relationships with and to political institutions. Overwhelmingly, according to Laurison, people in the highest quintile for wealth⁵ tend to engage in political participation at a much higher rate than people in the lowest two quintiles (Laurison 2016, 685). Laurison writes, for example, that, according to his analysis of the General Social Survey data 2015, “[i]n every national-level US election since at least 1960, people who earn more have reported voting more. In 2012, people in the top quintile of the income distribution...reported voting at a rate 1.4 times higher than those in the bottom 40% of household incomes...” (Laurison 2016, 685). He summarizes his findings thus: “the same kinds of patterns appear if we look at...any measure or combination of measures of class position and...political engagement...” (Laurison 2016, 685). In short, as Solt established, economic inequality really does lead to depressed rates of political participation among the economically marginalized.

Again, Laurison provides three theories that may explain this difference in political participation. The individualist approach, which is the dominant theory for understanding political participation among political scientists, “holds that income, education, and occupation, ... explain individual differences in likelihood of voting” (Laurison 2016, 686). Advocates of this position⁶ sometimes also refer to this theory as the “Civic Voluntarism Model” and argue

⁵ Laurison explains why he uses wealth rather than income in his analysis; wealth, unlike income, can include class resources such as home ownership, which more accurately reflects economic status. See page 685 of Laurison’s article for a more detailed justification for his use of wealth over income.

that political participation requires some specific skills that are learned primarily through formalized education or in specific kinds of careers, and thus people without those skills tend not to participate as much in politics.

The individualist or civic voluntarism model supports Brennan's rational choice account of political knowledge but undercuts his worry about political participation. Brennan argues that some people don't invest in acquiring political knowledge, and therefore that their votes (and perhaps other forms of political participation) may do irreparable damage in our collective political life. The individualist model takes Brennan's reasoning one step further and theorizes that individuals without advanced political education will likely rationally choose not to participate in politics more generally, which would mean that the failures of our democracy cannot be attributed to the outsize influence of the un- or under-educated. Further allaying Brennan's worries here is the fact that, according to several studies⁷, relative education level correlates strongly with likelihood to vote. This is to say that, based on the available data on US voting patterns, the less educated are already less likely to vote, rendering Brennan's epistocratic proposal redundant. Laurison summarizes the findings of these studies to argue that "it is unlikely that it is the substantive content of education that facilitates voting," but rather the fact that wealthier people are better able to afford an education (Laurison 2016, 687). Thus education level acts as a "proxy for class" in analyses of voting patterns (Laurison 2016, 685). In short, even if the individualist model were to adequately explain our political habits, Brennan needn't

⁶ Verba et al. 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980.

⁷ Nie et al. 1996; Wattenburg 2002; Tenn 2005

worry; the people he wishes to keep from the polls would choose not to participate in politics anyway.

Laurison finds the individualist model for explaining inequalities in political participation to be, appropriately, too individualistic; on Laurison's view, this model focuses too much on the "role of individual attributes rather than features of social structure more broadly or characteristics of the political field in the United States specifically" (Laurison 2016, 687). This is to say that the individualist or civic voluntarism model assumes too much rational choice on the part of individual members of the polity and fails to account for the ways in which economic structures can serve to enable, mediate, or depress political participation depending on one's socioeconomic positioning. Laurison therefore offers an alternative account for understanding political participation in the United States, which he calls the "institutional" approach (Laurison 2016, 687).

Those who endorse the institutional approach "argue that there is nothing inherent in having less income or education that leads to lower political participation (noting that this correlation does not exist in other countries and has only been the case in the United States for the last century or so)" (Laurison 2016, 687). In short, the institutional approach wants to ask a causal question about why having less wealth in the United States depresses one's political participation. Proponents of the institutional approach "cite the interests of elites and the structure of the party system as causes of class-stratified participation and engagement" (Laurison 2016, 687). Laurison provides some examples of ways in which the structure of US politics itself serves to dissuade or prevent economically marginalized members of the polity from participating, including unequal party mobilization in lower-income areas, long lines at

polling places, requiring state-issued IDs to vote, and felon disenfranchisement laws (Laurison 2016, 688). Laurison notes that felon disenfranchisement laws are particularly politically significant, as they tend to disproportionately disenfranchise already precarious communities of color and especially Black communities (Laurison 2016, 688).

Laurison is skeptical, however, that the institutional approach tells a complete causal story about why the economically marginalized tend to participate less in politics because it seems that certain reforms intended to mitigate the institutional barriers listed above haven't been successful. He cites, for example, that reforms like voting by mail or early voting were intended to help economically marginalized voters by making voting more widely accessible, but instead these kinds of measures seem to actually increase political inequality; Laurison writes that "the better-off who are more likely to vote in the first place vote *even more* when it is more convenient or easier but the worse-off do not change their behavior very much" (Laurison 2016, 688, emphasis his). Laurison reasons that if the economically marginalized do not change their political behavior much in light of reforms intended to help them, then there must be some factors outside of our political institutions that depress political participation for those populations (Laurison 2016, 688). Laurison therefore ultimately rejects the institutional explanation for unequal political participation.

While, in my opinion, Laurison is right that institutional barriers to political participation do not represent a *complete* explanation for inequality in political participation, I do think he has rejected the institutional explanation prematurely for a couple of reasons: first, I think that analyses concluding that institutional barriers can't explain, at least in part, depressed political participation on the part of the economically marginalized haven't considered the harmful effects

that these institutional barriers might have *in aggregate* on the ability of precarious individuals and populations to participate in politics. Let's look at Laurison's own examples: he argues that requiring a state-issued ID and having to wait in a long line to vote cannot be barriers to political participation because there are measures in place to mitigate these difficulties, such as the motor-voter law, early voting, and voting by mail. Again, Laurison argues that, because the motor-voter law near-automatically registers the recipient of a driver's license to vote, voter registration should pose little to no problem for the financially worse-off.

However, Laurison is not considering ways in which getting a state-issued ID can itself be an obstacle for the economically precarious; people must often wait in long lines at the DMV, which can be impossible for someone so economically precarious that they are unable to take a day off from a job or afford childcare for the day. Further, depending on the state, those seeking a state ID may have to present multiple proofs of address, which can be difficult for those who don't own their home, those who have to change rentals often, or those who are homeless. Lack of access to stable housing is particularly important as I write this chapter during a global pandemic; because of financial difficulties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, tens of thousands of Americans face eviction from their rental housing, leaving them with no permanent address to list on government documents. There is also a fee associated with obtaining a state ID, which seems trifling for many, but which can be burdensome for those living paycheck to paycheck or living with significant debt. If one cannot easily obtain a state-issued ID, therefore, it will compound the difficulties posed for economically precarious individuals and groups when it comes to political participation.

Laurison's account here also assumes that all the institutions on which voting depends function properly to facilitate maximum electoral engagement. For example, he again argues that the ability to mail in ballots means that voting should be universally accessible. This assertion depends on the correct and consistent functioning of the United States Postal Service, which at the very moment that I am writing this sentence is in danger of running entirely out of funding and ceasing operations. Political barriers also often contribute to or compound existing economic barriers to voting; following the 2020 election, many Republican-led states are passing laws to limit mail-in voting and curb the number of polling places in their state. We see, then, that the ability to participate in an election can be out of reach for the economically marginalized when their political leadership fails to support the institutions necessary for free and fair elections.

Second, although Laurison has himself defined political participation to include activities and modes of engagement other than voting, his rejection of the institutional approach does not consider many of those other activities, including donating to a campaign/candidate/issue, protesting, and working with one's community to address a problem. Although he does not explicitly mention these, I would also add that he is overlooking other modes of political participation as well, including but not limited to running for office and lobbying. Even if it is the case that institutional barriers can't explain unequal participation in voting (a conclusion of which I am deeply skeptical), they certainly can explain unequal participation in these other political activities. To take just one very basic example, if I am living paycheck to paycheck, it will be extraordinarily difficult for me to budget for donating to a political campaign or candidate.

The institutional barriers to political participation for the economically marginalized are thrown into even clearer relief if we examine examples of such barriers that exist in each of Habermas' three stages of political discourse. Beginning with Habermas' first stage of political discourse, we can already see that modes of political participation that should in principle be accessible to everyone are in practice limited to those with the financial means to take advantage of them. I'll focus on three major modes of what Habermas would call "everyday" practices of political communication and knowledge-making: protesting or activism, political donations, and voting.

Everyday Communication

Protest

In an acknowledgment that political discourse often can proceed unjustly or in a way that excludes certain people or groups, Habermas argues that civil disobedience, although I extend this point to protest more generally⁸, performs a legitimating function in political discourse.⁹ This is to say that when a person or group is not allowed the opportunity to contribute their needs and interests to the discussion of a political issue, protesting is a mode by which they can ensure their interests make it into the public view. Protesting, then, is on Habermas' view a kind of

⁸ On Habermas' view, civil disobedience is only one kind of protest; following Rawls, he characterizes civil disobedience as a non-violent law-breaking. The implication of Habermas' characterization here is that some other forms of protest, and notably violent or destructive ones, may not be legitimate expressions of political knowledge and opinion. I am not, however, inclined to agree with this point.

Questions about the morality and legitimacy of protest practices like looting and destruction of private property have been in the news a great deal as I write this chapter in 2020; Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and unjust policing practices have, at least in some cases, resulted in destruction of businesses and looting of major retail outlets (although it is also worth noting that most BLM protests are peaceful and some property damage is the result of right-wing counter-protesters who wish to sow destruction in an effort to delegitimize the BLM movement). These acts are recognitions of the partially economic character of racial oppression and violence, and thus we cannot exclude them from the realm of legitimate protest.

⁹ For more on Habermas' account here, see "Civil Disobedience: Litmus Test for the Democratic Constitutional State" (1985).

safeguard for the legitimacy of a governing body; protest can put an issue back on the table that has been systematically ignored or pushed out of the public eye, thereby forcing a governing body to reckon with that issue.

Habermas' supposed nod to the non-ideal character of political discourse here does not, however, address a practical reality, which is that protesting is not a viable option for many, and especially for those who are economically marginalized. Protests pose some of the same challenges for economically marginalized people and communities that Laurison suggests voting does, most notably that it requires participants to sacrifice a day's or more wages to participate. For those who are economically precarious, this sacrifice can be too steep. Non-unionized participants can also face additional repercussions; participating in a protest or action may put one at risk of losing their work altogether.

We see, though, that there are additional economic risks associated with protest that fall systematically on the economically marginalized; the cash bail system disproportionately disadvantages people who are already economically precarious. According to a recent NPR article (Domonoske 2020), there are typically about half a million people in jail awaiting trial. Most of these are economically precarious individuals who are unable to post bail, while wealthier individuals are able to leave jail to await trial. In addition to spending weeks or even months in jail prior to trial, individuals that can't make bail are more likely to lose their jobs because they haven't been showing up, resulting in further – and potentially long-lasting – financial repercussions.

Donations

It is a matter of common sense that donating to a campaign or political cause might be out of reach for people experiencing financial hardship. An examination of trends in federal campaign contributions, however, reveals just how out of reach it is for even median income members of the American polity to make a meaningful contribution to a campaign; according to the Center for Responsive Politics (“Donor Demographics”), from 2019 to summer 2020, just 0.81% of the population of the US contributed \$200 or more to a federal candidate, political action committee (PAC), political party, or political group. This percentage amounts to about 2.5 million donors whose contributions account for over 73% of all 2019-2020 political donations. Contributions under \$200 account for just over a quarter of political donations. Taking a closer look at the breakdown of donations over \$200, we see that 2.3 million donors gave between \$200-2,699 for a raw dollar amount of about \$1.5 billion in political contributions. The number of donors who gave over \$100,000 is just 2,381, but they donated nearly as much: a little over \$1.2 billion. Combined with the nearly 40,000 donors who gave between \$10,000 and \$100,000 during the 2020 cycle for a raw dollar amount of just over \$2 billion, the nearly 43,000 donors spending contributing more than \$10,000 outspent the more than two million donors giving between \$200 and \$2,699 two to one.

In their 2018 book *Billionaires and Stealth Politics*, Benjamin Page, Jason Seawright, and Matthew J. Lacombe report similar donations patterns among the wealthy. In their examination of the political actions of the 100 wealthiest billionaires in the United States over the last decade, they found that 36% held a campaign fundraiser or bundled donations to a candidate or cause (Page et al. 2018, 42). Further, 92% of the wealthiest billionaires contributed

to a political campaign or cause, with annual donations averaging about \$500,000. The authors further emphasize that these numbers reflect only *reportable* donations and don't include dark money.¹⁰ Consistent with the findings from the Center for Responsive Politics, Page et al. found that the majority of these donations – about 64% – went to conservative candidates or organizations (Page et al. 2018, 43).

Why is this donation differential important? As I will discuss later in this chapter, candidates with more money tend to win elections, and big donations comprise a much larger percentage of campaign funding than small donations do. For 2010 Congressional candidates, for example, 48% of campaign funds came from large donations and 23% from PACs, whereas just 13% of funds came from donations under \$200. This means that larger donors, and especially those donating \$10,000 or more, have a disproportionate influence on the outcome of federal elections. The wealthiest billionaires, donating on average half a million reportable dollars annually, have even greater influence in deciding which candidates will run successful campaigns.

This issue is thrown into even greater relief when we consider that campaign donations are not equally distributed among political parties; while political donors between 2019-2020 that gave less than \$10,000 tended to favor Democratic candidates and PACs, those giving \$10,000+ tended to favor Republican candidates and PACs. We see then that economic inequality doesn't just correspond to unequal amount of political influence; economic inequality takes on a partisan character, meaning that small donors are less likely to be able to elect

¹⁰ Although space limitations don't allow me to discuss dark money at length here, Jane Mayer's *Dark Money* (2016) provides an accessible and thorough introduction to the role of unreported contributions in politics. She has written further on the subject recently, notably an article in the *New Yorker* revealing the role of dark money in the conservative attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. See Mayer 2021.

candidates that represent their interests in government. And of course, we cannot fail to mention that since the Citizens United v. FEC Supreme Court ruling, corporations are also legally entitled to make independent donations to political campaigns and causes, further diminishing the influence of smaller donors in federal elections. Online retail giant Amazon, for example, spent \$1.5 million in Seattle local elections in 2019.

Voting

I have already discussed some of the ways in which access to the vote is limited by socioeconomic status in the United States, but thus far I have left out some of the ways in which the United States government has restricted access to voting for economically marginal communities. The state of Kentucky, for example, eliminated over 3,300 polling places just days prior to their 2020 senate primary, leaving just 200 for the entire state. In Jefferson County, there remained just one single polling place, intended to serve over 610,000 voters. On MSNBC, former House minority leader Stacey Abrams remarked that long voting lines resulting from actions like these amount to a “poll tax” because would-be voters have to sacrifice an entire day’s pay in order to exercise their right to vote.

Laurison would likely contend that long lines do not constitute a barrier to voting because voting by mail is a viable alternative. Again, however, I contend that, *in aggregate*, institutional factors can and do depress political participation for the economically marginal; voting by mail is not as universally accessible as Laurison leads us to believe. Vote-by-mail laws vary from state to state; in Alabama, for instance, would-be voters must provide an excuse for requesting a mail-in ballot such as illness or injury (although this excuse is accessible to all during the COVID-19 pandemic) (RockTheVote.org). Almost all states require mail-in ballot requests to be made via

an online form, which disproportionately excludes individuals living in low-income and rural areas where internet connections and computers may still be inaccessible. Mail-in ballots also boast a higher rejection rate than in-person ballots, often because voters aren't aware of state-specific particularities in mail-in voting laws; Pennsylvania requires mail-in ballots to be enclosed in two envelopes, while North Carolina requires a witness to sign the ballot (Love et al. 2020 and Buchanan & Parlapiano 2020).

Again, Laurison is also taking for granted that the institution of mail in the United States, namely the United States Postal Service, can and does function properly. Laurison is wrong about that; in summer 2020, the United States Postal Service was dangerously close to ceasing operations due to lack of funding, which means that the postal service can no longer easily accommodate a high volume of mail-in ballots. It is worth noting, too, that USPS Board of Governors chairman Robert Duncan also heads two GOP super PACs aimed at retaining a Republican Senate majority and reelecting Donald Trump, while Louis DeJoy, President Trump's newly appointed postmaster general, is a long-time Republican fundraiser and holds stock in USPS competitors like UPS. DeJoy's reorganization of the USPS in the summer of 2020 resulted in widespread delays in mail delivery and pick-up, which has disastrous implications for the 2020 election taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic; by September 24, 2020, 65.5 million registered voters requested mail-in ballots for the November 2020 election (Gamio et al. 2020). Already, mail delays are resulting in a surge in the number of ballots that are not counted, as in one New Jersey 2020 primary which was decided by just 195 votes with over 1,100 absentee ballots left uncounted. These delays are not entirely mitigated by the propagation of ballot drop-off locations since many states do not provide them. Since, historically, lower voter

turnout corresponds with Republican election victories, the floundering of the postal service and the government's refusal to fund it represents a coordinated partisan strategy for voter suppression, especially for lower-income and economically marginal communities.

This back-door disenfranchisement does not even include the explicitly legal methods for preventing economically marginal communities from voting; again, concerning the problem of voting by mail, a federal appeals court ruled that the state of Texas could legally restrict mail-in voting to residents over the age of 65 following a suit by the Democratic party according to a September 11, 2020 article in *The New York Times*. Of course, the legal restriction of mail-in ballots is not the only formal mode of disenfranchising economically marginalized voters; felon disenfranchisement laws, for example, tend to affect economically marginalized individuals at a higher rate because poverty is correlated with higher rates of incarceration and recidivism. The economic bias associated with felon disenfranchisement legislation is particularly evident in a recent case in Florida, in which a majority Republican state legislature passed a law conditioning felons' right to vote on the payment of all fines, fees, and restitutions associated with their case. Most felons would be unable to pay these fees and can be prosecuted for voting if they do not. The majority conservative Supreme Court upheld this decision in July 2020.

Felon disenfranchisement, in turn, provides the opportunity for prison gerrymandering, where districts with high proportions of incarcerated felons may count those felons in their census but those felons have no say in the distribution of federal funds allocated based on the census count.

We can see from this system of – both official and unofficial – coordinated disenfranchisement that Laurison is underestimating the ways in which institutional factors can

depress political participation, especially for economically marginalized individuals and communities. Explicit disenfranchisement laws work alongside either partisan or merely ineffectual institutions to ensure that large swaths of the population of the United States do not have access to voting.

Mass Communication

In examining the ways in which economic inequality results in political inequality at the level of what Habermas calls “everyday” political discourse, I have thus far focused more on ways in which economically marginalized individuals and groups are excluded from supposedly universally accessible opportunities to contribute political knowledge and opinion. In discussing the public sphere, I will concentrate instead on ways in which economically privileged individuals and groups have greater political influence and more opportunities to express their political knowledge. This is especially true in Habermas’ second stage of political discourse, the stage of mass communication, because individuals with outsize wealth wield correspondingly outsize influence in what Habermas calls the “public sphere,” which he defines simply as “the sphere of private people come together as a public” (Habermas 1989, 27). This is the arena in which matters of interest and opinion are open for debate and dissemination to the larger polity (Habermas 1989, 27). Habermas contends that the public sphere is subject to certain kinds of influence or “power,” and he develops an account of four of these: political power, social power, economic power, and media power (Habermas 2009, 167-168). I will discuss the latter three of these categories of power further in this section.

The public sphere plays an important political role insofar as it is the site in which the interests and opinions of individual members of the polity are distilled into distinguishable trends

in public opinion – “the common voice” (Habermas 1989, 64). Indeed, Robert McChesney identifies a system of political communication and information dissemination to be one of the three principal criteria for participatory government (McChesney 1997, 5). Mass media outlets like newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, and even social media disseminate the distilled “common voice,” thereby making information about the needs and interests of the polity as a whole public for that polity. In this sense, media outlets exercise what Habermas calls “media power”; he argues that people working in “politically relevant sections of the media system,” including “reporters, columnists, publishers, directors, and producers...cannot fail to exercise power inasmuch as they select and process politically relevant material and thus influence the formation of public opinions” (Habermas 2009, 168). Habermas argues that even if a media outlet can remain politically neutral, the very act of selecting what is “newsworthy” or appropriate for dissemination to the larger public guides and shapes political discourse. In an effort to sell this information, media outlets also exercise power through stylizing and formatting the information they present in the public sphere (Habermas 2009, 169).

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989)¹¹, Habermas argues that the public sphere as we understand it today came about as a result of the bourgeois commodification of information, and specifically news, which is to say that economic interest has always dictated the information available in the public sphere (Habermas 1989, 15-17). McChesney expands Habermas’ point here in historicizing the development of the news media as we understand it today; he contends that “professional journalism” and the rise of so-called “objective” reporting was the result of pressure from corporate interests for newspapers in which

¹¹ Habermas published the original German text in 1962; 1989 refers to the English translation by Thomas Burger.

their advertisements appeared to sell more copies; it was easier to sell newspapers that weren't overtly politicized (McChesney 1997, 12-15). McChesney is careful to note, however, that this "objective" journalism is not necessarily unbiased; economic interests are often implicit in the kinds of stories that appear in the news media and in the sorts of events that are considered "newsworthy" or marketable (McChesney 1997, 14).

On Habermas' view, those individuals who inspire authority or trust within the public sphere gain a level of "social power," which "rests on status within a stratified society and is generally attached to positions within functional systems" (Habermas 2009, 168). Social power is a fairly broad category because our society is stratified in so many ways; a popular news anchor might enjoy some level of social power, as would a celebrity singer, a member of Congress, and perhaps even a viral video star. Those who hold social power might have more influence over political discourse in the public sphere and thus more opportunities to share their political knowledge. Celebrities, for example, routinely endorse and even campaign publicly for political candidates in hopes that their knowledge and opinions will influence fans in their voting choices; *Seinfeld* and *Veep* star Julia Louis-Dreyfus campaigned aggressively for Joseph Biden during the 2020 presidential election cycle, for instance.

My argument is that economic inequality distorts the information available in the public sphere such that mass communication disproportionately reflects the knowledge and opinions of the ultra-wealthy. This is to say that the ultra-wealthy hold a great deal, and perhaps too much, social power. Habermas contends that "economic power" is a "special form of social power – the dominant form in capitalist societies" (Habermas 2009, 168). What he argues here is that in capitalist societies, a prevalent and perhaps even the dominant form of social stratification is

economic, and thus economically privileged subjects attain tremendous political influence, both through social capital and by explicitly economic means. Interestingly, according to Page et al. 2018¹², the wealthiest individuals rarely speak publicly about political issues, but rather exercise influence over public political discourse in less overt ways, namely through large donations and ownership and control of mass media outlets. This is a problem on Habermas' view because "the conversion of social power into influence over political decision-making must occur in a transparent manner" (Habermas 2009, 168), but as Page et al. reveal, the ultra-wealthy tend to exercise political influence in "stealthier" ways.

Page et al. contend that, since the wealthiest individuals tend to have fiscal policy opinions that are far right of the majority of Americans and relatively centrist social policy opinions, they tend to avoid speaking publicly about their policy preferences in order to avoid public backlash, despite the fact that their opinions would be desirable fodder for most journalists. Indeed, just one quarter of the United States' wealthiest billionaires have made public statements about fiscal policy in the last ten years, and most of those statements were either vague or were given by a wealthy individual in a position of political power like former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg (Page et al. 2018, 38). Page et al.'s point is that billionaires do not control public discourse by participating openly in that discourse. Rather, they rely on what Page et al. call "stealth politics," which entails influencing policy and public opinion from behind the scenes. Although the wealthiest Americans avoid speaking openly about their policy preferences, we have already discussed ways in which they influence public policy by making substantial annual donations to mostly conservative candidates and causes. I will now discuss

¹² *Billionaires and Stealth Politics*

some examples of ways in which the ultra-wealthy can contribute to public political discourse through the ownership and control of publicly available information.

There are numerous ways that the ultra-wealthy can contribute to or control public political knowledge. The first, and perhaps the rarest, is by direct contributions via mass media outlets. Because the ultra-wealthy are of great public interest, their public statements are thoroughly covered and widely circulated. In summer 2020, for example, Elon Musk (net worth approx. \$79 billion as of September 2020) went viral on Twitter when he decried the existence of labor unions. In late 2019, billionaires like Bill Gates (net worth approx. \$116 billion as of September 2020) and Warren Buffet (net worth approx. \$83 billion as of September 2020) were featured in Washington Post opinion pieces on legislation that would implement a more progressive tax structure by increasing rates for the ultra-wealthy, nicknamed the “wealth tax” (see the Washington Post on November 9 & November 12, 2019 for just some examples of such pieces). Even Tom Cotton, a Republican senator from Arkansas who is wealthy by median US standards, was featured in a New York Times op-ed despite espousing a position so classist and racist that the publication later retracted it.¹³ As Page et al. point out, however, most economically privileged Americans, especially multi-billionaires, tend to remain purposefully silent on policy issues because their fiscally conservative views are likely to draw scrutiny from the larger public.

Instead, the ultra-wealthy may also influence public opinion by controlling the information that is circulated to the broader public via mass media. One example that has just recently come to light is that of the Coca-Cola corporation, which paid scientists to obfuscate the

¹³ The Times chose to keep the piece up on their website, albeit with a substantial disclaimer at the beginning.

extent to which soda and other sugared beverages contributed to the obesity epidemic between 2013 and 2015. Another even more prominent example comes courtesy of the Amazon empire, which during the COVID-19 pandemic circulated a scripted segment to no fewer than 11 news stations touting Amazon's contributions to public health. Amazon had been under fire during the pandemic for its failure to provide protective equipment, sick leave, and adequate testing kits to its employees. The segment appeared to portray Amazon employees as safe, healthy, and heroic workers on the front lines of the pandemic and was intended to alter public perception of the multi-billion dollar corporation (Gurley et al. 2020).

Media giants Mark Zuckerberg (net worth approx. \$100 billion as of September 2020) of Facebook and Sundar Pichai (net worth estimated between \$600 million and \$1.2 billion as of July 2020) of Google have also recently come under scrutiny for their companies' role in mass dissemination of information. Congress brought the two CEOs, along with Apple's Tim Cook and Amazon's Jeff Bezos, to Washington in July 2020 to question them in part about Facebook's role in spreading false political and public health information and Google's tendency to highlight big advertisers in supposedly value-neutral searches (Bond et al. 2020).

Not even higher education is immune from the outsize influence of the disproportionately wealthy; the Koch brothers' substantial investment in Arizona State University has, according to faculty member Matthew Garcia, "infused existing college curriculum with libertarian ideology by supporting strategic hires of new professors in existing departments," as well as changed curricula to emphasize libertarian ideologies (Strauss 2018). The influence of the Koch Foundation on higher education should be of grave concern to Jason Brennan, whose account of political knowledge is predicated on the impartiality of university learning. The blatantly partisan

agenda of Koch Foundation donations calls into question Brennan's assumption that university-gleaned knowledge is purely rational or unbiased; the Kochs are not only participating in the creation of intersubjective political knowledge by contributing their own opinions in the public sphere, but further creating political knowledges in an explicitly educational setting prior to the possibility for public debate.

One further way the ultra-wealthy can disproportionately influence public opinion without making public statements is by operating and owning a media outlet outright. Ownership or operation of a media outlet allows ultra-wealthy individuals to make their political positions public without needing to voice them directly. One prime example (no pun intended) is the Washington Post's acquisition by Jeff Bezos (net worth approx. \$204 billion as of August 26, 2020) in October 2013 for a mere \$250 million. Although Bezos himself did not publicly denounce the proposed "wealth tax" during the 2019 Democratic presidential debates, as I mentioned earlier, the Washington Post ran several opinion pieces criticizing proposals for a more progressive tax structure. Bezos' ownership of a major newspaper is not an anomaly; ownership of major media outlets by multi-millionaires or billionaires is a common feature of our public life. McChesney terms this phenomenon "integrated oligopoly," which is characterized by "a handful of firms dominating all forms of U.S. media..." (McChesney 1997, 17). To name just a few examples, NBC Universal, which owns and operates NBC News, is a media conglomerate subsidiary of Comcast, whose CEO and chairperson is Brian Roberts (net worth approx. \$1.7 billion as of May 2020), son of Comcast founder Ralph Roberts. The Fox Corporation, which operates Fox News, is owned by the Murdoch family; Lachlan Murdoch, CEO of the Fox Corporation, is worth approx. \$2.36 billion as of September 2020. And of course

we can't forget that Facebook, now a major source of news for many in the United States, is owned and operated by Mark Zuckerberg. We are increasingly seeing McChesney's media "oligopoly" play out as heavy hitters like Amazon, Disney, and Facebook acquire other news and media companies.¹⁴

The ownership of major media outlets by wealthy individuals whose fiscal policy preferences are radically different from the vast majority reveals a problem with the structure of our public life; the views that major media outlets present as commonplace may actually represent the views of a privileged few rather than the nation as a whole. Presenting these views as commonplace shifts political discourse in general in a more conservative direction, precluding genuine discussions about progressive political solutions to the needs of the majority. I once again have to disagree with Laurison's assertions that our institutions, in this case the mass media, do not contribute to political inequality along economic lines.

Legislation

At the level of legislation, Habermas' third stage of political discourse, we see once again that structural aspects of our government afford greater political sway to the wealthy while those who are economically marginalized and/or precarious have few opportunities to influence political outcomes. At this stage, economic inequality corresponds to political inequality in two major ways: first, wealth dictates the kinds of people who are able to run for public office and who are therefore eligible to take part in formalized political discourse that will result in concrete legislation. Second, economic interests may influence both the issues up for legislative debate and the outcomes of legislative debate through economic measures such as lobbying.

¹⁴ See Molla and Kafka 2021 for *Vox* for a flowchart depicting the landscape of media outlet ownership. The chart is current as of May 2021.

We have already discussed ways in which campaign donations, and especially large campaign donations, represent one site for economic inequality to become political inequality. However, running for political office is another way of participating in the political process that is vastly less accessible for the economically marginalized. For the purposes of this project, I will be focusing on national offices like the Presidency, the Senate, and the House; although some of my remarks apply equally to state and local office, running a campaign for those positions is somewhat less cost prohibitive.

Running a political campaign costs dearly, both in terms of time and in terms of money. Although any citizen can in principle run for national public office, in practice those who are economically precarious cannot devote even the time, much less the money, to launching a campaign because it requires more attention than someone working a full-time or multiple part-time jobs can reasonably give. However, trends in campaign expenditures in recent decades preclude even most middle-class individuals from pursuing public office. There are some notable exceptions, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for instance, who have managed to attain public office with little personal wealth, but overwhelmingly those elected to national public office tend to be independently wealthy. More than half of Congressmembers in 2020 were millionaires (Evers-Hillstrom 2020).

Our current campaign finance regulations discourage people without personal wealth from running; according to the Center for Responsive Politics, most first-time candidates for national office rely heavily on their own wealth because, due to lack of name recognition or incumbent status, it is difficult for them to find enough donors to run a competitive campaign. Federal Election Commission (FEC) regulations do not stipulate an upper limit for what

candidates can give to their own campaigns, so candidates with deep pockets can more easily finance a first run. Once elected, an incumbent will likely not be forced to spend personal money again, and those elected may reimburse themselves for personal campaign contributions from contributions garnered once in office. In order to be elected for the first time, then, most candidates for national public office must already have a substantial financial reserve on which to draw, even if they never need to dip into their own funds again. This means that those without personal wealth are less likely to launch a successful run for office. In the 2018 midterms, for example, only three non-incumbents won Senate seats, spending over \$23 million on average¹⁵; Florida Senator Rick Scott's Senate seat cost over \$83 million, \$65 million of which he financed himself (Evers-Hillstrom 2019).

Further exacerbating this inequality is the fact that campaign costs are on the rise; the cost to run a presidential campaign, for example, increased fourfold between 2000 and 2012. The 2016 presidential campaign was the most expensive in United States history, breaking records set during the 2000 and 2008 election season; between paying campaign staff, running campaign ads, airfare, and other costs, the total amount spent for the 2016 presidential election was over \$2.4 billion. The two major party candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, spent a combined \$1.16 billion (Probasco 2020). Both the Trump and Biden campaigns raised record amounts in summer 2020; the Trump campaign raised \$266 million in the quarter ending June 30, 2020 and the Biden campaign brought in a staggering \$282 million in the same timeframe (Neely 2020). The combined campaign expenditures from the wide field of Democratic presidential hopefuls have already set records; Michael Bloomberg spent half a billion dollars on

¹⁵ This is compared to the \$15 million average for all Senate victors in 2018, up from \$10 million in 2012.

his short-lived campaign and other contenders for the nomination spent even more in aggregate, resulting in a \$1 billion Democratic race by February 2020.

With campaign expenditures spiking at an historic rate, those best positioned to launch a successful run for national public office are those who can afford a lengthy and very expensive race. The people in charge of debating and deciding public policy, then, are overwhelmingly people with substantial personal wealth, which limits the available knowledge in our governing bodies to that gleaned from the perspective of relative wealth.

Once a candidate is elected to office, economic interests persist in influencing policy debate, both because national public servants have their own economic interests and because powerful lobbies have tremendous influence in the legislative process. We have seen that it is difficult to elect public servants with the same kinds of economic concerns as the majority of the American population because our campaign finance regulations make it difficult for middle- and low-income individuals even to launch a campaign. We see now that, once elected, wealthier individuals can and often do allow their own economic positioning to influence their policy choices. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, for example, has invested about \$45 million in real estate and in the summer of 2020 came out against rent and mortgage freezes, legislation intended to mitigate the harmful economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pelosi is not the only member of Congress whose investments have come under scrutiny recently; since early 2020, multiple reports have surfaced demonstrating that members of Congress were enjoying higher than average investment returns owing to privileged policy knowledge that might affect the stock market. Representative John Yarmuth invested in cannabis stocks while offering political support for legalization, for instance (Legum 2021). Several

senators – Dianne Feinstein, Kelly Loeffler, and Richard Burr – sold stocks after a private briefing informing them of the pandemic in its first weeks (Lipton and Fandos, 2020). Senator David Perdue invested in companies that would likely see an increase in revenue and stock returns as a result of COVID-19 during the pandemic’s earliest days, including Pfizer and Netflix. And Tom Price, both a former member of Congress and of Trump’s cabinet as secretary of health and human services, traded health care stocks (and received discounted stocks from drug companies) while advocating for privatized healthcare (Saul, Kelly, and LaForgia 2020).

Former New York governor Andrew Cuomo serves as another example of financial interest motivating policy choices; in August 2020, Cuomo blocked legislation that would impose a higher tax on wealthy individuals in his state, which would have included several of Cuomo’s own big money donors such as hedge fund magnate James Simmons. Simmons had, just the previous month, given Cuomo \$90 thousand (Cunningham-Cook 2020).

Politicians’ personal wealth and financial interests have a tremendous impact on their policy, we see now; people who are ostensibly public servants promote policies that enrich them personally. Some of these policies, in turn, actively harm public interests in favor of private wealth.

More formal economic interests also have a tremendous influence on policy through the practice of lobbying; total spending on federal lobbying in 2019 exceeded \$3.5 billion, which includes employing both in-house lobbyists and K Street lobbying firms (“Lobbying Data Summary”). The Center for Responsive Politics has compiled a list of interests and companies that spent the most on lobbying the federal government dating back to 1998, and overwhelmingly US policy trends tend to support those interests and firms spending the most on

lobbying. Interests like the United States Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Realtors, and the Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers of America, as well as companies such as General Electric, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Exxon Mobil, and Boeing are consistently among the highest spenders over the last 22 years. Over the past 22 years, the pharmaceuticals industry has spent over \$4.5 billion on lobbying, the oil and gas industry has spent \$2.3 billion, the automotive industry has spent \$1.2 billion, and the defense industry has spent close to \$1.2 billion (“Industries”). Federal policy, in turn, has favored keeping medical care and drug costs high, relatively little economic or environmental regulation for businesses, high military spending, high reliance on oil, and bailouts for the flagging airline and automotive industries. In recent years, tech firms have been increasing their level of lobbying expenditures; Facebook and Amazon, for example, spent a combined \$33 million dollars in 2019 alone to lobby the federal government.

There is a stark split in lobbying expenditures on behalf of businesses, which aid corporations and those invested in corporations, and lobbying expenditures on behalf of labor interests, which aim to help workers and support working families. Between 2008 and 2021, lobbying expenditures for business interests *far* outstripped expenditures for labor, ideological groups, and other lobbies combined. Just in 2020, lobbying expenditures for business interests represented 87.96% of total lobbying expenditures for that year, whereas expenditures for labor represented just 1.44%. Lobbying expenditures for business interests reached nearly \$3 billion (\$2,993,787,782, to be precise), while lobbying expenditures for labor in 2020 did not even reach \$50 thousand (“Business, Labor & Ideological Split in Lobbying Data”). Workers simply do not have the resources or institutional opportunity to make themselves heard in government that

corporations do; the result is a feedback loop in which corporations use their capital to influence policy aiding or enabling the accumulation of more and more capital. This feedback loop exists to the detriment of workers, who by design can't accumulate the funds to compete with big business at the level of influencing legislation. We see, then, that the system of lobbying as it is currently instantiated privileges interests and corporations that are already financially successful because they are able to spend more to influence policy.

While again my examples here of ways in which Habermas' stages of political discourse are distorted by economic inequality are by no means comprehensive, they are sufficient to show that Laurison's claim that the structural explanation fails to account for at least some political inequality in an economically unequal nation is an oversimplification; economic inequality works at all levels of our democracy to produce, in aggregate, a political situation that is at best indifferent and at worst hostile to the situated knowledge and political interests of economically marginalized individuals and communities. As we can see from these examples from each of Habermas' three stages of political discourse, an institutional approach does indeed help to illuminate a causal story for the depressed political participation on the part of economically marginalized individuals and groups.

While Laurison agrees that these institutional barriers "are part of the story of class inequalities in participation in the United States," he adds that they "do not fully explain the class gradient in political engagement" (Laurison 2016, 688). He thinks there is something missing from an institutional perspective, specifically "a fully understanding of socially structured differences in how people see, relate to, and understand politics" (Laurison 2016, 688). Essentially what Laurison is arguing here is that we need to cultivate an understanding of the

relationship between individual political agents and the political institutions that enable or restrict their political participation. Laurison names this kind of framework a “relational” perspective on or approach to studying political participation.

The crucial insight of the relational perspective that Laurison develops is that “it is not really possible to separate out cultural and social institutions from our approach to politics” (Laurison 2016, 690). His claim here is drawn from the understanding that politics just is the coordination of variously-situated populations, and thus it is impossible to understand political engagement outside of that situatedness. Political participation is not just mediated by the institutions of which we are a part, but also our networks of socialization and political support. In short, our political participation is socially-informed. Laurison quotes Rolf 2012 in saying that we ought to be analyzing political participation

as emerging from the interactions of strategic political actors and conditionally cooperative citizens embedded in social networks...In this picture, the turnout story starts with politicians who want to win an election, and thus devote resources to mobilizing potential voters and to raising the salience of an upcoming election. Campaign activity sets off a chain reaction among civic-minded citizens whose decisions are largely conditional on the decisions of those around them. Social interaction among potential voters spread the initial mobilizing impulse, with different structures varying in their effectiveness in doing so. (Laurison 2016, 690; quoting Rolf, 2012, 178)

Once again, Rolf and Laurison’s analysis here truncates political participation to voting, but their overall point that political participation is motivated by our social situation is much more widely applicable; political participation is socialized in that our participation, as well as our reasons for participating, become a feature of culture.

Rolf and Laurison argue that inequalities in political participation often have to do with the different forms of relationships that economically differently-situated people or groups form

both with each other and with their political institutions. Part of the reason, that wealthy people vote more, for example, might be that their social circles may include peers already involved in politics who exert pressure on them to vote (or donate, volunteer for a campaign, or even run for office themselves) (Laurison 2016, 691). Political involvement, then, becomes part of what it means to be socialized into a particular socioeconomic position, specifically a wealthy one.

By contrast, Laurison argues, individuals socialized in economically marginalized communities may be acculturated differently to political engagement, believing that politics is not open to them and therefore that they ought not or cannot participate (Laurison 2016, 689, citing studies Eliasoph 1998, Croteau 1995). I would also add that the effects of this acculturation are compounded when institutional factors keep issues important to the economically marginalized out of public debate; when economically marginalized communities don't see themselves or their interests represented in political debate, it can send a signal that political engagement won't meet their needs. Further, individuals from economically marginalized communities or populations, as we have seen, have much less access to the possibility of affecting change directly by running for office or obtaining work in a government organization, whereas comparatively wealthy individuals can more easily aspire to positions that directly affect political change. It is worth noting here, however, that certain factors do disrupt these patterns of unequal political participation; economically marginalized communities with a high proportion of unionized workers tend to buck these trends, for example, likely because union leadership offers examples of workers engaged in direct political action.

Laurison's general insight here is that socioeconomic positioning has a tremendous impact on feelings of political efficacy; if a community sees little political recourse for

addressing their needs, individuals belonging to that community may not understand political engagement as something that is useful or beneficial. Laurison's insight here is valuable, but I want to stress again that we cannot understand his relational approach in abstraction from the concrete institutional barriers that exist to curb political participation for the economically marginalized. Indeed, I would argue that it is precisely these institutional barriers, which prevent issues important to economically marginalized populations from reaching the level of public debate and legislation, that contribute to feelings of political inefficacy among those same populations.

However, Laurison's "relational" approach does provide us with the important insight that the institutional barriers to political participation that result from economic inequality breed an additional, significant barrier: the feeling among economically marginal communities that they lack political efficacy. This barrier spans all three of Habermas' stages of political discourse; why vote, protest, donate, engage in discourse, or run for office if you know and feel keenly that your institutions are not set up to listen? In my next chapter, I will discuss ways in which this feeling of political inefficacy acts as what Kristie Dotson would call "epistemic smothering."

We see, then, that for each of Habermas' three stages of political discourse, economic inequality leads to political inequality, both because our political institutions are set up to privilege wealth and because the result of that privileging of wealth is that economically marginalized individuals develop a "relational" barrier to political participation in the form of feelings of political inefficacy. We must understand this relational barrier, not as separate from institutional barriers, but rather as working with and as a result of institutional barriers to create a

network of political practices that systematically work for the economically privileged and against the economically marginalized. The result is a new diagnosis of Brennan's original problem: our democracy doesn't fail us because the undereducated have too much voting power, but rather because the people with the most intimate knowledge of the political needs of the majority are being systematically shut out of the political process. Implementing Brennan's proposal for a voter licensing epistocracy would codify what is already implicit in our political system: the political knowledge of the wealthy has an outsize influence on governance and policy.

CHAPTER THREE

EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

In my previous chapter, I discussed some ways in which economic inequality results in political inequality in everyday communication and knowledge-making, the public sphere, and in governance and legislation. In this chapter, I will argue that this privileging of political knowledge of the ultra-wealthy, and converse depression of political knowledge of the economically marginalized, constitutes an “epistemic injustice,” or a harm against someone in their capacity as a knower. Epistemic injustices can take a variety of forms; they can be perpetrated face-to-face or by institutions, can be direct or indirect, can be one-off occurrences or systematic patterns of behavior and cognition. The common thread in all cases of epistemic injustice is that, because of their sociopolitical positioning, someone’s knowledge is ignored or taken to be worthless.

Typically, when we talk about epistemic injustices, we frame our discussion in terms of what Linda Alcoff calls “visible identities” like race or gender. In cases like these, epistemic injustices often take the form of lack of credibility or respect; a hearer occupying a privileged racial or gender identity may fail to extend adequate credibility or respect to a speaker occupying a marginalized racial or gender identity. These kinds of judgments can also be systematized; perhaps it is generally culturally understood that people occupying a particular gender or racial identity aren’t trustworthy or intelligent. Perhaps because people occupying privileged visible

identities are more likely to be in positions of authority, they are taken to be more trustworthy or intelligent.

My argument in this chapter is that we can apply some of these same concepts of epistemic injustice that occur in sociohistorical contexts of racial and gender inequality to economic inequality, as well; epistemic injustices can be economic. However, we also have to acknowledge ways in which economic inequality operates differently than racial or gender inequality; although it does correlate with some visual markers, relative economic status is not a “visible identity” in the way that Linda Alcoff describes. Thus, I will argue in this section that economic (as opposed to gendered or racialized) epistemic injustice is largely systematic rather than agential and is characterized by what Kristie Dotson calls “testimonial quieting” and “testimonial smothering”.

Epistemic Injustice and Visible Identity

Because the literature on epistemic injustice comes out of feminist theory and philosophy of race, it tends to focus on ways in which epistemic injustices are perpetrated against people or groups occupying marginalized *visible* identities. The literature on epistemic injustice tends, in other words, to focus on identities that carry visual markers like race and gender, while rarely discussing economic positioning directly. Linda Alcoff explains why we might prefer to focus on visible identity in analyzing various forms of oppression or marginalization; she writes that, although “structural power relations such as those created by global capital are determinate over the meanings of our identities, the possibilities of social interaction, and the formations of difference,” it is nevertheless the case that “power most often today operates precisely through the...personal sphere of our visible social identities” (Alcoff 2005, *vii*). Alcoff explains that the

operation of economic power through visible identities of race and gender is no accident, but rather that “capitalism was a racial and gender system from its inception, distributing roles and resources according to identity markers of status and social position and thus reenforcing their stability” (Alcoff 2005, *vii*). This is to say that capitalism is itself racialized and gendered; relations of economic power are conceptually inseparable from relations of racial and gender power. For long swathes of our history, women and people with dark skin were considered property by legal standards (as well as moral ones), and although the relationship between economic oppression and racial or gender oppression is perhaps somewhat less overt in the present moment, that relationship still exists; Alcoff continues that “[s]ocial identities such as race, ethnicity, and gender remain the most telling predictors of social power and success...” (Alcoff 2005, *vii*), determining many of our economic possibilities from the kinds of jobs we can hold, the education we get, how much money we will make, whether or not we are likely to be incarcerated, if and where we can buy a home, to the kinds of investments open to us.

Alcoff’s argument here is absolutely true but doesn’t represent the sum total of economic oppression; I think there is more to say about economic inequality, and especially the political implications of an economically unequal system, beyond discussing the ways in which economic oppression manifests as or in race and gender oppression. Alcoff argues that the ways in which race and gender serve as a predictor for economic success reveal that “class works through, rather than alongside, the categories of visible identity” (Alcoff 2005, *vii*). Again, Alcoff is right here in that economic oppression often “works through” categories of race and gender, but I contend that the opposite is also true; economic injustice can be the mode by which a society perpetrates racial and gender injustice. For example, while women and Black Americans have

the legal right to vote, when both groups (and particularly Black women) are consistently compensated less than white men for the same work, the costs associated with taking several hours off to vote – including transportation, missing work, and childcare – are disproportionately burdensome for those who are economically marginalized as a result of their racial or gender positioning. Alcoff is right that economic oppression often “works through” racism and sexism, but the inverse is also true; visible and invisible modes of oppression work together, and we cannot reduce economic oppression to race and gender oppression. When overt racism and sexism are no longer socially appropriate, economic barriers become the *de facto* mode of discrimination in our political system, and economic barriers can also exist for people who are privileged in other ways or along other axes of identity.

There is therefore utility in understanding economic inequality as what we might think of as a primary mode of oppression, rather than one that is secondary to oppression on the basis of visible identity. Specifically, examining oppression on the basis of “invisible” identity like economic status allows us also to identify ways in which oppression itself may also operate invisibly, through politico-economic systems that preclude political participation for a huge proportion of the population through primarily economic means. Taking economic inequality as a primary mode of marginalization or oppression helps to more directly analyze the systemic nature of epistemic exclusion. Thus, in this chapter, my task will be to demonstrate that epistemic injustice, a category of injustices usually reserved for describing harms to people occupying marginalized race and gender identities in their capacities as knowers, can be used to describe a feature of economic oppression as well.

Agential Epistemic Injustice

In her 2007 *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Miranda Fricker contends that epistemic injustices – that is, harms committed against a subject specifically in her capacity as a knower – can be perpetrated either agentially or systemically. This is to say that individuals may commit epistemic injustices against one another and that our institutions may themselves be epistemically unjust. Agential injustices, on Fricker's view, depend on existing sociopolitical hierarchies and tend to take two main forms: that of a "credibility deficit" or that of a "credibility excess" (Fricker 2007, 17). A credibility deficit occurs when a hearer accords a lower estimation of credibility to a speaker in virtue of that speaker's identity; a man may, for example, consider a woman less credible than another man because of the gendered social power at work in their relationship. A credibility excess, by contrast, occurs when a hearer artificially inflates the credibility they extend to a speaker in virtue of that speaker's sociopolitical positioning; a white person may more readily listen to and believe a speaker of their own race, for example. Once again, these credibility judgments operate in a background of existing hierarchies of power that privilege some identities and marginalize others.

Agential accounts of epistemic injustice seem to be predicated on Alcoff's "visible identities"; in order for me to inflate or deflate my judgment of a speaker's credibility, they must be legibly or identifiably situated in the sociopolitical hierarchy. Expanding our field of analysis to economic inequality complicates this picture somewhat; as Alcoff has pointed out, although there are some visual markers for economic positioning, it is often difficult to ascertain someone's economic status by looking at or speaking with them. I would therefore argue that economic epistemic injustices are largely systemic, rather than agential, in nature, and I will

therefore limit my analysis to systemic epistemic wrongs and exclusions that take place at the level of institutions.

Systemic Epistemic Injustice

Systemic epistemic wrongs reveal, perhaps even more clearly than agential ones, ways in which our hierarchies of social and political power and institutions that result from those hierarchies may exclude, ignore, or discredit epistemic contributions by people and communities occupying marginalized identities. In cases of systemic epistemic injustice, it is institutions, rather than individuals, that perpetrate epistemic harm. Institutions can perpetrate epistemic harm because they are products of existing relations of social power, and oppressive social power more specifically. Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. writes that we should understand epistemic injustice, especially systemic epistemic injustice, “as intertwined with (and reinforcing) relations of dominance and oppression” (Pohlhaus 2017, 16).

In understanding epistemic injustices as occurring in or as problematic epistemic institutions, Pohlhaus argues that we can identify particular institutions and “cognitive practices that maintain and enforce unjust power relations” (Pohlhaus 2017, 17). Following Charles Mills, Pohlhaus contends that epistemic injustices of this kind create what we might think of as two classes of knowers, where only certain kinds of people (“white European men,” says Pohlhaus) are considered capable of “intellectual achievement and progress” (Pohlhaus 2017, 17; paraphrasing Mills 1997, 44-46). She further emphasizes that the class of privileged knowers remain largely ignorant of their own privilege and the ways in which it benefits them insofar as the epistemic contract works actively to prevent what she calls the “sub-class of knowers” or the epistemic underclass from drawing attention to the unjust distribution of epistemic power.

Pohlhaus refers to this phenomenon as “willful hermeneutical ignorance” (Pohlhaus 2017, 17; citing Pohlhaus 2012).

Pohlhaus argues that epistemic injustices stem from and reinforce relations of dominance and oppression. Another way of thinking about her claim here is that part of what it means to be oppressed is that oppression includes an epistemic dimension; sociopolitical and epistemic oppression are mutually-reinforcing and -constituting. Pohlhaus’ claims in this section rely on Charles Mills’ account of racialized epistemology from *The Racial Contract*. Mills is discussing the epistemic implications of racial oppression, which establishes, in his view, an “epistemic underclass” wherein those privileged by the racial contract, whites, are deemed to have legitimate knowledge, whereas knowledge possessed by those marginalized by the racial contract, “nonwhites,” is not considered valuable, important, or legitimate (Mills 1997, 17-19; 61). Racial oppression thereby takes on an epistemic character; knowledge itself is racialized, and those oppressed along racial lines experience an additional epistemic dimension of oppression in the form of a devaluation of their knowledge.

Jason Brennan’s account of epistocracy serves as a fantastic example of the application of Mills’ argument here to economic, rather than racial, marginalization; Brennan is arguing that the only kind of political knowledge that is valuable or legitimate is the kind that we learn in an explicitly educational setting like a university. Since this kind of political knowledge, “social scientific knowledge,” is most easily accessible for economically privileged subjects (and the knowledge being taught is itself the product of economic privilege in many cases), Brennan has deliberately created an economic “epistemic underclass,” the set of people who do not have social scientific knowledge sufficient to pass a voter licensing exam, and argues that this class of

knowers should not be able to contribute political knowledge through the act of casting a vote.¹ He even proposes a system whereby people would get more votes in national elections corresponding with the number of degrees they attain (Brennan 2016, 213). Brennan makes his epistemic underclass even more explicit with his suggestion that “a restricted suffrage regime could allow anyone who passes an exam to vote for free,” while “those who fail the exam [may] be permitted to vote, but only if they pay a penalty of two thousand dollars” (Brennan 2016, 213); access to political self-determination is therefore solely a feature of economic positioning on this proposal, which requires either financial access to university education (ideally at the graduate level) or buying a vote directly.

In this sense, Brennan is only making explicit what we have seen implicitly in the functioning of our political system already; if we transpose Mills’ claim about racial oppression to economic marginalization, we see that economically marginalized subjects *already do* constitute an epistemic underclass in economically unequal democracies. This is to say that, as I argued in my previous chapter, our political system both explicitly and implicitly values and responds to the knowledge of wealthy individuals more so than political knowledge from economically marginalized subjects by limiting opportunities for economically marginalized

¹ Brennan’s epistemic underclass has racial and gendered implications as well; he acknowledges that, according to this account of political knowledge, “Whites on average know more than blacks, . . . men know more than women, . . . and high-income people know more than the poor.” He even makes an overt claim that “Most poor black women, as of right now at least, would fail even a mild voter qualification exam” (Brennan 2016, 226). We should be outraged by Brennan’s claims here for two reasons. First, he doesn’t feel that the economic, racial, and gender bias inherent in an epistocracy that requires voter licensing is a problem for his proposal. Secondly, he implies that a government run by the very wealthy, white men who have imposed conditions that systematically deny education and economic opportunity to people who are marginalized along economic, racial, or gender lines will be able to effectively govern those same communities. Brennan’s proposal grossly ignores the social and political conditions that resulted in economic, racial, and gendered barriers to educational attainment; racism and sexism are not mere accidents of social organization, but rather represent coordinated political efforts to maintain white male supremacy. Any proposal that would deny Black women the right to political self-determination is heir to this legacy and will continue to support white male supremacy.

subjects to contribute their knowledge in and through the process of political discourse. In my previous chapter, I offered examples of this kind of devaluation of epistemic contributions by economically marginalized subjects that span all three of Habermas' stages of political discourse; implicit and explicit voter suppression, ownership of media outlets by wealthy individuals or families, the structure of our campaign finance system, and lobbying regulations are just a few examples of ways in which economically privileged subjects gain outsize influence over the available political knowledge in our democracy and/or marginalized subjects are discouraged from contributing knowledge to our democratic process. Once again, therefore, we see that existing oppression – in this case economic – takes on an epistemic character when individuals and groups already experiencing hardship also lack epistemic authority or opportunities to participate in communal knowledge-making.

Importantly, institutional epistemic injustice both results *from* and results *in* relations of political dominance. Existing relations of political power determine the kind of knowledge that is accepted and reified at the level of politics; because economically privileged subjects already hold political power – often as a result of their wealth – their knowledge is taken as valuable and appropriate in a political context. The resultant exclusion or depression of knowledge by economically marginalized individuals and groups means that the needs and interests of economically marginalized individuals will be left out of political discursive processes, resulting in further marginalization through worse policy outcomes and less representative government.

Systemic epistemic injustices, then, are ones that take place in a context of existing inequality and as a result of institutional, rather than agential, marginalization or silencing of an oppressed group.

Systemic Epistemic Injustices as Failures of Reciprocity

In understanding how a political institution may perpetrate an epistemic injustice along economic lines, I turn once again to Pohlhaus and also to Kristie Dotson. Pohlhaus and Dotson both examine the intersubjective character of knowledge-making and argue that epistemic injustices occur when social relationships or configurations between epistemic agents result in oppression, marginalization, and violations of communal trust. If we transpose their claims to relationships not just between epistemic agents but also between epistemic agents and the epistemic institutions of which they are a part, I argue that we can begin to understand the modes by which economic epistemic injustices occur. Specifically, I will use Pohlhaus and Dotson to argue that economic epistemic injustices, as systemic injustices perpetrated by institutions, result from historical exclusions of economically marginalized subjects from epistemic life and fractures in communal epistemic trust.

Pohlhaus' analysis of epistemic injustice highlights "the degree to which knowers are intersubjectively constituted," which is to say once again that knowers are situated in a sociopolitical context that at least in part determines their experiences, access to sources of knowledge, and access to epistemic communities (Pohlhaus 2017, 18). In understanding knowledge as an intersubjective endeavor, Pohlhaus argues that we can identify two kinds of epistemic injustice: "first, exclusions that keep epistemic agents isolated from one another without warrant and, second, fractures in epistemic trust" (Pohlhaus 2017, 18). Pohlhaus provides some examples of ways in which epistemic injustice occurs in a context of epistemic interdependence, specifically with regards to epistemic exclusion; "examples...include formal and informal refusals to allow certain knowers to participate in various areas of communal

epistemic life, such as education, healthcare, politics, and science” (Pohlhaus 2017, 18; citing Carel and Kidd 2017; Grasswick 2017; Kotzee 2017, see also Hookway 2010 and Medina 2013). What Pohlhaus means here is that exclusion from participation in epistemic institutions – and she identifies political epistemic institutions specifically – itself constitutes a moral wrong. She argues that exclusion from epistemic participation in this way stunts individuals’ development as knowers, and further that the exclusion of entire communities diminishes epistemic institutions as a whole.²

Pohlhaus further contends that, where epistemic exclusion has historically existed, breaches of epistemic trust might prevail even when the exclusive institutions have been remedied. Epistemic distrust signals an on-going epistemic injustice; individuals and communities that have historically been excluded from epistemic institutions “may understandably be less trusting of them and so less able to benefit epistemically from a trusting reliance on them that is available to others for whom there has been no historical breach in trust” (Pohlhaus 2017, 19). She continues that “in such cases, the breach of trust that leads to a population’s inability to trust in communal epistemic institutions constitutes an epistemic trust injustice” (Pohlhaus 2017, 19; citing Grasswick 2017). This is to say that a breach in epistemic trust is an additional, related wrong resulting from an existing epistemic injustice; if an institution perpetrates an epistemic wrong against me, they also commit an additional harm by degrading or fracturing my trust in the institution itself.

Pohlhaus’ insight here that knowledge-making is an intersubjective or communal endeavor is a valuable one because it makes explicit ways in which epistemic exclusions

² See Medina 2013 on epistemic friction.

constitute moral wrongs; if epistemic life is a communal undertaking, agents and institutions that systematically fail to include parts of that community have broken communal trust by violating an ethical norm. Again, Pohlhaus argues that this violation of trust is an additional wrong because marginalized people or communities can no longer benefit from a relationship with the responsible agent or institution. One important example of an institutional epistemic trust violation is the institution of healthcare; medical professionals tend to discount or downplay reports of discomfort and pain from women, especially Black women, resulting in poor treatment outcomes and higher risk of death or lasting medical issues. Discounting or downplaying those reports of pain is itself an epistemic injustice; doctors are failing to hear and respect women's intimate knowledge of their own bodies. However, these medical professionals commit the additional wrong of violating the relationship of trust between a doctor and their patient, or a patient and the institution of healthcare. This breach of trust means that these patients are less likely to seek medical attention when they need it because they know they will not be heard; they can no longer benefit from a trusting relationship with and to the institution of healthcare or their medical care provider.³

When we examine the United States in particular, exclusion from political life constitutes an obvious violation of a prevailing and explicit ethical norm, namely that the people ought to have a say in who governs us. Since this norm is the very foundation of a democratic system of government, political epistemic exclusions in a democracy are particularly grave fractures of communal trust. Once again, we see that these kinds of democratic exclusions do, in fact, take place along economic lines as well as racial and gendered ones; when economically marginalized

³ See Sims 2010 for just one example of a study on disparities in healthcare outcomes along race and gender lines, this time focusing specifically on Black women over the age of 50.

subjects encounter difficulties voting, protesting, and attaining leadership positions as I have shown in my previous chapter, our political system qua communal epistemic institution is no longer functioning as it should. Indeed, it is no longer democratic.

We have already seen evidence of fractures in epistemic trust along economic lines in our democracy; the election of Donald Trump to the presidency and subsequent insurrection is one prime example. Economically marginalized communities, many in what has come to be known as the “rust belt” in the United States, became disenchanted with a government that ignored their needs and excluded their knowledge contributions from public life. For these communities, Donald Trump represented an alternative to a status quo that systematically failed to address or even to hear their needs and interests, as well as hope for economic recovery. However, many people in these communities simply did not vote at all; the lack of trust in purportedly democratic institutions motivated a cessation of political activity. Distrust in our political institutions among working class white communities following Trump’s election ran so deep that those same communities staged a coup at the Capitol, motivated by a lack of trust in the democratic process itself. We should think of Trump’s election and his followers’ insurrection as a symptom of a breach in epistemic trust between economically marginalized communities and their political institutions.

Kristie Dotson’s account of epistemic violence helps us to understand the dual character of economic epistemic injustice at the level of institutions; her account of “testimonial quieting” gives us language to describe ways in which institutions might fail to “hear” or respond to knowledge contributions, while “testimonial smothering” refers to the practice of self-silencing that might result from a breach of epistemic trust in an institution. Dotson’s account, like most of

the accounts of epistemic injustice I engage in this chapter, focuses on epistemic harm along lines of race and gender, and thus focuses on agential epistemic harms more than is appropriate for understanding the specifically economic dimensions of epistemic violence. However, I think her account can be applied a little more broadly to incorporate the systemic and sometimes invisible operations of economic epistemic injustice.

In her article “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” Kristie Dotson expands Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “epistemic violence,” which Dotson argues is what occurs when “members of oppressed groups” are “silenced by virtue of group membership” (Dotson 2011, 236). She ultimately contends that epistemic violence occurs as a result of a failure on the part of a hearer to participate in a reciprocal linguistic exchange (Dotson 2011, 236).

Dotson begins her account of epistemic violence by detailing the basic structure of a successful linguistic exchange; she refers to Jennifer Hornsby’s work on “reciprocity” in speech in asserting that speakers depend on audiences in order to complete a “successful linguistic exchange” (Hornsby 1995, 134). Hornsby contends that in order for an illocutionary act to be successful, the audience must not only “understand the speaker’s words but also, in...taking the words as they are meant to be taken, satisf[y] a condition for the speaker’s having done the communicative thing she intended” (Hornsby 1995, 134). If the audience succeeds in both of these conditions, they can be said to be reciprocally participating in the linguistic exchange, and the exchange is therefore successful. Dotson’s basic point, drawn from Hornsby’s account of reciprocity, is that “to communicate *we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us*” (Dotson 2011, 238, emphasis hers).

Dotson's point here is an extension of Pohlhaus' claim that knowledge-making is an intersubjective endeavor; not only does knowledge-making take place in a community, but members of that community must be able to hear and respond to one another in order for our epistemic contributions to become meaningful. Failures of epistemic reciprocity are, then, violations of communal epistemic trust.⁴

José Medina provides two criteria for successful linguistic exchanges of the kind that Dotson and Hornsby describe here specifically in the realm of politics; he writes that "democratic sensibilities" are contingent upon two requirements: the "expressibility requirement" and the "responsiveness requirement" (Medina 2013, 9). The expressibility requirement "demands that the different groups that a social body can contain have the opportunity to...articulate their shared experiences and perspectives"; this is something like testimony in the political sphere, where we understand testimony to be an expression of political knowledge. The responsiveness requirement "demands that the social and epistemic conditions of communication and interaction be such that the expressions of a public have the proper uptake by other publics and by society as a whole"; in short, the institutions that comprise our political life and our public opportunities for testimony must be set up to hear and understand knowledge contributions from subsets of the polity. In order for our society to be democratic, on Medina's view, our political institutions must meet Dotson's reciprocity criterion.

⁴ Dotson contends that in order for a failure of reciprocation to count as epistemic violence, it must cause harm to the speaker (Dotson, 239); in chapter 4, I will discuss some of the harms that result from epistemic violence and injustice against economically marginalized communities, including but not limited to harm to subjects in their capacities as knowers, material harms in the form of worse policy outcomes, diminished epistemic resources in public political debate, and legitimation problems for our government itself.

Epistemic Injustice and Economic Inequality

In applying Dotson's argument to epistemic injustice along economic lines, we must first further investigate her account of epistemic violence. She identifies epistemic violence as a state of affairs in which "*entire populations* of people can be denied this kind of linguistic reciprocity" (Dotson 2011, 238; emphasis mine). Epistemic violence, then, "is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange..." (Dotson 2011, 238).

Dotson's account of epistemic violence describes ways in which our prejudices and biases, derived in "transaction"⁵ with a raced and gendered sociopolitical environment or lifeworld, might cause us to extend less credibility or respect to epistemic utterances or gestures by people occupying marginalized identities. In this sense, she is again discussing ways in which visible identities may have a bearing on the level of epistemic authority, respect, credibility, and care accorded to a particular subject or group. Her assertion that epistemic violence can operate against "entire populations," however, opens the door for an analysis of epistemic violence that is not limited to visible identities; at the level of populations, epistemic violence must operate systemically, which means that biases based on visual markers are no longer sufficient to explain epistemic violence. Instead, we can assert that epistemic reciprocity can be a feature of institutions, which can thereby be blameworthy for failures to hear, understand, and respect epistemic contributions by particular populations.

Institutions may not be able to "hear" epistemic contributions in the literal sense, but institutional responsiveness to epistemic contributions is absolutely something we can assess. At

⁵ See Sullivan 2006.

the level of politics and governance, we can ask questions about whether or not our leaders and governing organizations represent, reflect, and respond to the needs of particular, situated communities. We can ask questions about whether there exist avenues for the expression of those needs to our leaders and in our governing organizations. We can ask questions about whether we have real recourse when those needs are not met. We are already adjudicating these questions in public debate; increasingly, swathes of the voting public are growing dissatisfied with the system of the electoral college, for example, which has installed five presidents who did not win the popular vote. The institution of the Senate, too, diminishes the power of the polity by granting less political sway, in a relative sense, to more populace states. In short, there is utility in asking questions about institutional receptivity and responsiveness to political knowledge belonging to the polity; it can reveal systemic problems with our current political institutions.

When we ask these questions about our leaders and governing institutions specifically with regard to the needs and interests of economically marginalized communities, I think a lot of the time the answer is “no.” No, our leaders and governing institutions do not represent, reflect, and respond to the needs of economically marginalized communities; as I state in my previous chapter, even on the left our leaders tend overwhelmingly to be male, white, and wealthy. No, there are not avenues for the expression of the needs of economically marginalized subjects and communities to our leaders and organizations; when voting is inaccessible, small campaign donations are eclipsed by donations from billionaires, and lobbying expenditures from wealthy corporations dictate policy, those needs are ignored in public debate. And no, we have very little recourse when those needs are not met; protest is not always an accessible option for those relying on hourly income, and mass media outlets often highlight the views and opinions of the

ultra-wealthy. As I have shown in chapter 2, our purportedly democratic institutions of voting, of protest, of mass media, and of government itself are not set up to “hear” economically marginalized communities. When we examine the ways in which, at least in aggregate, our democratic institutions fail to reciprocate epistemic contributions by economically marginalized communities, we see, then, that those very institutions can commit (and are committing) epistemic violence against economically marginalized communities.

Dotson draws a further distinction between “instances” and “practices” of epistemic harm; an “instance” of epistemic harm may be an isolated case, whereas a “practice” of epistemic harm constitutes a pattern of unreciprocated illocutionary acts that is “harmful and reliable” (Dotson 2011, 241). It’s easy to imagine an instance of epistemic harm along economic lines – perhaps once a voter may have difficulty casting a vote because she has to work an extra shift – but the kind of mass political disenfranchisement that I discussed in my previous chapter goes far beyond simple epistemic aberrations or blips; the kind of widespread depression of political participation at all levels of political knowledge-making for economically marginalized communities that we are seeing now can only be understood as a *practice* of epistemic violence.

Dotson makes a further distinction between two kinds of practices of epistemic violence: “testimonial quieting” and “testimonial smothering” (Dotson 2011, 242). Testimonial quieting occurs when an audience or hearer does not reciprocate in a linguistic exchange because they accord the speaker less credibility as a result of an identity she occupies. Dotson refers to Patricia Hill Collins’ contention that “black women are less likely to be considered competent [speakers] due to an audience’s inability to discern the possession of credibility beyond ‘controlling images’ that stigmatize black women as a group” (Collins 2000, 69) as an example of testimonial

quieting. The assumption here is that Black women are attempting to engage in knowledge-making by offering their testimony, but hearers refuse to reciprocate their epistemic gestures.

When we transpose Dotson's account of testimonial quieting to the practice of economic epistemic violence, we see that it is our institutions of government that fail to participate in reciprocal epistemic exchange, which is to say that those political institutions are not set up to "hear" economically marginalized subjects. Similar to Dotson's example, we see ways in which economically marginalized subjects attempt to participate in communal knowledge-making by, for example, voting, protesting, or engaging in political discourse. However, when courts rule not to count mail-in votes that arrive after election day, police disperse protests with violence, and the political opinions of economically marginalized subjects are not featured in mass news outlets, it signals a lack of reciprocation on the part of our political epistemic institutions. These institutions, in limiting epistemic contributions along economic lines, have engaged in "testimonial quieting."

Testimonial smothering, by contrast, occurs when a speaker self-censors when she perceives her audience to be epistemically incapable of understanding her testimony (Dotson 2011, 244). This self-censorship is a kind of coerced "capitulation" of the speaker to the ignorance or ignorant perceptions of the audience; when a conversation is difficult or dangerous, the speaker may choose not to have it at all. A woman may, for example, choose not to confront a sexist co-worker out of fear that she may lose her job, or she may play along with a catcaller's remarks instead of explaining her discomfort in order to avoid potential violence. We can think of testimonial smothering as both a consequence of epistemic violence and a kind of epistemic

violence in itself; the would-be speaker is forced to self-censor likely as a result of testimonial quieting, and her coerced capitulation further marginalizes her own situated knowledge.

Laurison's relational account of depressed political participation helps us to understand how testimonial smothering might look in a context of economic inequality; Laurison argues that economically marginalized subjects are likely to feel alienated by political institutions that do not consider or respond to their needs and interests. Thus, economically marginalized subjects are more likely to feel ambivalent about political participation and choose not to engage in political discourse at various levels; Laurison's example of choosing not to vote when no candidate represents one's interests is a common one of testimonial smothering at the political level. Another might be the decision not to run for office; the mind-boggling cost of running for congress or the president prohibits almost all but the wealthy from contributing political knowledge as holders of national public office. We see, then, that not only are our political institutions set up to "quiet" epistemic contributions by economically marginalized subjects, they are also so indifferent to the needs and interests of economically marginalized subjects that those subjects "smother" or censor their own epistemic contributions.

At first blush, Dotson's account of testimonial smothering seems to support Brennan's rational choice explanation for what he identifies as the widespread political ignorance of the American polity; Brennan argues that most members of the polity will make the rational choice not to invest in acquiring "social scientific knowledge" about politics because they intuit that their votes won't matter except in the extraordinary circumstance that there is an electoral tie. Dotson's account of testimonial smothering is similar in that the choice not to engage is a

rational one; sometimes the social, political, and sometimes even bodily risks aren't worth the effort of engaging in communal knowledge-making.

There are, however, some key differences between Brennan's rational choice theory and Dotson's account of testimonial smothering. Brennan is worried about the outcomes of people who choose, rationally, to be politically ignorant engaging in the political process by voting. Dotson and Laurison, on the other hand, are identifying quite the opposite state of affairs; people who genuinely possess and help to develop political knowledge are choosing not to participate in the political process because of a background and history of oppression and marginalization that have undermined their confidence in political institutions. In short, Brennan's claims about why people might choose not to engage in the political process ignore the broader context of who is making these choices and why.

Pohlhaus' and Dotson's accounts of epistemic violence reveals an important facet of epistemic injustice along economic lines, namely that institutions as well as agents can perpetrate epistemic wrongs in predictable, systematic ways. Economic epistemic injustice in particular is likely to manifest as a set of systematic wrongs, which not only exclude economically marginalized individuals' knowledge from the public sphere but also result in fractures in epistemic trust in our political institutions. This fractured trust, in turn, promotes testimonial smothering amongst already epistemically marginalized communities whose trust in their political institutions has been broken.

We see, then, that we absolutely can make the claim that epistemic injustices take place along economic lines. However, we must also recognize that epistemic injustices resulting from economic, rather than racial or gender, inequality manifest in different ways than epistemic

injustices on the basis of “visible” identities; economic epistemic injustices result from the failures of institutions – as opposed to agents – to be responsive to knowledge by economically marginalized communities. We can describe economic epistemic injustices in terms of Dotson’s account of testimonial violence by identifying ways in which institutions fail to hear us and ways in which our trust in those institutions breaks down. It is important to do this critical work of identifying ways in which economic inequality results in epistemic inequality because, as I will argue in my next chapter, epistemic inequality in the political sphere carries with it dire consequences for the kinds of policy we enact, the quality of political discourse, and ultimately the legitimacy of our government itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HARMS OF ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION AND EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION

I argued in my previous chapter that we can identify ways in which economically marginalized people and communities are subject to epistemic injustices in the public political sphere. This is to say that economic inequality is likely to result in the repression or suppression of political knowledge from economically marginalized individuals and communities. In this chapter, I will explain why epistemic injustices along economic lines are a problem for both politics and the polity in the United States.

For many theorists of knowledge, political exclusion is not inherently an epistemological problem; it may be regrettable or even inexcusable on moral grounds to exclude a person or group from political participation on the basis of occupying some identity, but if we think of knowledge as a unitary entity to which any subject may in principle gain access given enough time to learn or to reason, members of the polity are epistemically interchangeable. Jason Brennan makes this argument; he writes that, if a president had to take advice either from ten thousand randomly selected middle-aged, rich, white men or young, poor, Black women, the president should choose to listen to the white men because they are more likely to have access to social scientific knowledge through higher education. The implication here is that anyone can, in principle, gain access to political knowledge, but an accident of privilege makes wealthy white men more likely to have the means to do so. Knowledge, here, is understood as something which one either possesses or does not, and therefore it is a unitary entity.

As I have shown, however, if we consider the ways in which knowledge is situated, or rather the ways in which knowledge is created in and through our experiences as situated in a sociopolitical context, we can no longer make the claim that political knowers are interchangeable; Brennan's "social scientific knowledge" is one sort of knowledge among many, developed and gleaned by subjects situated differently with regard to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, culture, religion, geography, and history. The situatedness of our knowledge becomes doubly important in a political context where, as Habermas notes, my knowledge(s) bump up against the knowledges of others; in order for my experiences of the world to count as knowledge, they must be justified through the intersubjective process of "argumentative justification" (Ingram 2010, 98), particularly with differently-situated subjects (Habermas 2003, 42). As a consequence, we must acknowledge that the exclusion of some political knowers on the basis of their economic situation alters the state of our political discourse; some knowledge about what is important to a subset of the polity and what measures might help to ameliorate their situation is left out. Conversely, some knowledge is given too much weight or airtime in our political discourse; we hear and respond more readily and more often to political knowledge from wealthy members of the polity.

In this chapter, I argue that epistemic injustice along economic lines results in four major sets of harms for the United States polity and for United States politics itself. I will address each of these sets of harms in turn. First, economic epistemic injustice results in *moral harm* insofar as it represents a disrespect for economically marginalized subjects in their capacity as knowers. Second, economic epistemic injustice results in *procedural harms* to the political process in the United States, which is to say that it worsens the quality of political discourse in our country by

precluding certain knowledge(s) from entering public debate. Third, and related, economic epistemic injustice perpetrates *material harm* against economically marginalized communities in the form of policy outcomes that either ignore the needs of those communities or actively make their situation worse. Fourth and finally, economic epistemic injustices represent *legitimation harms* against the United States government and its policy decisions, which derive their legitimacy from the free and equal participation of all citizens in the democratic process.

Moral Harm

In any kind of epistemic injustice, those most immediately and most directly harmed are those against whom an epistemic injustice is committed: the person or group whose knowledge is disregarded or undervalued. In his article “What’s Wrong With Epistemic Injustice?: Harm, Vice, Objectification, Misrecognition,” Matthew Congdon writes that epistemic injustice “is not just *wrong*, but it *wrongs someone...*” (Congdon 2017, 246). Congdon uses two models – what he calls the epistemic objectification model and the epistemic misrecognition model – to articulate two principal ways in which epistemic injustice constitutes a direct moral wrong to economically marginalized subjects. In applying his argument to political epistemic exclusions along economic lines, I will use the same recognition theory on which Congdon relies to argue that these moral wrongs take on a political character; economically marginalized subjects can be objectified or misrecognized as members of a polity.

Epistemic Objectification

Congdon writes that the model of epistemic objectification “is meant to articulate the sense in which testimonial injustice does a direct and intrinsic moral wrong to the speaker by treating her as less than a full epistemic subject” (Congdon 2017, 247). We can think of

Congdon's claim here as an extension of Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative that precludes our treating a moral subject as a "mere means" to an end; although subjects may be epistemic resources, it is immoral to treat them as "mere" epistemic resources or "epistemic objects." Congdon refers to Fricker's distinction between "informants" and "sources of information," where informants are people in their own right with information to offer, while sources of information are treated *merely* as offering information (Congdon 2017, 247). To treat someone as a source of information is, on Fricker's view, to treat a person as a mere epistemic object.

In a politico-economic context, we may need to expand Congdon's claim here to better accommodate the systematic nature¹ of economic epistemic injustice in political discourse; what does it mean for an entire political system to treat a group of people as mere epistemic objects?

Our current political system relies on individual expressions of political knowledge to function. As I explained in chapter 1, there are lots of ways individuals can express political knowledge, including but not limited to voting, donating to a campaign or cause, protesting, or even running for office themselves in order to engage in legislative debate. Because the United States is a democratic republic, it absolutely depends on these expressions of political knowledge to function; if no one voted, for example, we wouldn't have any means to elect new leaders.

Our political system's dependence on individuals' expressions of political knowledge is not in itself a problem; as Congdon and Fricker make clear, it is not a moral wrong to depend on information or expressions of knowledge that "informants" provide. Indeed, because differently situated informants have access to unique knowledges, we ought to invite political participation

¹ See chapter 3.

from as many informants as we can! However, when the state fails to account for the situated needs and interests of members of the polity who express their political knowledge through, for example, the act of casting a vote, we can argue that the state treats those individuals as *mere sources of information*. More simply, when a candidate fails to support the individuals who elect her, she is treating those individuals as mere sources of information rather than as full epistemic agents with needs and interests of their own. When a state depends on members of the polity to express their political knowledge but fails to address their needs, the state treats those individuals as mere sources of knowledge. This attitude – this failure – constitutes moral disrespect on Congdon’s view; the state and its procedures often treat economically marginalized individuals as epistemic objects.

Congdon contends, however, that epistemic objectification does not constitute the sum total of moral harm associated with epistemic injustice; a person need not be epistemically objectified to be morally wronged in an epistemic context, and there are additional moral wrongs that may obtain over and above epistemic objectification. He relies on Pohlhaus’ argument that the objectification model fails to account for instances of what she calls “epistemic exploitation,” a situation in which “speakers’ claims are not rejected or ignored *en masse* but are selectively affirmed and denied by the hearer according to how well they confirm the hearer’s existing doxastic commitments” (Congdon 2017, 247, citing Pohlhaus 2012a, 105-106). Congdon therefore argues that, as a result of these instances in which speakers are considered at least epistemic “semi-subject[s],” to borrow Pohlhaus’ term, the epistemic objectification account only explains the wrongs inherent in certain instances of epistemic injustice. The rest, Congdon thinks, are explained by what he calls “failures of epistemic recognition” (Congdon 2017, 248).

Epistemic Misrecognition

Congdon's account of failures of epistemic recognition is based, unsurprisingly, on recognition theory. He writes that one of the principal assertions of recognition theory is that "a positive relation-to-self is dependent upon, and therefore may be undone by, relations with others" (Congdon 2017, 248, referring to Honneth 1995, Taylor 1994, Brandom 2007, Butler 2004, and Bernstein 2015). He further contends that the experience of dissonance between one's own self-worth and a public denial of that worth constitutes an injustice (Congdon 2017, 248).

In elaborating this point, it is helpful to turn to Axel Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition*, on which Congdon depends in this section of his argument. In this work, Honneth develops an argument that "all social conflict is underpinned by a struggle for recognition which gives one moral significance" (Pourtois 2002, 292); this is to say that moral status is contingent upon social recognition in some capacity. This recognition is important because "social conflict" does not only concern "access to power or resources but also the status and image that are publicly assigned to a person or group" (Pourtois 2002, 292). People who are "victims" of poor social images and status may find it "difficult, even an impossibility, to build a positive relation-to-self" (Pourtois 2002, 292).² Recognition, therefore, describes one's moral status in the community and bears on one's own self-conception or notion of self-worth. This recognition has significant implications for people's lived experience; recognition does not merely mean that

² Pourtois's original analysis reads: "Dans *Kampf um Anerkennung*, Axel Honneth entreprend une reconstruction de la «grammaire morale des conflits sociaux». La thèse développée est que tout conflit social est sous-tendu par une lutte pour la reconnaissance qui lui donne une signification morale. En effet, l'enjeu d'un conflit social n'est pas seulement l'accès au pouvoir ou à des ressources mais le statut et l'image qui sont publiquement assignés à une personne ou à un groupe. Lorsque les structures sociales ou les modèles culturels en vigueur induisent des images et des statuts dépréciatifs pour certains groupes, cela peut engendrer chez ceux qui en sont victimes une difficulté, voire une impossibilité, à construire un rapport positif à soi. Alors surgit un problème moral dans la mesure où les questions morales se rapportent, selon Honneth, aux dispositifs à mettre en place pour protéger la vulnérabilité de l'individu dans son aptitude à développer un rapport positif à soi."

someone is passively “heard” by social and political institutions, but rather that they are accorded the rights and freedoms of moral and political agents. Proponents of recognition theory understand that the polity “doesn’t demand only that their discourse be heard or even debated but rather that their practices and ways of life be recognized and protected” (Pourtois 2002, 288).³

Honneth argues for a tripartite theory of recognition that accounts for what he identifies as the three main stages of subject-development. The subject, Honneth contends in this volume, develops agency in three stages. In the first stage, the subject develops agency and is recognized qua agent in intimate/interpersonal relationships. The second stage or form of recognition involves recognition as an individual moral agent worthy of moral respect; moral respect is important insofar as it allows a sociopolitical body to attribute rights to a subject and that subject may make appeals to that sociopolitical body to avoid discrimination or oppression. The third form of recognition is what Honneth calls “esteem,” which is derived from participating in sociopolitical configurations or systems in which one feels one’s particular identity, needs, and interests confirmed. These three kinds of recognition “respectively structure the three fundamental modes of relation-to-self: self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem” (Pourtois 2002, 292)⁴; one’s relation-to-self is contingent upon one’s recognition in the intimate, social, and political spheres. Congdon’s use of Honneth’s recognition theory mainly engages this second, moral form of recognition, but I contend that the third kind, as well as some of

³ “...ne demandent pas seulement que leur discours soit entendu ou même débattu mais surtout que leurs pratiques et leurs modes de vie soient reconnus et protégés.”

⁴ “...Honneth distingue trois formes de reconnaissance irréductibles : la bienveillance, le respect et l’estime sociale (ou solidarité) qui sont respectivement structurantes pour les trois modalités fondamentales du rapport à soi : la confiance en soi, le respect de soi et l’estime de soi.”

Honneth's later work on political recognition, can provide some insights into the nature of economic epistemic injustice at the level of political systems.

In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth contends that we form "deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition" in transaction with our sociocultural context. These expectations inform our notions of personal identity; he writes that "these expectations are internally linked to conditions for the formation of personal identity in that they indicate the social patterns of recognition that allow subjects to know themselves to be both autonomous and individuated beings within their socio-cultural environment" (Honneth 1995, 138). What Honneth means here is that our culture's social expectations dictate what it means to be an autonomous agent and how we ought to live as persons; when we conform to those expectations, we expect our personhood and our autonomy to be socially recognized in kind, both by the people with whom we are intersubjectively bound up and by the social, cultural, and political institutions of which we are a part.

This reciprocal relation between society and individual that Honneth describes can break down, leading to what Honneth calls "misrecognition". Honneth writes that "[i]f these normative expectations are disappointed by society, this generates...the type of moral experience expressed in cases where subjects feel disrespected" (Honneth 1995, 138). In short, when a subject conforms to social expectations for agency, but social systems nevertheless fail to recognize that subject's autonomy, it constitutes a moral wrong or harm. Honneth is conceiving of social injustice here as a kind of moral disrespect or denial of full personhood within the context of a society's normative framework.

Congdon is applying Honneth's account of personhood and recognition here to epistemic relations, or what we might think of as epistemic personhood. Congdon argues that, insofar as the status of "knower" is a normatively laden one that implies certain capacities on the part of a subject –the role of knower refers "to what someone can *do*, what roles someone may legitimately assume" in a social context (Congdon 2017, 248) – then "regarding oneself as a knower is a positive relation-to-self, a way of seeing oneself as bearing worth or normative status" (Congdon 2017, 248). Public denial of one's normative status as a knower, therefore, constitutes an injustice in the form of misrecognition. Congdon draws on Honneth's account of "the moral injury of misrecognition," an injustice that, according to Honneth, degrades one's sense of identity (Honneth 1995, 132). Congdon concludes that "epistemic-injustice-as-recognition-failure may be understood as a withholding or denial of forms of social validation that are necessary for the development and maintenance of the specific relation-to-self involved in regarding oneself as a knower" (Congdon 2017, 248).

Congdon is focusing on Honneth's *moral* dimension of misrecognition here, but Honneth's account of *political* misrecognition is also applicable to cases of epistemic injustice; as knowers, we can experience political disrespect much in the same way that we can experience moral disrespect. When I offer up my political knowledge in public discourse, I can feel a lack of esteem from my political institutions; perhaps my contributions are deemed unworthy to be featured in the newspaper or on a news show, or maybe I stage a protest against a policy that will have an unjust impact, but nothing changes as a result. Perhaps I vote for a presidential candidate that represents my interests, but the particularities of the electoral college system mean that a

different candidate is elected instead. My political agency is limited, and thus I feel a lack of esteem in/by my political institutions.

Later Honneth modifies his account of recognition to deal even more robustly with the effect that our economic and political institutions can have on our possibilities for recognition; in *Freedom's Right*, Honneth argues that we must analyze what he calls the “democratic public” as “an embodiment of social freedom”; the public political sphere is where citizens may exercise their political agency and freedom by forming “beliefs that form the principles to be obeyed by the legislature” (Honneth 2014, 254). In short, the public political sphere is the site for self-determination. When I engage in that democratic public, but my needs and interests aren’t addressed, I am misrecognized not only in my capacity as a knower but also as a member of the polity; as a *political* knower specifically, I experience a lack of esteem in the context of the democratic public.

Economic exclusion from the democratic public is of particular concern to Honneth; he contends that recognition in the economic sphere is necessary for the democratic political sphere to function properly. He writes that “deliberative will-formation in the...public sphere is bounded; the latter can only live up to its principles of legitimacy” if we are also recognized as free and autonomous agents in both the intimate and economic spheres (Honneth 2014, 254-255). Even if, legally, every citizen in the polity has the right to participate in collective democratic will-formation, having the political right to participate in democratic discursive exchange does not guarantee political recognition (esteem); political rights are necessary but not sufficient conditions for political esteem. Honneth argues that, even after the laboring class was granted the legal right to vote, “a series of cultural mechanisms of exclusion continued to prevent

many members of the lower classes from having their voice heard in the public exchange of opinions” (Honneth 2014, 287). He provides the example of Bourdieu’s “bourgeois habitus,” modes of comportment that signify wealth or standing in the community, as one such cultural roadblock to political esteem, but we can also include the more concrete barriers to political participation that I explained in chapter 2; the mere fact that presidential elections take place on a weekday, for example, might prevent some economically marginalized individuals from participating, as might the outsize influence of donations from wealthy corporations and PACs.

The media exacerbates this problem of political exclusion; Honneth argues that “[t]hese informal disadvantages would also be reinforced by the thematic and stylistic selectivity of the mass media, which had the task of mediating the public exchange of opinions...” (Honneth 2014, 287). Honneth’s contention, which goes even beyond Congdon’s claim about epistemic misrecognition, is that econo-cultural misrecognition undermines systems of political esteem; I can’t be recognized as a member of the democratic public or, even more specifically, as a political *knower* until I experience social freedom in the economic sphere. This lack of political recognition itself constitutes a kind of moral disrespect or wrong; my political rights, guaranteed by my membership in a political institution and my moral standing in that institution, are not necessarily inviolable in practice.

Taking Congdon and Honneth together, we can identify reciprocal or mutually constituting moral wrongs resulting from economic epistemic injustice: moral disrespect to marginalized subjects in their capacity as knowers, and moral disrespect to marginalized subjects in their capacity as members of the polity. When political institutions, either by design or through a failure of administration, depend on political subjects’ knowledge and participation

without representing and meeting their needs, they morally disrespect members of the polity qua knowers and qua bearers of political rights.

Procedural Harm

The second category of harm associated with economic epistemic injustice is what I call “procedural harm,” which is to say that economic epistemic injustice is a failure to instantiate ideal political discursive procedure to the detriment of that procedure itself. Where economic epistemic injustice’s moral harms fall specifically on the subjects to whom the injustice has been done, procedural harm is much more diffuse; it harms every member of the polity that depends on collective will-formation in the public sphere to ground legislation. I rely once again in this section on Habermas’ account of ideal political discourse as a diagnostic tool; by making claims about how political discourse *ought* to proceed, we can critically examine ways in which our society deviates from that procedure.⁵

In chapter 2, I explained Habermas’ original account of the discourse ethic, as well as a modification pertaining more directly to political discourse, but some key points bear repeating in this section. Discourse is an intersubjective exchange between rational, autonomous subjects that should conform as closely as possible to a procedure that promotes an exchange that is “free of external and internal constraints” (Habermas 1985b, 42). This is to say that, with the exception of the “force of the better argument,” participants in a discursive exchange should not be moved to a conclusion by any other force. Habermas contends that a procedure that conforms to the

⁵ David Ingram makes a similar point in his 2016 introduction to Habermas, writing that “Because the ideal speech situation implicit in discourse cannot be realized, it can at best serve as a critical *standard* for assessing the extent to which real discourses fail to satisfactorily approximate our rational expectations” (Ingram 2016, 103).

ideal, unconstrained, speech situation will inevitably result in rational consensus between all parties to whom the issue at stake pertains, so long as discourse continues long enough.

The rules that comprise the discursive procedure serve as a justification for the consensus that results from the exchange; we can be sure that the consensus is right because we have followed the rules of this special sort of communicative action. The ideal speech situation serves as a way of mediating the dynamics of power and privilege that bleed into discourse from the lifeworld, but it also ensures that any subject that might be affected by the consensus can contribute to the consensus itself. By mandating universal inclusion and lack of coercion, the procedure guarantees the validity of consensus. For this reason, even though Habermas recognizes that we can never actually instantiate the ideal speech situation, it is nevertheless vitally important that we approximate those special conditions as closely as we can and assume that they obtain when we enter into a discursive exchange.

In applying the principles of his discourse ethic to political discourse specifically, later Habermas somewhat relaxes his requirements for discursive exchange; for example, he is no longer as concerned with equal and infinite speaking time for all concerned subjects. Along similar lines, Habermas recognizes the need to substitute something like a majority decision for true consensus where material and time constraints require a decision before a polity or legislating body can agree on a single course of action. However, Habermas does retain some of the basic principles that characterize the ideal speech situation; it is still vital for the integrity of the discursive procedure that all affected subjects be able to contribute their views, even if not all affected subjects are in the position of legislating. Habermas thinks we should be able to achieve this more relaxed standard of inclusivity based on his staged model of political discourse.

Habermas breaks political discourse down into three distinct stages, which again are “everyday communication,” “mass communication,” and “institutionalized discourse” (Habermas 2009, 159). The stage of “everyday communication” incorporates the knowledge, views, and interests of the polity as a whole; the polity may express their knowledge through voting, protest, discussion, and I argue donations and other ways as well. These contributions are then “filtered” (to use Habermas’ term) through the mass media to create a unified account of the public’s interests, which both the public and the legislators can critically examine.

It is fairly clear that any way of preventing a member of the public from participating in public exchange of ideas and reasons constitutes a barrier to the ideal execution of the discursive procedure; the procedure begins with public debate, and any consensus that results from that debate can and will only address concerns raised in the public phase of discourse. I have already provided examples of some ways in which an economically unequal democracy like ours can result in harm to discursive procedure at the level of the public: scheduling elections for workdays and making it difficult to protest are just two such examples. I will explain in the next two sections why these exclusions matter for the outcomes of public political discourse, but these exclusions also constitute a problem for the quality of discourse itself.

Epistemic exclusions in public discourse curtail opportunities for what José Medina calls “epistemic friction,” (Medina 2013, 50) instances and/or practices of differently situated knowledges bumping up against and confronting one another. Friction, Medina contends, is a kind of resistance between “opposing forces,” in this case opposing epistemic forces that stem from “differential experiential perspective[s] of socially situated subjects” (Medina 2013, 48-49). Confronting differently situated knowledges does important epistemic work; because my

knowledge is both limited and enabled by my particular social situation, contending with another subject's socially-differentiated knowledge offers me both the chance to critically examine my own "prejudices and biases" and "bodies of ignorance" and the opportunity to unmask those same epistemic gaps at the level of my society, culture, or polity (Medina 2013, 49-50).⁶

Habermas' own account of knowledge-formation also depends on epistemic friction, although Habermas does not use that term; he instead refers to the necessity for the "opposition of other social actors whose value orientations conflict with ours" in developing knowledge (Habermas 2003, 42). Habermas conceives of knowledge as a "threeplace relationship" between a subject's proposition, world, and community (Ingram 2010, 98). On this view, "...claiming to know involves referring (1) a belief or proposition to (2) a mind-independent world of objects by means of (3) reasons that are convincing for a particular community" (Ingram 2010, 98). For Habermas, then, it is not merely that our beliefs themselves are socially mediated, but also that those beliefs don't count as knowledge until they have been intersubjectively justified. The discursive procedure is the site for this justification or "friction".

Medina suggests two principles for facilitating productive epistemic friction: the principle of acknowledgement and engagement, and the principle of epistemic equilibrium. The principle of acknowledgement "dictates that all the cognitive forces we encounter must be acknowledged and, insofar as becomes possible, they must be in some way engaged..." This is to say that we must include any and all relevant knowledges in our public discourses in order to maximize the

⁶ It is important to note that epistemic friction does not always produce these positive or productive results; Medina also reveals ways in which a subject may push back against differentiated knowledges that challenge her worldview, biases, or habits. Part of what constitutes effective or beneficial epistemic friction on Medina's view is deliberately exposing oneself to differentiated knowledges and practicing openness to self-critique that might result from that exposure.

possibility for productive epistemic friction. The principle of equilibrium “lays out the desideratum of searching for equilibrium in the interplay of cognitive forces, without some forces overpowering others, without some cognitive influences becoming unchecked and unbalanced” (Medina 2013, 50). What Medina means here is that we have a discursive obligation not only to include all relevant knowledges but also to ensure that no one epistemic perspective is so privileged that it cannot be the object of critical examination, reflection, and correction. These principles maximize epistemic friction, resulting in more effective discursive interaction.

When these two principles do *not* obtain – when one epistemic perspective is universalized or taken as primary in a public discursive exchange – opportunities for epistemic friction are limited and the quality and efficacy of that discourse suffer. Epistemic exclusions are not only harmful to the subject that is excluded, but they also “damage the social knowledge available and harm the chances for epistemic improvement of the...community” (Medina 2013, 31). In short, when a subject or community of subjects is excluded from a discourse, the quality of discourse suffers, which in turn affects the community or polity itself. This epistemically impoverished discourse is of particular concern when exclusions at the level of mass communication and public will-formation are taken up and refined by the mass media and debated at the level of policy.

At the level of mass communication, our discursive procedure assumes that the media will function in a systematic and unbiased way to communicate the needs and interests of the public, both to that public itself and to those in the position of legislating. Honneth, following Dewey, contends that the media’s role in refining or “filtering” public discourse helps to secure “a form of social freedom by enabling individuals, in communication with all other members of

society, to improve their own living conditions” when “judging the consequences of their own actions” as related by the media (Honneth 2014, 274). This is to say that the media play a vital role in the democratic public, specifically of making the whole of public discourse accessible to the polity. Honneth argues that if “the media fulfil their task of providing the general knowledge required for dealing with social problems, the members of society will be capable, under conditions of equal rights to freedom and participation, to commonly explore appropriate solutions...” (Honneth 2014, 274); the polity’s ability to address its own needs is contingent on the correct functioning of the media.

Epistemic injustice along economic lines can prevent the correct functioning of the media; when media outlets privilege wealthy voices and views and/or highlight sensational news for profit, the media paint a picture of public discourse that isn’t always accurate. These distortions can have disastrous effects on our political procedure itself. As a prime example, look no further than the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, which was incited by a sitting president. President Trump’s media presence is a perfect example of the distortions that wealth can prompt in the media; he is both a wealthy person in his own right with a substantial following on social media⁷ owing largely to his own entertainment ventures, but also his brash and sometimes erratic behavior made for compelling news segments, drawing in viewers and therefore profits for news outlets. As a consequence, the media gave far too much airtime to Trump’s false accusations of election fraud during the 2020 presidential election, allowing a marginal and blatant falsehood to undermine public confidence in the results of the election. By privileging the views of a wealthy man for profit, media outlets both failed to carry out their role

⁷ Prior to the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol, at which point his social media accounts were largely suspended or deleted.

in democratic discursive procedure and actively obscured public expressions of political knowledge by undermining the credibility of the vote. In this case, the consequences of such a severe failure of the media to maintain the integrity of democratic discursive procedure were deadly, but in all cases, discursive distortions at the level of mass media alter the trajectory of public debate itself.

The level of “institutionalized discourse” in legislative debate is much more formalized than either public debate or mass communication, and as such is less vulnerable to the kinds of distortions and exclusions we see at the previous two stages of political discourse. Although it is difficult to get elected unless one is wealthy, once elected to national office in the United States, it is difficult to exclude a Congressman, for example, on the basis of wealth. However, because the previous two stages of political discourse are subject to significant distortion along economic lines, the issues up for debate at the legislative phase are likely to fail to address the actual needs and interests of the polity as a whole. I therefore propose that the procedural harms/distortions that result from economic inequality will, in turn, produce two additional categories of harm: material harm, in the form of legislation that fails to address the needs of the people, and harms to the legitimacy of policy decisions themselves.

Material Harm

The third consequence of economic epistemic injustice is what I call “material harm.” Material harm describes the ways in which members of a polity suffer directly from economic epistemic injustice in terms of their lived experience, possibilities, and circumstances. Specifically, I contend that, because their needs and interests are not sufficiently represented in political discourse, economically marginalized individuals and communities are likely to suffer

from policy outcomes that do not address their needs and interests and instead favor the ultra-wealthy. Concretely, these policy outcomes result in worse access to healthcare, worse access to education, and worse access to public services for economically marginalized individuals, as well as widening economic inequality.

As I demonstrated in chapter 2, economic inequality in the United States results in political inequality, as well; because it takes at least minimal financial security to contribute knowledge to public discourse through voting and protest – not to mention the exorbitant amounts that the wealthiest Americans donate to campaigns, PACs, and special interest groups – it is much harder to participate in collective will formation if one is economically precarious and much easier if one is wealthy. Corporations, too, dominate political discourse by controlling media narratives, funding massive lobbying efforts, and donating to superPACs per the *Citizens United* ruling. Economically marginalized individuals are therefore, on balance, much less likely to participate – or participate to the same extent – in political discourse than their wealthy counterparts. Wealthy individuals also have access to avenues for politico-epistemic expression that their economically marginalized counterparts do not; owning news outlets, corporate lobbying, and even direct contact with elected representatives are possible ways for wealthy people to advocate for their own political interests and influence policy.

The problem with this differential in political participation is that epistemic and political subjects are not interchangeable; Page et al. revealed in *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* that the ultrawealthy tend to espouse disproportionately fiscally conservative and far-right views compared with the polity at large because their political knowledge and interests center on

maximizing their own wealth.⁸ When these views drive political donations, lobbying interests, media coverage, and even policy debate when elected officials often kick in their own wealth to bolster their campaign, it means that a wealthy minority's knowledge and political interests are disproportionately better represented in all three stages of political discourse.⁹

Not only are the knowledge and interests of wealthy Americans better represented in discourse, but in policy outcomes, as well. Although the fiscally conservative Republican party has lost the popular vote in seven out of the last eight presidential elections as of November 2020, the party “has figured out how to succeed with minority support” over the past several decades (Leonhardt 2021) in terms of national policy; a February 15, 2021 New York Times article by David Leonhardt reminds us that “Republican-appointed justices dominate the Supreme Court...[t]axes on the wealthy are near their lowest level in a century,” and the conservative party benefits hugely from a Senate structure that gives more power to less populace states. Policy outcomes in the past several decades have favored conservative aims; the United States has not invested in infrastructure to combat climate change or in public education, Congress has gutted Medicare, taxes have been low, promises to raise the national minimum wage have not yet been fulfilled^{10, 11}, and Congress has passed only minimal direct COVID-19 relief while at the same time bailing out big corporations.

⁸ Nancy MacLean's *Democracy In Chains* (2017) provides a rich example of Page et al.'s claim here; she examines Charles Koch's role in forming the Republican party into a vehicle to promote and codify libertarian ideology and far-right fiscal policy, despite these policies being further right even of most Republican voters' and politicians' views.

⁹ See chapter 2, as well as *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* (2019), for a more thorough discussion of the disproportionate influence of wealth in politics.

¹⁰ As of February 26, 2021, a measure to include a \$15/hour minimum wage in a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package was struck down on the floor of Congress.

These policy outcomes help the wealthy by keeping taxes low, curbing public services, and subjecting corporations to only minimal regulation, but they actively harm the economically marginalized.

Conservative and far-right fiscal values have dominated United States economic policy for decades, and recent studies have demonstrated that low taxation and minimal public spending result in increased economic inequality. Since Reagan's tax cuts in the early 80s, for example, GDP and unemployment rates tend to stay relatively stable. However, "the incomes of the rich grew much faster" in the United States than in wealthy nations that either raised taxes or kept tax rates stagnant over the last 50 years (Picchi 2021). It is also worth noting that these statistics about unemployment are misleadingly positive; although prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the United States boasted a relatively low unemployment rate, unemployment statistics don't typically account for the kind of employment people are able to obtain. People employed only part-time or employed as gig workers count against the unemployment rate although they do not have stable, full-time positions. Gig work is increasingly a part of America's economic landscape; the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that 55 million Americans were gig workers in 2017. Gig workers often make far below a living wage and are rarely eligible for health insurance benefits; in just the first half of 2020, Uber spent over \$1.2 million to lobby the government to keep their drivers classified as "contractors" rather than as employees, exempting the company from providing health insurance and other benefits (Karbal 2021). As of February 2021, Uber was successful in this effort in the state of California, where it is headquartered (Bond 2020).

¹¹ It is worth noting that \$15/hour is no longer a living wage in most parts of the United States; a living wage would be closer to \$20/hour.

Low tax rates and the proliferation of poorly paid work have led to widening wealth gaps; middle- and working-class individuals' income growth has been lagging behind rising cost of living, and their access to healthcare and public services has been curtailed. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic many Americans were unable to afford a \$400 emergency (Selyukh 2020). About 40% of Americans “were struggling to afford at least one basic necessity and...78 percent of full-time workers were living paycheck-to-paycheck” in 2017. 50,000 people in the United States were homeless in 2018 (Sirota & Bragman 2020).

Conservative and right-wing fiscal policy also creates worse material circumstances for economically marginalized individuals in the United States by systematically underfunding public education; because public education in the United States is funded in large part by local property taxes, lower-income school districts receive less funding than wealthy ones. State tax structures should ideally make up the difference, but because parents in wealthy school districts enjoy more political clout and have the time to lobby state and local governments, lower-income districts rarely get the funding they need to support their schools; the US Department of Education reported that 40% of low-income schools “don’t get a fair share of state and local funds” because “school districts across the country are inequitably distributing their state and local funds.” Unequal state spending on education has been reified at the highest levels of government; a majority conservative Supreme Court struck down *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* in the late 1960s, arguing that education is not a protected or guaranteed right in the United States (Martin et al. 2018). Lack of equitable federal funding for education results in demonstrably worse outcomes for students in low-income school districts; teachers in these districts are paid less, class sizes are larger, and schools have a harder time

affording basic educational materials like textbooks and computers. These educational inequities have lasting impacts on students, who attend university at lower rates and tend to earn lower wages later in life compared to their counterparts in wealthier districts.¹²

Nowhere is the impact of conservative fiscal policy in the United States starker than in healthcare, a \$3.8 trillion industry in 2019, accounting for over 17% of the US GDP that year (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services 2020). The lack of public healthcare options funded by taxation has placed a massive financial burden on already overstretched American households; for example, of the 9.5 million Americans diagnosed with various forms of cancer between 2000 and 2012, over 42% “depleted their entire life’s assets” by their second year of treatment, according to a recent study by Gilligan et al. in the *American Journal of Medicine*. The same study also noted that “large financial burdens...adversely affect access to care and outcomes among cancer patients,” resulting in worse health outcomes for already financially precarious individuals and/or families (Gilligan et al. 2018). Another study by Himmelstein et al. in the *American Journal of Public Health* notes that medical expenses are one of the leading causes of bankruptcy in the United States (Himmelstein et al. 2019). Many Americans are forced to seek funding for medical care on the market; over \$650 million a year in medical costs are raised on GoFundMe, a crowdfunding startup founded in 2010. While the medical industry flourishes, increasingly desperate citizens and residents of the United States are facing bankruptcy and death because they can’t afford to seek treatment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also served to make the differential impact of conservative fiscal policy clear. The wealth of US billionaires rose by about a third in 2020 to approximately

¹² I extend a special thank you to middle school teacher (and my husband) Matthew Volk for explaining the system of public education funding in the United States to me.

\$4 trillion, and big corporations received the brunt of federal COVID-relief. The \$2.2 trillion CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act that Congress passed in late March 2020 was distributed in ways that benefited wealthier institutions across all three of its major targets: small businesses, healthcare organizations, and institutions of higher education. The 500-employee cap for the Paycheck Protection Program allowed multimillion-dollar national chains to take advantage of federally backed loans if they had *locations* employing 500 or fewer workers, for example. The brunt of federal aid designated for healthcare went to hospitals serving wealthier patients, and education funds went to already well-endowed, private institutions of higher education like Harvard and Yale (which eventually turned down the money following public backlash) (Abramson 2020).

By contrast, the burdens many economically marginalized Americans already faced have been intensified; the hardest hit industries have been those that are lowest paying, including retail, leisure, tourism, and hospitality, resulting in mass layoffs of already precarious workers. These layoffs have already resulted in increases in foreclosure, eviction, and food insecurity. More than 50 million people experienced food insecurity in 2020 (Myers & Hodges 2020). By summer 2020, 14 million workers lost employer-based health insurance. Mass loss of jobs, homes, and healthcare has led record numbers to consider suicide, and violent crime rates have risen in the United States during the pandemic (Sirota & Bragman 2020). As of February 23, 2021, 500,000 Americans had died of the COVID-19 virus, and health care providers are having to ration personal protective equipment, ventilators, and vaccines. By September 2021, over 675,000 Americans had died of COVID, and emergency rooms were so crowded during the Delta variant surge that they turned away patients experiencing non-COVID-related issues; one

tragic example of such overcrowding is an Alabama man, Ray DeMonia, who died after he was turned away from 43 emergency rooms while experiencing a cardiac emergency (Bella 2021). The United States' largely privatized healthcare system is ill-equipped to handle a public health crisis of this magnitude, resulting in far more deaths and long-term health consequences.

While corporations receive government bailouts, Congress has struggled for months to pass legislation to distribute even small direct payments to Americans. Direct payments benefit middle- and working-class Americans far more than the wealthy because people use that money to pay rent, to buy food, to pay down debt, or to use for medical expenses; although some of that money will in turn stimulate the economy, the bulk goes to necessities and subsistence expenses. Many legislators, including Democratic Senator and multimillionaire Joe Manchin¹³, opposed direct relief payments, arguing that they were a misdirection of federal funds. The Washington Post, owned by multibillionaire Jeff Bezos, ran an op ed making similar claims (Bruenig 2021). The United States' fiscal priorities are clear, and they prioritize the health and wealth of corporations and wealthy individuals over that of economically marginalized Americans, who suffer disproportionately from lack of access to basic necessities, healthcare, and affordable education. In short, widening economic inequality, exacerbated but not created by the pandemic, has made the material circumstances of economically marginalized individuals considerably worse by throwing their access to food, shelter, healthcare, and education into jeopardy while offering little direct relief.

The fact that many Americans have trouble accessing even the most basic necessities demonstrates the extent to which the focus on fiscal conservatism in this country has caused

¹³ Manchin's fortune is largely invested in commercial banking.

policy to ignore the needs and interests of the economic majority. The result is a fairly dire set of material circumstances that maintain and even exacerbate economic precarity and inequality in the United States. These circumstances manifest in both physical and psychological harm for people without access to food, shelter, healthcare, or education.¹⁴

Legitimation Harm

The final category of harm that results from economic epistemic injustice is what I call “legitimation harm,” or harm to the legitimacy of both the United States government and its policy decisions. In elucidating exactly what it means to harm the legitimacy of a government or its policies, I turn once again to Habermas, who explains how democratic governments may claim legitimacy. I will contend in this section that, due to the systemic exclusion of economically marginalized individuals and communities from the democratic process in the United States, the US government has damaged the bedrock of its own legitimacy.

According to Ingram, Habermas’ theory of democratic legitimation rests on the claim that “a legitimate circulation of power must be grounded in communicative power, or the power of public opinion as it is generated in the public sphere and taken up for debate by legislators” (Ingram 2010, 29). This is to say that what grants a democratic government its power to govern is not just the *assent* of the governed but the *active participation* of the governed in steering the policy and bureaucratic functions that comprise what Habermas calls the “administrative power” of the state. A polity may assent to be governed by a monarch, for example, who has unitary control over policy and bureaucratic decisions, but this wouldn’t be a legitimate democratic

¹⁴ Recent studies in California have shown that a modest monthly stipend for low-income families greatly reduces experiences of stress, lowers cortisol levels, and even increases the chance that members of the family will go on to full-time employment.

government. What makes a democracy democratic is that the polity must have a say in those policy and bureaucratic decisions; a democratic republic, like the United States, must at least derive administrative power from the communicative power of the polity.

A democratic state therefore depends on the correct functioning of the public discursive procedure; that procedure is the mode by which communicative power is “filtered” through mass media and legislation to become or to legitimate the administrative power of the state. When the procedure is working – when all members of the polity have opportunities to contribute political knowledge, that knowledge is taken up by mass media, and the distilled public opinion is debated by elected representatives – a democratic government can claim legitimate power and its policy decisions will be legitimate ones.

As we have seen, however, the systematic exclusion of economically marginalized individuals and communities from all three stages of public political discourse constitutes a procedural failure in the public sphere of the United States. And when the procedure of public political discourse fails, administrative power is decoupled from communicative power.

Ingram discusses some of the ways that a capitalist economic structure specifically represents a problem for public discursive procedure and, by extension, for political legitimation; he contends that there is a “tension between capitalism and democracy” that stems from the outside “social power of economic elites” (Ingram 2010, 267-268). On Habermas’ view, because “public opinion is *selectively* filtered” both by mass media and “administrative elites...the administrative power we get at the end of the power circuit might not sufficiently resemble the communicative power that supposedly justifies it” (Ingram 2010, 29, emphasis mine). Further, Ingram adds that “the predominance of bargaining, compromise, and preference aggregation

suggests that democratic dialogue is really a strategic game in which social power eclipses the achievement of unconstrained consensus” (Ingram 2010, 29). Ingram’s analysis here is meant as an acknowledgment of the nonideal character of political discourse, which is often leveled as a critique against Habermas’ theory of discourse, but we can also take his analysis as a diagnosis of the problems facing democratic legitimation in a capitalist economy that precludes equal participation in political discourse; when economic elites bargain with administrative elites, spend huge sums on lobbying, own media outlets, and represent massive proportions of campaign donations, any resultant policy consensus will certainly be “constrained.”

The pressures on democratic discourse that stem from economic inequality result in what Habermas calls a “legitimation crisis.” A crisis, he argues, is “the idea of an objective force that deprives a subject of some part of his normal sovereignty” (Habermas 1973, 1). In the case of a democratic government that fails to procedurally incorporate input from substantial swathes of the polity, the deprivation of sovereignty is extremely literal; economically marginalized individuals are *in fact* being deprived of democratic sovereignty when their epistemic contributions are depressed and/or excluded in public discourse.

Importantly for Habermas, the deprivation of sovereignty must not be “accidental,” but rather it must be result from “structurally inherent system-imperatives that are incompatible” and that threaten the integrity of the sociopolitical system itself (Habermas 1973, 2). In the case of political exclusion along economic lines, it is clear that these exclusions are not the result of mere prejudice or bias on the part of wealthy voters, news moguls, or politicians; rather, the conditions for participation in the United States’ democratic process are such that it is difficult or impossible to contribute political knowledge unless one is wealthy, as I have shown in previous

chapters. Consequently, the United States government is not legitimately democratic, as its administrative power is not properly derived from the communicative power of its polity.

The legitimation problems with the United States government should worry us for a couple of reasons. First, if our government is not properly democratic, then it is something else masquerading as a democracy, thereby circumventing the necessity for legitimation as this other political body. Given the outsize influence of the wealthy in our political system, the United States may be described as something of an economic oligarchy, with wealthy citizens both wielding political power directly and driving policy debates through practices like corporate lobbying. Yet the polity at large does not elect its corporate leaders – a problem I’ll return to in my last chapter when I discuss the positive implications of economic democracy on our political system – and has little say over the economic system that allows a privileged few to run for office, control media outlets, or spend millions in lobbying expenditures.

The second reason we should be worried about the United States’ legitimation problem is that it is unsustainable; as economic inequality grows in our country, it is the case both that only the wealthy will be able to run for office and that the growing stratum of economically marginalized people will find their needs and interests shunted to one side in public discourse. This state of affairs can only continue for so long; the United States, already bitterly divided, is heading for a political crisis point as the polity at large loses confidence in its government to address their needs. This lack of trust has never been clearer as during the COVID-19 pandemic, which as I write in early 2021 has been prolonged by government inaction and exacerbated by government’s failures to provide access to healthcare, vaccines, and stimulus money. As

economic inequality and its corresponding political inequality widen, the country heads further toward legitimization crisis.

What is clear from analyses of all four of these types of harm – moral, procedural, material, and legitimization – is that they depend on and reinforce one another; the procedural harms that result from excluding economically marginalized subjects promote material harm by ensuring that a critical mass of the polity cannot communicate its needs to those in power. When democratic discursive procedure stops working, the legitimacy of the government itself becomes a question. And when many members of the polity are not listened to or respected by their political institutions, they are harmed not just materially but morally.

The combined moral, procedural, material, and legitimization harms that result from economic epistemic injustices act as a mandate; the United States must rethink its political process to maximize epistemic inclusion and, in so doing, to better address the needs and interests of the polity. In the following chapters, I will investigate democratic theories that do a good job of maximizing epistemic inclusion and propose some concrete changes to our present politico-economic system that will allow the United States to better instantiate those democratic ideals.

CHAPTER FIVE
AGAINST EPISTOCRACY
OR
HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE DELIBERATION

What should be the relationship between knowledge and politics?

In his book *Against Democracy*, Jason Brennan proposes that only those with what he terms “social scientific” knowledge should be allowed to participate in politics through the act of casting a vote; he advocates for voter licensing in an effort to preclude those without formalized education from participating in what he deems to be high-stakes decisions about political representation and policy. Brennan and I are in agreement that political decision-making is a high-stakes enterprise, but I cannot agree with his epistocratic proposal.

This chapter is devoted to an investigation of political theories that can accommodate the account of knowledge as situated, incomplete, and fallible that I have developed using work by social, feminist, and anti-racist epistemologists. I use Elizabeth Anderson’s political epistemology as a metric for assessing the epistemic efficacy of political theories; she proposes three criteria by which we can assess a political system’s ability to incorporate and respond to the available knowledge in the polity (“diversity, discussion, and dynamism”). I will begin by explaining why Brennan’s epistocratic proposal fails to accommodate this understanding of knowledge, but I will also reject some democratic theories – specifically theories of aggregative democracy – that also fail Anderson’s criteria for epistemic inclusion. Ultimately, I will contend

that deliberative democracy, as expounded by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, is a political system that can accommodate an account of knowledge as situated by building in ways of revisiting and revising political decisions.

Against Epistocracy

In my first chapter, I outlined some of the ways in which Brennan's account of political knowledge falls short. He thinks of knowledge in terms of acquired expertise, something that one may learn only in the context of formal education, and as something that will help us – either by rote memorization or by a process of deductive reason – to arrive at “correct” answers to political problems. Brennan attributes many of the United States' failures to pass policies that are effective in administering and caring for its polity to ignorance on the part of its voters, contending that instituting epistocracy – or “rule of the wise” – by excluding so-called ignorant members of the polity from voting will result in better policy. Members of the polity would have to pass an exam testing their “social scientific knowledge” before voting.

I argued instead, along with numerous social, feminist, and anti-racist epistemologists, that we must think of knowledge differently; instead of treating knowledge as something that we learn and possess or don't, we should think of knowledge as situated and intersubjective. Knowledge is something we acquire and create as we move through the world as members of social, political, cultural, and linguistic institutions and communities. We learn through experiences as well as through formal education, learn from others in our community, and create new knowledges¹ as we cope with and navigate structures of power and privilege.

¹ I use “knowledges” in the plural here following Lisa Bergin, a feminist theorist of epistemic difference. She argues that differently-situated subjects develop varied bodies of knowledge in navigating and coping with their relationships to social and political structures. Using “knowledges” in the plural conveys the plurality of knowledge that exist within a community or polity. See Bergin 2002.

Social, feminist, and anti-racist epistemologists like Lorraine Code, Alison Wylie, José Medina, and Charles Mills tell us that knowledge is always already bound up in structures of power and privilege; knowledge is *situated*. These thinkers contend that we gain and create knowledge in our interactions with other subjects through practices like testimony and discourse, in our relationships to institutions like schools, governments, healthcare, and in our communities. We learn to navigate these institutions and our social relationships within those institutions, thereby creating knowledge about the institutions themselves and the agents included and constituted therein.²

On this rich and complex account of knowledge, we can no longer treat knowledge as a commodity that one either possesses or does not; on this view, we can instead examine overlapping knowledges, communal knowledges, flawed or incomplete knowledges, and knowledges that develop within and regarding structures of power and privilege. Based on their situation, experience, and communal resources, people may develop certain kinds of expertise or certain epistemic gaps. People may develop knowledges that challenge or uphold certain power dynamics. On this view, knowledge is plural, it is intersubjective, and it is fallible.

The emphasis on the fallibility of knowledge in social epistemology is a real departure from a more “traditional” view of knowledge like Brennan’s; Brennan thinks of ignorance and knowledge in opposition, contrary to social epistemology’s more nuanced view that access to certain kinds of knowledge or habits of knowing forecloses access to others. Brennan draws a stark distinction between political experts – whom he nicknames “Vulcans” – and those he considers to be politically ignorant subjects, or “Hooligans.”

² See Chapter 1 for a more detailed account of social, feminist, and anti-racist epistemologies from these thinkers.

“Hooligans”, on Brennan’s view, are political subjects that are unlikely to invest in social scientific education and likely to vote with their community or political party. “Hooligans” represent the majority of the American polity, according to Brennan. It’s bad, on Brennan’s view, to do politics in this way; he thinks each voter should come to their own independently-reasoned conclusion and that it is irrational to be moved by the opinions of other political agents. What I think Brennan needs to consider more carefully is that the communal aspect of political decision-making doesn’t make members of the polity any less rational or knowledgeable; indeed, it makes a lot of sense to consult those who share one’s interests, are similarly situated, and hold similar values before making an important political decision. In this sense, the vast majority of the polity are engaging in effective and rational political knowledge practices by assessing as a community whether certain candidates or policies will improve their lives and align with their values. Calling most members of the polity “Hooligans” belittles and trivializes these important communal epistemic practices.

Where Brennan and social epistemologists would agree is that most members of the polity aren’t “experts” in Brennan’s social scientific sense and therefore are likely to make mistakes in their political decision-making. Social epistemologists, however, would hold that Brennan’s “Vulcans” are also likely to make mistakes, although perhaps of a different kind. As I will discuss later in this chapter, making mistakes is endemic to our political life; because all of our knowledge is limited in some fundamental way based on our experiences and social situatedness, we are all likely to have epistemic gaps or to develop bad epistemic habits. Brennan’s epistocracy does not account for those mistakes; he relies on what he regards as for

economically marginalized individuals the infallibility of “social scientific knowledge” to eliminate them, or at least reduce them to a great degree.

“Vulcans”, on Brennan’s view, are trained to rationally deduce answers to political problems using their knowledge of the complexities of our political system. While he acknowledges that “Vulcans” may hold rationally competing views, Brennan doesn’t allow for much possibility that political experts, despite their training, may nevertheless exhibit some ignorance or gaps in their knowledge. He also doesn’t investigate the possibility that the conditions under which social scientific knowledge is produced may themselves be biased or structurally flawed in racist, sexist, classist, and ableist ways, thereby producing “experts” with knowledge that is systematically lacking or flawed. To take just one example from recent politics, we often treat statistical analyses and polling as accurate predictors for electoral success. However, the 2020 presidential election ended up being much closer than most experts predicted for a couple of reasons. First, polling practices systematically excluded people without a landline and without reliable internet access, thereby overrepresenting the views of wealthier Americans. Second, statistical analyses were based on demographics information that failed to account for an increasing population of Latinx voters. Both working class white voters and Latino men voted Republican in that election in greater numbers than statistical analysis and polling predicted; certain biases and epistemic gaps on the part of analysts (and in the training of analysts) contributed to the fallibility of even expert political knowledge. While social scientific knowledge of the kind that Brennan describes is certainly vital for our political representatives and for politics more generally, it is not the *only* important kind of knowledge for effective politics, and it is not free from bias or systematic gaps.

We see evidence of the fallibility of our political knowledge in actions by individual members of the polity who make bad or mistaken political decisions, at the level of interpretation by the mass media, and at the level of legislation. I occasionally, for instance, poke fun at my husband who voted for a different candidate than I in a mayoral election. As it transpired, his candidate won the election and, in many respects that were important to us as voters, did a poor job; he feels he voted in error. These kinds of epistemic errors also occur at the level of the mass media, whose job according to Habermas and Honneth is to synthesize the political knowledge of the polity into a unified account of public will. One example of such an epistemic error comes from the New York Times' daily news round-up, "The Morning," from December 23, 2020. Journalist David Leonhardt wrote that the Times, like many news outlets, contended for years that "an increase in voter turnout would benefit Democrats" and cited one of his own articles from 2017. However, in 2020, following an election in which voter turnout was relatively high but Democrats nevertheless retook Congress by only the narrowest of margins, he contended that the situation was more complicated, saying "I now think that's at least partly wrong, and I want to explain today". He elaborates that certain populations in the United States, particularly a subset of white and Latinx citizens I discussed above whom Leonhardt terms "infrequent voters", tend to vote Republican when they can be moved to go to the polls. Leonhardt concludes, "Politics is less predictable than we journalists sometimes imagine. I'll try to do a better job of remembering that." And of course, the legislative history of the United States demonstrates that our representatives and legislators are constantly debating and revisiting policies that govern our nation's access to healthcare, education, abortion, infrastructure, and unemployment benefits.

This characterization of knowledge as fallible poses a problem for Brennan's epistocratic view; if knowledges vary, or if our knowledge is incomplete or ill-suited for certain kinds of pursuits, licensing voters is no longer an adequate way of ensuring that our nation's collective political decision-making makes use of the best available knowledge. We need an alternative political framework that accounts for the situatedness, incompleteness, and fallibility of knowledge.

Aggregative Democracies and Failures of Discussion

Democracy, rule of the people, seems to be a natural alternative to Brennan's epistocratic proposal; because administrative authority in a democracy is derived from the polity, government decision-making must, at least at some level, incorporate and respond to the knowledges of the people. However, not all democracies do a good job of incorporating or responding to variously situated knowledges; even within the scope of democratic systems or societies, there is room for political decision-making to go better or worse. We can ask questions about both the theory and the practice of democratic decision-making in an effort to incorporate and respond to the knowledges of the people. In the next chapter, I'll say more about the practical side of this question by recommending some specific ways that our current democracy can do a better job of recognizing and incorporating epistemic diversity, particularly along economic lines. In this chapter, however, my focus will be on evaluating democratic theories based on their ability – or lack thereof – to incorporate epistemic diversity. A good political system is one that can both accommodate and mitigate the three constitutive features of knowledge: its intersubjectivity, its diversity, and its fallibility.

In order for a political system to play well with the account of knowledge I have developed, it must accomplish three principal tasks, which I take from Elizabeth Anderson's account of democratic epistemology. Anderson argues that, for a political institution to be responsive to political knowledge, it must display three constitutive features: "diversity, discussion, and dynamism" (Anderson 2006, 13). In order for a government to be effective, she argues, it must incorporate an epistemically diverse polity, free and open political discourse, and an institutionally-sanctioned feedback mechanism for evaluating the success of collective decision-making and ensuring that dissent to collective decisions are heard. These three features of responsive government correspond with three tasks that a government must perform in order to hear and respond to the varied political knowledges at its disposal. First, it must provide opportunities for all concerned members of the polity to offer up political knowledge on an issue, policy, or political decision (diversity). Second, it must provide avenues for members of the polity to hear and respond to one another's epistemic contributions (discussion). This task is particularly important because, if we take the polity's knowledges to be situated in particular experiences and thereby incomplete in significant ways, members of the polity will need opportunities to "fill in" epistemic gaps by encountering differently situated knowledges. This is to say that political discussion provides opportunities for what Medina would call "epistemic friction." Third, and perhaps even most importantly, if our knowledge is inherently fallible and/or incomplete, we are bound to make mistakes. Often. A government must account for the fact that sometimes the polity or its representatives will get it wrong, and the polity will need to correct those errors (dynamism).

Brennan's epistocratic account already fails these three criteria. First, he explicitly limits the participants in the political process to only those with "social scientific knowledge," which prevents members of the polity with legitimate stake in a political decision from participating in that decision unless they are educated in a specific way. Second, because voting is restricted to those able to pass a social scientific knowledge exam, he doesn't build in opportunities for supposed "experts" to check their political decisions against the needs and interests of other members of the polity. This is a serious gap in Brennan's system because, as he acknowledges, "experts" may hold rationally competing views; if a measure passes by a narrow majority of expert voters, there is no opportunity to revisit or revise that decision in light of new information. Third, and related, Brennan's account of epistocracy doesn't have a built-in way of fixing, or even acknowledging, mistakes; he thinks that, as long as the voting polity possesses a certain kind of knowledge, they will arrive at the best possible answer to a political decision. Epistocracy as Brennan describes it, therefore, doesn't meet Anderson's criteria for effectively incorporating and addressing political knowledge in government.

Democracy, insofar as democratic decision-making must begin with the polity, has the best chance of successfully incorporating the varied knowledges of a polity. However, not all democratic theories can accommodate a more nuanced account of knowledge as intersubjective, diverse, and fallible, even though they are by nature more inclusive than something like epistocracy, theocracy, monarchy, or authoritarianism. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson broadly characterize these as theories of "aggregative democracy," which suppose that political knowledge and public will can be "aggregated" or added up to determine policy outcomes. Aggregative theories seek to "combine [political preferences] in various ways that are efficient

and fair” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 13). The authors further distinguish between two subsets or methods of aggregative democracy: majoritarianism and what we might call a kind of “filtration”.

Majoritarianism asks members of the polity to record their opinions on legislative issues through voting or public opinion surveys; interest groups, politicians, or political parties “formulate their positions...in response to the demands of voters who, like consumers, express their preference by choosing among competing products” on a market. Debate between candidates or representatives “serves a function...like that of advertising” on this view; it publicizes the advantages of certain platforms or policies in order to garner assent and votes (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 14). At the conclusion of a debate or election, the platform or candidate with the most votes or best polling results is successful.

The second method of aggregative democracy, the “filtration” method, “gives less deference to the votes and opinions of citizens: officials take note of the expressed preferences but put them through an analytic filter – such as cost-benefit analysis – which is intended to produce optimal outcomes.” This method boasts of the benefit of, at least in part, correcting for misinformation or bias in public opinion (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 14-15).

Both methods of aggregative democracy hold certain theoretical advantages, namely that they (1) produce “determinate outcomes” through (2) procedures that are clear and generally uncontroversial (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 15). This is to say that, first, aggregative democracy is effective in actually reaching a definitive decision. This is particularly important because, when members of the polity hold competing views or differing interests, aggregative democracy provides a quick and easy way of resolving conflict: simply add up the votes and the

polity has a decision. Since the diversity of knowledges in a polity makes it likely that there will, very often, be conflict among its members, this is a significant advantage of aggregative democracy indeed. Its second advantage is that the procedure itself, whether majoritarian or filtered, is simple and fair-seeming insofar as every member of the polity can take part in voting or polling. In this sense, aggregative democracy does effectively perform the first task of government: it provides opportunities for all concerned members of the polity to offer up political knowledge. Aggregative democracy as a theory of government passes the “diversity” test.

However, aggregative conceptions of democracy do also hold theoretical disadvantages; Gutmann and Thompson argue that they tend to reinforce unjust distributions of social and political power. They write that “[b]y taking existing or minimally corrected preferences as given, as the base line for collective decisions, the aggregative conception fundamentally accepts and may even reinforce existing distributions of power in society” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 26). Here, the authors are making two major points against aggregative democracy. First, majoritarian rule is likely to perpetuate policies and systems that oppress minority groups, since majority interests are likely to be best represented as policy outcomes. The second, more subtle, point here is that aggregative democratic methods don’t offer members of the polity opportunities to change each other’s minds or to modify their own ways of thinking in light of others’ interests and opinions; instead, they express static preferences through acts like voting or responding to polls.³ This second point demonstrates that aggregative democracy fails at the

³ This is not to say that voting and polling aren’t important political practices, but rather that *in an aggregative democracy*, voting merely serves the purpose of expressing a static preference. Voting takes on a different role in other democratic theories, which use voting as a way of responding to existing states of political affairs. I will return to this point later in this chapter.

second task of government: providing avenues for members of the polity to hear and respond to one another's epistemic contributions. Aggregative democracy fails the "discussion" criterion.

Another disadvantage of aggregative conceptions of democracy is that "they do not provide any way for citizens to challenge the methods of aggregation themselves" (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 16). Here again, Gutmann and Thompson are making two points. First, if the method of aggregation is unfair insofar as it reinforces oppressive or marginalizing structures of sociopolitical power, there is no way for the polity to respond to and change those systems. The second, again subtler, point is that if majority preferences, either sometimes or consistently, produce unjust or problematic outcomes, there is no way for the polity to revise or retract them within the bounds of the aggregative procedure. Simply put, aggregative methods of democracy keep us bound to our decisions, even if those decisions turn out badly. In this sense, aggregative democracy fails in the third task of government: providing avenues for fixing mistakes. Aggregative democracy fails the "dynamism" criterion.

Political Knowledge and the State

I have now rejected two political systems – epistocracy and aggregative democracy – on the basis that they do not perform three tasks that are vital to the project of incorporating and responding to diverse, and fallible knowledges. It now remains for me to respond to a final question: is there a theory of government that can adequately respond to a polity's political knowledge understood in this way?

In answering this question, it is useful to discuss the purpose of the state and the role of political knowledge in achieving that purpose. I turn to John Dewey's pragmatic account of political experimentalism to describe the function of the state and as a basis for building up an

account of the role of knowledge within that state. Deweyan experimentalism is a way of thinking of democratic government as the “use of social intelligence to solve problems of practical interest” and Anderson defines it as “cooperative social experimentation” (Anderson 2006, 13). Anderson argues, together with Dewey, that the optimal functioning of the state must be democratic in order to incorporate the knowledge of the polity as completely and effectively as possible.

Dewey begins with a basic claim about the origin or formation of the state, arguing that “human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others” (Dewey 1927, 66). Here, Dewey is arguing that politics, or political action, is a result of human action that is directed at particular consequences. These consequences, in turn, can have either direct or indirect consequences; Dewey defines direct consequences as those which affect only those people immediately involved in an action, whereas indirect consequences are “those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned” (Dewey 1927, 66). Dewey writes that “[w]hen indirect consequences are recognized and there is effort to regulate them, something having the traits of a state comes into existence” (Dewey 1927, 66). This is to say that politics are the effort to manage indirect consequences. Consequences take on a political character when they are perceived or “observed” by a public (Dewey 1927, 75), where a public is understood as “all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Dewey 1927, 69). The collective experience and observation of consequences is what constitutes a political public, on Dewey’s view.

The state, the job of which is to manage indirect consequences, can perform this task more or less effectively; Dewey contends that the state itself is not necessarily reasonable, where “reason” means to “analyze human behavior with respect to its consequences and to frame politics accordingly” (Dewey 1927; 80, 73). Simply put, the state and the public make mistakes; Dewey argues that “[o]bservations of consequences are at least as subject to error and illusion as is perception of natural objects. Judgments about what to undertake so as to regulate them, and how to do it, are as fallible as other plans” (Dewey 1927, 80). These mistaken judgments in turn are codified; “mistakes pile up and consolidate themselves into laws and methods of administration which are more harmful than the consequences which they were originally intended to control” (Dewey 1927, 80).

Because the state is fallible in its management of indirect consequences, the state “is ever something to be scrutinized, investigated, searched for. Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be re-made” (Dewey 1927, 81). Dewey is arguing here that the state’s administration of the public, in an effort to control indirect consequences, may itself produce indirect consequences that can be perceived by the public – a policy may result in a worse state of affairs than the consequences it was intended to mitigate. Consequently, “the formation of states must be an experimental process” wherein the public constantly scrutinizes the consequences of the state’s policies. Dewey refers to this process as one of “experimentation” in which the public may “learn from their errors and profit by their successes” (Dewey 1927, 83).

Understanding the state as a process of experimentation leaves plenty of room for Anderson’s criteria for effective and responsive government – diversity, discussion, and dynamism – as her analysis of Dewey reveals. First, Dewey’s model incorporates the need for

epistemic diversity; Anderson writes that Dewey “stressed the central importance to democracy of bringing citizens from different walks of life together to define, through discussion, what they take to be the problems of public interest, and to consider proposed solutions” (Anderson 2006, 14). Indeed, universal inclusion is important for justifying collective decisions both procedurally and instrumentally; Anderson writes that “exclusion casts doubt on the claim that problems and solutions as defined by those allowed to participate are truly in the public interest – responsive in a fair way to everyone’s concerns, insofar as they legitimately lay a claim on public action” (Anderson 2006, 14). This is to say that universal inclusion is procedurally vital on Dewey’s view because without it, we can’t claim that our policies are legitimate reflections of public interest. Anderson continues that exclusion “also undermines the ability of collective decision-making to take advantage of citizens’ situated knowledge...” (Anderson 2006, 14). Her claim here is that, without universal inclusion, the policy decisions we make will likely be worse because we will have rejected the knowledge gained from certain kinds of experiences “that have evidential import for devising and evaluating solutions” (Anderson 2006, 14). Universal inclusion therefore ensures that we have the widest and best possible base of knowledge from which to begin the process of policy-making.

It is in this claim that Anderson makes her call for democratic government explicit. Her demand for universal inclusion runs directly counter to something like Brennan’s epistocratic model, which limits the expression of political knowledge to an educated, privileged view. Since the purpose of the state, on Dewey’s view, is the administration and care for the needs and interests of the polity, the polity’s proper knowledge is vital in carrying out this task. To exclude some by differentiating between “social scientific” and other kinds of knowledge is already an

error. No political system but the most inclusive can provide the necessary epistemic resources for effective government on Anderson's account.

Anderson further argues that Dewey's model stresses the importance of discussion and dynamism in that, on his model, our collective decisions can always result in unintended, bad consequences. It is therefore essential that we reevaluate those decisions and either affirm or rework them based on their consequences (Anderson 2006, 13); our decisions ought to be dynamic, open to criticism and reevaluation. Anderson highlights the essential role that some democratic institutions play "sustain[ing]...dynamism," specifically "periodic elections, a free press skeptical of state power, petitions to government, public opinion polling, protests, public comment on proposed regulations of administrative agencies" (Anderson 2006, 14). We need institutions like the free press or the right to protest that protect dissent and critical evaluation of our policies. The polity requires, for example, "access to channels of communication with one another and with government decision makers. This requires that media be open and accessible to all" (Anderson 2006, 15). Anderson concludes, therefore, that a limit to the dissemination of information via mass media "undermines the epistemic powers of democracy" (Anderson 2006, 15).

Anderson continues that diversity and dissent are "central features of democracy" – rather than just blips in the system – and are critical for democracy to function well (Anderson 2006, 15). Further, she argues that the opportunity for dissent must not stop at the point of a collective decision, but rather must be available even after a decision has been made (Anderson 2006, 15). She rejects the central notion of aggregative democracy that a majority consensus can effectively represent the interests of a diverse polity. Rather, she argues, there are "costs of achieving

consensus,” specifically the coercion of dissenting individuals or minority groups. Consensus, she writes, “implies that everyone agrees that all objections to a proposal have been met or at least overridden by more important considerations” (Anderson 2006, 15). This implication, however, is a harmful norm that “suppresses public airing and responsiveness to the continuing reservations individuals may have about the decision” (Anderson 2006, 15). The advantage of Dewey’s experimentalist model is that it values this dissent and uses dissent as an opportunity to revise and reevaluate majority decisions. Anderson concludes that institutional feedback mechanisms preserve the diversity of the epistemic polity by protecting dissenting views even after a decision has been reached; we can and should revisit our decisions in light of dissenting opinion.

I want to draw particular attention to Anderson’s call for “periodic elections” in this section on political dynamism because her argument here runs directly counter to Brennan’s epistocratic view. Anderson contends that elections are not just a mode of political decision-making; they also serve as a way for the polity to express dissatisfaction with or opposition to a political decision. This hugely important function of democratic elections is one that Brennan overlooks, to the detriment of his argument; on his view, if the people voting are sufficiently educated, their votes will inevitably result in the best possible political decisions and there is no need to revise or revisit those decisions. Anderson’s view has two major advantages over Brennan’s here. First, Anderson’s view allows for a political situation in which a policy, candidate, or political decision might benefit the polity in the moment, but later circumstances render the policy, candidate, or decision detrimental in some way. She thinks we need a way to revise perhaps even the most initially effective policies as our world changes or new knowledge

comes to light. Voting can act as a collective call for revision; if enough people vote to repeal a policy or against an incumbent candidate, it can be a signal that the polity and its representatives have made a recent misstep. The second advantage of Anderson's view over Brennan's is that it has room to acknowledge that not only may political experts hold rationally competing views, but they may even make mistakes. In cases like this, it is vital that the public – the *entire* public – be allowed to express dissent. The universal right to vote is among the most direct avenues for this vital aspect of political will-formation and decision-making: collective expressions of dissent.

One final, and vital, point about the role of epistemic diversity in a political system is that, because our knowledges are situated, incomplete, and fallible, the mere existence of dissent within a political system is not sufficient to take full advantage of the epistemic resources of the polity; political agents expressing dissenting knowledges must have opportunities to encounter and respond to one another. This is the central thesis of José Medina's "resistance model" of democracy (Medina 2013, 6), which builds on Dewey and Anderson's experimentalist account.

The dynamism element of Dewey's experimentalism that Anderson endorses is central to Medina's "resistance model," which emphasizes the importance of productive dissent in an effective democracy. He develops the resistance model in contrast with what he calls the "consensus model of democratic decision-making," wherein "the achievement of a consensus is constructed as implying that all objections have been met or have been overridden by more weighty considerations" (Medina 2013, 10). Medina contrasts so-called consensus models – or aggregative models – of democracy with what he calls the "resistance model." The "resistance model" accepts that democratic decisions amount to "the convergence and divergence of

perspectives...but they are ultimately mere transitory moments that need to be revisited” (Medina 2013, 10). In short, he agrees with Anderson’s claim that we need to remain open to dissenting voices even after we reach consensus on an issue because those dissenters can offer new perspectives on the consequences of that consensus. Medina wants us “not only to be open to contestation, but to actively search for dissenting viewpoints and to benefit from critical engagements with them” (Medina 2013, 10).

In order for dissent to be maximally productive, Medina agrees with Dewey and Anderson that we need epistemic participation in democracy to be as diverse as possible; he writes, “it is because we want to exploit the benefits of productive dissent that we need to recognize and take advantage of the heterogenous situated knowledge of diverse agents...” (Medina 2013, 6).⁴ Medina is claiming that epistemic agents’ expertise or bodies of knowledge come from and are rooted in their sociopolitical situation. We need a diversity of epistemic agents, then, because “we want diverse experiences and reactions to be used for critically revisiting and perfecting decisions and policies” (Medina 2013, 6). The diversity of expertise lent

⁴ In his rejection of what he calls “consensus democracy” in this section, Medina explicitly names Habermas as a proponent of consensus models of discourse. While his reading of Habermas is not erroneous insofar as Habermas’ ideal discourse does aim at consensus, Medina does overlook some of Habermas’ more applied political theory in which he emphasizes the vital political role of dissent. For Habermas, one primary mode of dissent is civil disobedience, which is a “normalized...component of [the] political culture” of a constitutional democracy. He uses the term “resistance” to describe acts that, while illegal, nevertheless “appeal to the legitimating foundations of our democratic constitutional order” (Habermas 1985a, 99). These acts of resistance are important, on Habermas’ account, for those whose views are minoritized in public, consensus-aiming discourse. While Habermas perhaps does not center the role of dissent in his political theory the way Anderson and Medina do, it is nevertheless an important aspect of his applied philosophy.

Stephen White and Evan Farr go further in claiming that the role of dissent is indeed central to Habermas’ work in ways that are often overlooked. In their article “‘No-Saying’ in Habermas,” they claim that his framework is “less hostile to dissensus and agonism in democratic life” than his critics typically contend. Drawing primarily from Habermas’ work on civil disobedience, they argue that “the particular no-saying of civil disobedience draws its sense and significance from a conceptually prior, onto-ethical figuration of no-saying embedded in the core of the paradigm of communicative action” (White and Farr 2012, 33). This is to say that dissent is built into the very structure of communication as Habermas understands it, not just prior to but as a precondition for discursive justification.

by differently-situated agents ensures that we as a polity are revising our democratic practices and policies from as knowledgeable a place as possible.

But the simple existence of dissenting knowledges isn't enough; Medina's key insight is that part of the task of an effective and just state is to place dissenting knowledges in conversation with one another. Medina argues for the imperative for resistance in a political system. He understands resistance as the product of political dissent, although not necessarily opposition; he writes that "resistance can be found (and should be looked for)...in mainstream practices and perspectives" (Medina 2013, 15). This is to say that we encounter resistance everywhere that we encounter heterogeneity, particularly heterogeneity with regard to positioning within structures of sociopolitical power. As long as our knowledges are differentiated with respect to our experiences and our sociopolitical positioning, different ways of understanding the world are likely to bump up against one another in ways that create friction, resistance. Medina quotes Foucault in contending that, in any structure of political power, "there is resistance...*a multiplicity of points of resistance*" (Foucault 1978, 95). Foucault continues that "often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shifts about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings..." (Foucault 1978, 96). This is to say that, on Medina's and Foucault's views, resistance doesn't often take the form of a clear-cut "us vs. them" debate; rather, our socio-politically differentiated knowledges place us in shifting political alliances, in transient agreement with some and disagreement with others, in a position to be critical in some moments and criticized in others.

Medina argues that this resistance is politically vital; it helps to challenge dominant and often "epistemically vicious" ways of thinking through political problems and represents a kind

of political esteem for individuals or groups whose epistemic contributions are marginalized or minoritized. Part of what an effective political theory must do, then, is provide avenues for resistance. A state must not only permit dissent but must actively create opportunities for resistant knowledges to encounter one another.

The principal insights of experimentalism as expounded by Dewey, Anderson, and Medina are that the job of the state is address the needs and interests of the polity and, in so doing, the state must maximize the productive expression of political knowledge. This means the state must encourage dissent and must respond to that dissent in the revisitation and revision of past political decisions. Having established the main tasks of the state and the role of political knowledge in carrying out those tasks, I turn once again to Gutmann and Thompson, who propose an alternative to aggregative democratic theory that can perform these vital political tasks: deliberative democracy.

Deliberative Democracy, Epistemic Inclusion, and Dissent

Gutmann and Thompson define deliberative democracy as “a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives) justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 7). This definition incorporates what Gutmann and Thompson argue are the four defining characteristics of deliberative democracy as a form of government: justification, accessibility, binding decisions, and dynamism.⁵

⁵ I am borrowing this term from Anderson here; Dewey, Anderson, Gutmann, and Thompson all emphasize the importance of revising past political decisions, so I have used the term dynamism in this instance to indicate a conceptual similarity in their views.

The first and, on Gutmann and Thompson's view, most important feature of deliberative democracy is that it "affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives" through its "reason-giving requirement"; the process of deliberation is the process of giving reasons to justify a political decision (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 3). This is to say that the most important and defining feature of deliberative democracy is that members of the polity must communicate their knowledge to one another in a process wherein they must justify their political decisions. Gutmann and Thompson are careful to note that deliberative democracy does not preclude non-deliberative forms of decision-making "including bargaining among groups, and secret operations ordered by executives," but also contend that these other ways of making political decisions must themselves have been justified at an earlier date through the deliberative process.

This first feature of deliberative democracy fulfills Anderson's "discussion" criterion for effective government. Deliberation is, at its core, a requirement for knowledge-sharing. This is vital for Dewey, Anderson, and Medina because, again, our knowledges are situated and often incomplete. The act of deliberation is an opportunity for resistant knowledges to encounter one another; people whose views and knowledges challenge one another have the opportunity to come together in a state-sanctioned space to give reasons for their position. The practice of knowledge-sharing and reason-giving offer opportunities to mitigate some of what Medina calls our epistemic "blind spots" and to create a *communal* body of political knowledge that is more complete.

The second feature of deliberative democracy on Gutmann and Thompson's view is that "the reasons given in [the deliberative] process should be accessible to all citizens to whom they

are addressed” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 4). The authors specify that deliberation must be accessible in two senses; deliberation must take place in public – rather than in the privacy of one’s own mind, as a theoretical discourse – and its content must be understandable for members of the polity (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 4). This is not to say that deliberation cannot include expert testimony or rely on reasons given by experts, but rather any experts involved in a deliberative process must present their reasons in ways that are understandable for the polity. In short, deliberation must be both practically and epistemically accessible for the polity as a whole.

This second feature of deliberative democracy as a theory of government fulfills Anderson’s “diversity” criterion, which Medina contends is necessary for the kind of “resistance” that produces more complete and effective communal knowledge. That political deliberation must be actual on this framework, and not take place merely in one’s own mind, is a boon for this democratic theory; on the account of knowledge that social, feminist, and anti-racist epistemologists have developed, it is simply the case that no individual can have access to the plurality of knowledges that are created in and through the various relationships to sociopolitical power structures. We need *actual* – rather than purely hypothetical – dissent in order for a political community to incorporate and respond to all relevant knowledges within the polity.⁶

⁶ In this respect, Gutmann and Thompson depart from Habermas’ account of discourse. Habermas argues in several places – including *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *Truth and Justification* – that one can achieve ideal discourse merely by “*rationality* taking into account all relevant voices, topics, and contributions” (Habermas 2003, 37, emphasis mine). This is to say that, on Habermas’ view, so long as I consider the potential reasons or objections a differently situated member of my community might give, I can engage in a discourse in good faith and arrive at a procedurally guaranteed truth (where truth is understood discursively).

There are good reasons for Habermas to make this claim, chief among them that actual discourse or deliberation may not always be practically achievable given geographical, temporal, social, political, religious, cultural, and economic barriers to getting differently situated subjects in a common space together. However, on the social epistemology account of knowledge to which Gutmann and Thompson adhere, this kind of “hypothetical” discourse presents an epistemic problem; there are simply some reasons or objections to which I may not have access in virtue of my positioning in what Habermas calls the “sociocultural lifeworld.” My epistemic gaps are not resolvable in a hypothetical attitude, no matter how hard I might try to anticipate what an interlocutor might say in a discursive context. Habermas offers a partial solution intended to help eliminate bias, which he calls “therapeutic

The third feature of deliberative democracy on Gutmann and Thompson's account is that "its process aims at producing a decision that is binding for some period of time" (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 5). We can think of this "binding" requirement as describing the legitimating function of deliberation in a democratic government; the binding requirement ties political decision-making to the will of the people insofar as policy results from deliberation. When the polity contributes to deliberation, the resultant policy becomes binding on the polity.

While the "binding" feature of deliberative democracy does not correspond directly with one of Anderson's criteria for effective government, it does address a problem that I raised in a previous chapter on the harms of epistemic exclusion in politics. I argued that, in a democratic government, the legitimacy of a government and its policies depend on the inclusion of knowledge of the governed about their own needs and interests; if a democratic government requires the assent of the governed, exclusion of the governed (or some substantial subset thereof) from the process of policy-making presents a legitimation problem. However, deliberative democracy as a political framework insists on including epistemic contributions from all members of the polity, which has the theoretical advantage of making policies proposed and agreed-upon through deliberation legitimately binding on all members of the polity.

This "binding" requirement leads us to the fourth and final feature of deliberative democracy: its dynamism. Although Gutmann and Thompson do not use this term, I have borrowed it from Anderson to describe their characterization here because Gutmann and Thompson's description of this function of deliberative democracy resembles Anderson's

discourse," but again he doesn't offer ways of eliminating or mitigating epistemic gaps in the hypothetical discursive attitude. I therefore support Gutmann and Thompson's insistence on actual discourse or deliberation as the standard for effective deliberative democratic practice; Habermas' "rational" or "hypothetical" attitude is not sufficient to address the epistemic gaps inherent in an account of knowledge as sociopolitically situated.

account of political dynamism so closely, both in content and justification. Although political decisions in a deliberative democracy are binding for the polity insofar as they are derived from the polity's deliberation, we may nevertheless question the justification for or validity of past political decisions. In short, we may not want all political decisions to be binding forever.

Gutmann and Thompson write that “[a]lthough deliberation aims at a justifiable decision, it does not presuppose that the decision at hand will in fact be justified, let alone that a justification today will suffice for the indefinite future” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 6); a polity may want or need to revisit a past decision and debate the issue again.

The dynamism of deliberative democracy is an important feature for two reasons. First, “in politics, most decisions are not consensual” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 6); rather, majority decisions tend to stand in for true consensus. Revisiting past decisions is vital for political minorities for whom the initial decision was not preferable or perhaps even justifiable. The ability to revisit a previous decision can also serve an instrumental purpose in politics; political minorities “who disagreed with the original decision are more likely to accept it if they believe they have a chance to reverse or modify it in the future” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 6-7). This is to say that the dynamism of deliberative democracy bolsters the odds of reaching a decision at all because members of the polity and their representatives can assent to an imperfect policy knowing that they can change it later. Revisiting a decision later also encourages political factions that disagree to find common ground in order to avoid the risk of alienating political rivals in future debates on the same or similar issue (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 7).

It is because of the need to revisit and revise political decisions that politics must not be merely deliberative but also democratic; a government requires the input of the polity as a whole

to determine the efficacy of a policy or representative. This is why, contrary to Brennan's view, we really do need universal suffrage; the role of voting is to provide a clear cut and universally accessible way for all members of the polity to register their assent or dissent. To return to my earlier example, when my city next holds a mayoral election, my husband will be voting for a different candidate instead of the incumbent with whom he has been dissatisfied. Limited suffrage serves to curtail vital opportunities for dissent.

Second, and most importantly, the dynamism of deliberative democracy is important because "decision-making processes and the human understanding upon which they depend are imperfect" (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 6); simply, Gutmann and Thompson also argue that human knowledge is incomplete and we are likely to make harmful or problematic decisions sometimes that we will want to reconsider later in light of new evidence or different reasons. Their view on knowledge here is closely aligned with that of social epistemologists. The ability to revisit a decision "keeps open the possibility of a continuing dialogue, one in which citizens can criticize previous decisions and move ahead on the basis of that criticism" (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, 6).⁷

This second benefit of deliberative democracy's dynamism is an epistemic benefit. It acknowledges the ways in which human knowledge is inherently situated, perspectival, and incomplete; our knowledge, insofar as it is derived from experience and filtered through sociocultural mechanisms and institutions of language and culture, is not unitary and universal but varied and contingent. Deliberative democracy, by virtue of this dynamism, leaves open the

⁷ Gutmann and Thompson also contend that this dynamism encourages what they call the "economy of political disagreement." When decisions and/or policies are open to revision, political opponents must find common ground in their deliberation, provide acceptable reasons for their stances, and learn to compromise. Otherwise, they can expect political retaliation at a later time.

possibility that our political knowledge will change, evolve, or shift, and with it our priorities and reasons in political decision-making. The polity and its representatives may make wrong political decisions, or it may make right political decisions that become wrong later. Deliberative democracy allows a polity to be responsive to the situatedness, complexity, incompleteness, and contingency of human knowledge and to act to modify or correct past political decisions when necessary.

To summarize, Gutmann and Thompson's theory of deliberative democracy fulfills all three of Anderson's criteria for epistemic democracy – discussion, diversity, and dynamism – by advocating for universal, *actual* deliberation in which members of the polity offer political knowledge to which binding policies respond. These policies can and should be reassessed in future deliberation. Their theory also helps to address the requirements of legitimation in an epistemically diverse polity; universal inclusion, both theoretical and practical, is necessary for policies and political decisions to be binding on the polity as a whole. If we understand knowledge as plural, situated, and fallible, deliberative democracy is our best option for instantiating government and policies that are effective and just. In short, the best epistocracy is deliberative democracy after all.

As both proponents and critics of deliberative democracy remind us, however, deliberation rarely proceeds as ideally in reality as it does in theory. Habermas calls ideal discourse a “counterfactual” in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (among other works), Gutmann and Thompson acknowledge barriers to the instantiation of deliberative democratic theory, and Brennan's assertion that deliberative democracy can't proceed ideally is the

cornerstone of his rejection of it in favor of an epistocratic framework (Brennan 2016, 69-70)⁸.

Brennan's objections to deliberative democracy differ from those of other thinkers' in an important way, however; Brennan argues that personal biases and self-interest often get in the way of proper deliberation, but concedes that if people *could* deliberate well, it would be a viable political framework. Thinkers like Habermas, Gutmann, Thompson, and Honneth, however, offer an alternative explanation for some failures of actual deliberation to instantiate the ideal; they tend to argue that the structures that produce biases and epistemic gaps also prevent us from doing deliberation well. This is to say that Brennan is attributing the failures of deliberation to individuals when the cause(s) are often structural.

I have already enumerated some ways in which certain economic structures act as barriers to the expression and dissemination of political knowledge in previous chapters. These same issues prevent the instantiation of deliberative democracy as Gutmann and Thompson describe it. When members of the polity are excluded from voting and protest in ways that can be traced back to economic status, it impedes participation in important modes of providing feedback and registering dissent. When owners of media conglomerates disproportionately publicize the opinions of the wealthy, the public will as recorded and synthesized by the mass media is incomplete insofar as it excludes resistant knowledges. And when only the wealthy are in the position to legislate, valuable knowledge is left out of the deliberation between representatives of the polity. This results, as I have argued, in moral, procedural, material, and legitimation harms against the polity and the state itself.

⁸ Although, again, Brennan does concede that his preference for epistocracy over deliberative democracy is a purely instrumental one, which is to say that if deliberation could produce better policy outcomes than limited voting, he would be forced to support deliberation as political practice.

In my final chapter, I will propose some ways in which the United States can move closer to the ideals of deliberative democracy as outlined by Gutmann and Thompson. Some of these measures will comprise reforms to or repeals of existing policies. Some of these measures will be much more drastic. Ultimately, I will contend that a true deliberative democracy must be an economic democracy as well.

CHAPTER SIX
PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS TOWARD ECONOMIC
AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Over the past five chapters, I have developed the claim that the most effective government is an experimentalist deliberative democracy that is responsive to the needs and interests of its polity. This government requires epistemic diversity because the situated knowledges that develop in contexts of social and political power structures are essential for determining how a government may best respond to the needs and interests of a polity. I have also argued that in the United States' present capitalist democracy, epistemic diversity is severely limited along economic lines; our political institutions and modes of political engagement are epistemically saturated with knowledges developed in contexts of wealth and economic privilege, while knowledges concerning poverty, precarity, and economic marginalization are sidelined. This epistemic imbalance along economic lines results not only in moral epistemic injustices, but also a degradation of the political procedures of our state, real material harms against economically marginalized people suffering from lack of access to even the most basic needs, and a legitimation problem for our government's policies and our government itself.

We should be worried about this state of affairs; as economic inequality in the United States increases, the corresponding politico-epistemic gaps that result from political exclusion along economic lines are likely to widen. We must make concrete changes in order to maximize

the inclusion of economically marginalized knowledges in political deliberation, from public discourse to mass media to legislation.

In this final chapter, I will propose some concrete changes that will do the work of improving politico-epistemic inclusion along economic lines in the United States. Just as, earlier in this project, I have been unable to exhaustively illuminate the many ways that economic inequality functions to accord political privileges to the wealthy in the United States, I will be unable to exhaustively cover the changes that would be required for “perfect” politico-epistemic inclusion along economic lines, if such a thing is even possible. Rather, my goal in this chapter is a prefigurative and melioristic¹ one; I identify ways that we can progress toward deliberative democracy in the present and highlight politico-economic ideologies toward which we must continue working in order to make deliberative democracy a reality in the future.

I divide my proposals into two main “chunks”. In the first, I will offer up some changes to policies and practices that will improve politico-epistemic inclusion along economic lines within the confines of the current configuration of our capitalist democracy. These proposals will be piecemeal, fairly basic, and, although politically progressive in the context of our present social organization, would not represent significant changes to the United States’ political or economic institutions. However, I don’t think these modest proposals will be enough to get at the core problem, which is that – as I have shown and will discuss further below – money and political power are tied up together, and under capitalism there must by nature be those who hold tremendous wealth and power and those who have less, or none at all. We can, through policy reform and new political practices, attempt to limit the political inequality that results from

¹ See Medina 2013.

economic inequality under capitalism, but we can also do better. Ultimately, in order to better instantiate the ideals of an experimentalist deliberative democracy, we will need to make further-reaching changes in our economic system.

In the second “chunk” of this chapter, I will take seriously Axel Honneth’s contention that freedom in the economic sphere is a necessary condition for freedom in the political sphere. Understanding Honneth’s “freedom” here as communal self-determination leads me to the following argument, and the driving thesis of both this chapter and this project as a whole: political democracy requires economic democracy.

In this second section, I will discuss the relationship between economic and political freedom and ultimately contend that collective self-determination in the economic sphere is a necessary precondition for the political freedom that democracy entails. In short, capitalism and democracy are in tension, and that tension may not be resolvable. I will use David Schweickart’s account of economic democracy to propose an alternative to the United States’ capitalist democracy: a market socialist system that fosters collective self-determination. I will argue that economic democracy of the kind that Schweickart outlines can make room for the possibility of a more democratic political sphere in the United States.

Prefigurativism and Deliberative Democracy

My goal in proposing changes both within our present politico-economic system and to that system itself is to identify ways that we can more closely instantiate the ideals of deliberative democracy. I am interested in and committed to bringing about a state of affairs in which members of the United States polity are able to engage in deliberation and collective political will formation with minimal economic constraint on opportunities to deliberate,

information accessible in the public sphere, and legislative agenda. In this sense, my guiding ideology in this chapter is prefigurative politics.

Prefigurative politics, or prefigurativism, refers to an ideology characterized by a commitment to implementing policies and practices that both contribute to and will help to bring about some new moral and political state of affairs. Paul Raekstad and Sofa Saio Gradin provide a more thorough definition in their 2020 book *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today*²; they define prefigurativism as “the deliberate implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now” (Raekstad & Gradin 2020, 10). The key insight of prefigurativism framed in this way is that we must understand our current struggles in terms of a desired future, but equally that our desired future cannot be so ideal or idealized that we cannot take concrete steps toward instantiating them now. Prefigurativism understood in this way is melioristic; it aims to improve current states of affairs in ways that make room for future improvements, too. In short, according to Raekstad and Gradin, “Being committed to prefigurative politics means being committed to the idea that if we want to replace certain social structures, then we need to reflect some aspect(s) of the future structures we want in the movements and organisations we develop to fight for them” (2020, 10).³

² I thank Alec Stubbs for introducing me to this work and for his presentation on prefigurativism for the North American Society for Social Philosophy in 2021.

³ One further reason I have chosen to make use of Raekstad and Gradin’s prefigurativism in my own project is because their prefigurative politics’ focus on experimentalism complements Dewey’s and Anderson’s focus on the importance of dissent and revision in the realm of the political. Dewey makes the argument that politics is essentially the experimental process of solving problems and managing consequences for a polity. Sometimes our solutions don’t work, or circumstances change later and render our solutions inadequate. In order for politics to be effective, a political system must incorporate a feedback mechanism for assessing the efficacy of political policies and practices for the polity.

Raekstad and Gradin share this view; they write that “Our definition also includes the word ‘experimental’.

In practice, it is impossible to know for sure in advance what we will deem a free, equal, and democratic society in the future. What we today believe to be necessary will likely change over time – it certainly has so far. We cannot create a final and complete blueprint of a free, equal, and democratic society simply by applying some clear-cut

My goal in this chapter is to propose some ways that the United States can more closely approximate the ideals of deliberative democracy by mitigating or eliminating economic constraints on free and equal deliberation and collective will-formation. In other words, I aim to prefigure deliberative democracy by maximizing epistemic inclusion along economic lines in the United States' present political system(s). In aiming for deliberative democracy, my proposals will center on making the United States more democratic in the present. The first section of these proposals will focus on improvements aiming at democratic inclusion, while the second will further clarify the ideals toward which these improvements should guide us. Ultimately, making changes within our present politico-economic configuration will make later, further-reaching changes to that system itself more feasible.

Expanding Democratic Deliberation in our Present Democracy

There is a near-endless list of changes that the United States could make now to epistemically decenter wealthy knowledges and expand political opportunities for economically marginalized people to contribute knowledge in the public sphere. To attempt an account of all of them would be the work of many, many volumes in several disciplines. My contribution here is nothing close to a complete account; rather, in this section I aim to highlight some relatively simple, straightforward steps toward ameliorating the epistemic saturation of our political institutions with knowledge gleaned and developed in contexts of wealth and economic

reasoning procedure or scientific method, at least not yet. We need to experiment and experience to see what works. On the other hand, since it is difficult to work towards a better world without having some conception of what that world might look like, we cannot do away with visions of the future altogether. Rather, we must treat them as temporary, tentative, and subject to revision" (2020, 37).

Their argument here shares important points with Dewey's; they argue that not only might our methods for prefiguring a new political order turn out to be flawed, ineffective, or unable to respond to changing conditions, but our goals themselves might shift; the ideals we once espoused may be out of reach or just plain misguided. While they maintain the importance of working toward some ideal, their focus on experimentalism keeps their immediate political focus on meliorism and continual critique.

privilege. My hope in this section is to show that greater epistemic inclusion in the United States is a doable thing within the bounds of our current politico-economic system.

In this section, I will propose some concrete modifications to the United States' current policies and practices that can aid the important work toward epistemic inclusion along economic lines without making fundamental changes to the capitalist democratic structure. Much in the same way that I outlined the economic barriers facing the expression of political knowledge according to Habermas' staged model of political deliberation in a previous chapter, I will outline these proposed changes according to Habermas' staged model, as well. While I have organized these proposals by deliberative stage, they tend to serve two main purposes; some of these proposed changes will do the work of limiting the influence of or epistemically decentering political knowledges developed in contexts of wealth, while others are aimed at expanding or making accessible opportunities for political knowledge-making and contribution by economically marginalized people and communities.

Public Deliberation

In chapter 2 of this project, I outlined three major modes by which people may contribute political knowledge to public deliberation and discourse: voting, campaign contributions, and protest. These modes of political engagement serve a dual purpose; they are sites for people to voice their knowledge and interests pertaining to a specific issue and they are also opportunities to register dissent or dissatisfaction with a policy, candidate, or ideological stance. Consequently, the institutions of voting, protest, and donation serve a legitimating function in our democracy; when they are universally and practically accessible, they serve as a consistent feedback

mechanism for assessing the efficacy of the state and of the representatives of the people to solve problems and manage consequences effectively and fairly.

Also in chapter 2, I outline some of the ways that these institutions of voting, protest, and donations are epistemically saturated by wealthy knowledges and interests and/or leave out knowledges gleaned and developed in contexts of economic marginalization. In short, I explained that it's hard to vote, to protest, or to donate if one is experiencing economic marginalization. This is a problem because exclusion on the basis of wealth from even the most basic features of a democratic state results in moral harm (epistemic injustice and lack of political esteem), worse material policy outcomes, harm to the deliberative procedure, and questions about the legitimacy of the government and its policies.

Avoiding these harms is a matter of expanding access to these basic features of our democratic government by changing some of the background conditions and specific policies that make it difficult for economically marginalized people to be politically engaged or that grant outsize influence to a wealthy minority.

First and foremost, making election day a paid national holiday in the United States would enable hourly and non-unionized workers to more easily take the time required to vote in person. Expanding access to the vote would also entail increasing the number of polling places per county – to mitigate gas and public transit costs for voting – and expanding opportunities for mail-in voting; some states will not accept mail-in ballots, and many states that do require an “excuse” to mail in a ballot. Expanding access to mail-in voting would also require additional infrastructural support for the United States Postal Service; additional funding and staff would be necessary for mail-in voting to be nationally feasible. Finally, a unified national procedure for

mail-in voting would drastically curb the number of rejected mailed ballots; the current rules differ wildly by state, and ballots that fail to follow state-specific rules are rejected. If a Pennsylvania voter fails to enclose their ballot in *two* envelopes, for example, that ballot is rejected.

These measures to expand access to voting run in direct contrast with new laws enacted following the 2020 presidential election. As I write this chapter in summer 2021, many – primarily conservative – states have passed laws and regulations restricting access to voting by making voting rules more stringent, reducing the number of polling places, and narrowing opportunities to use mail-in ballots. These new policies are ostensibly intended to increase election security, but amount to little more than voter suppression; these laws disproportionately affect economically marginalized people who will have to take more time off work and travel further to vote.⁴

As I noted with the example of funding for the postal service, access to voting, protest, and public deliberation is dependent on social and political infrastructure. Access to affordable childcare is absolutely essential for expanding public deliberation opportunities, particularly for low-income women, for example. Universal internet access is also hugely important, particularly in expanding the reach of polling practices; making internet a public utility rather than a private

⁴ It is worth noting here that these “election security” measures also disproportionately affect those who are economically marginalized not because of their status *within* the capitalist class structure, but because of their relationship *to* the capitalist class structure. I’m thinking here in particular of people with mobility-related disabilities or impairments for which they collect Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI); part of what constitutes marginalization in a capitalist economy is that one’s social and political value is tied to one’s ability to aid in the accumulation of capital. For people with mobility disabilities or impairments, selling their labor power may be difficult or impossible, hence the need for SSDI payments. However, SSDI payments are notoriously low – on average a little less than \$1,300 monthly – making it difficult to afford housing, food, healthcare, and vital home aid. For many collecting SSDI payments, traveling to a far-away polling place is a dual hardship; travel itself may be difficult when public transit is inaccessible or hostile to disabled bodies, and the additional expense may be a cost burden. This is just one example of the myriad ways in which economic positioning interacts with, reinforces, and reifies marginalization on the basis of other categories of identity, in this case (dis)ability.

commodity would go a long way toward including economically marginalized individuals and communities in public deliberation that happens through polling and online.

Many of the same policies and conditions that make voting difficult also inhibit Americans from attending protests; being able to take time off work and access to affordable childcare are essential if we as a polity are to exercise our right to protest. One additional obstacle that many would-be protesters face is potential censure from employers; not only do many employers discourage taking time off work to attend a protest or demonstration, but many private employers are within their rights to terminate an employee for exercising their right to protest, depending on the state.

In chapter 2, I discussed one further way that the polity can, at the level of public deliberation, contribute knowledge by making their needs and interests known: campaign donations. Donations, like voting and protest, can serve the important function of assessing assent or dissent with an issue or candidate at the level of populations; ideally, donations should be able to tell us which candidates the public is most interested in seeing elected, the polity's feelings about an incumbent candidate, their attitudes toward a candidate's previous policies, and their relationship to a candidate's current platform.

Unfortunately, the polity at large's expression of their political knowledge and interests through political donations is, as I explained in chapter 2, hugely eclipsed by much larger donations by both wealthy individuals and corporations. Although individual donors who gave over \$10,000 in the 2020 election account for less than 3 percent of total donors, they contributed over two-thirds of the total raw dollar amount reported as campaign contributions for that year. These numbers exclude other sources of campaign funding, like PACs, corporations, and other

organizations. Including these other sources, wealthy donors still funded over 42% of the record-breaking \$14.4 billion 2020 election cycle, and over 13% of the cycle was self-funded by candidates (Evers-Hillstrom 2021). Since wealthier donors tend to give more – and more often – to fiscally conservative candidates, these outsize contributions give the impression that donors as a group are more fiscally conservative than they actually are; in fact, the majority of donors give to liberal and/or progressive candidates, but their contributions pale in comparison to the sizable sums given by wealthy individuals to conservative candidates.

The role of corporations in funding elections and other political actions also cannot be overstated. Corporations and corporate PACs have historically been active political donors, giving millions to congressional candidates that will support their interests; the National Association of Realtors and the National Bankers Association gave a combined \$4 million to congressional candidates over the past several years, and other top donors include Exxon Mobil, Boeing, Comcast, and Lockheed Martin. These donations have real, material consequences for policy; elected congressmembers to whom these organizations and corporations donated have supported huge military budgets, few environmental and economic regulations for corporations, and evictions during the pandemic. Indeed, all the organizations and corporations that I have just mentioned donated to Republican congressmembers who voted to overturn the results of the 2020 election (Slodysko 2021); these organizations and corporations are *in fact* funding threats to democracy itself.

The politico-epistemic institution of political donation is saturated by knowledges and interests developed in contexts of wealth and economic privilege; therefore, in better instantiating the ideals of deliberative democracy, we must epistemically desaturate donating by

more strictly regulating who can donate and how much. We can accomplish this desaturation by (1) setting stricter caps for individual and PAC campaign donations⁵, (2) cracking down on dark money political contributions, (3) limiting personal campaign spending for candidates, and (4) reversing the Citizens United ruling. These measures will limit the amount of money candidates can expect from wealthy donors and corporations (as well as the amount of money they can spend to fund their own campaigns); this will force candidates to broaden their bases of financial support by crafting policy platforms that appeal to greater numbers. These campaign finance reforms would also hold incumbents accountable to a greater share of the electorate; if candidates must appeal to more people in order to get funded for another election cycle, they are less likely simply to enact policies that will appeal to a wealthy minority of donors.

Mass Media

In chapter 2, I discussed the role of the mass media in shaping political outcomes, particularly by highlighting knowledges and interests developed in context of wealth and economic privilege. Mass media plays an important role in the public sphere; Habermas, Honneth, and Dewey all contend that the media's job is to synthesize or refine public deliberation, to communicate the issues of greatest importance back to the polity, and to inform legislators of the polity's collective will. In order to accomplish these tasks, mass media must be free of constraint and unbiased. Economic interest, however, represents both constraint and bias in the mass media. In this section, I will offer some potential ways forward in minimizing that constraint and bias.

⁵ Current FEC regulations can be found here: <https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/candidate-taking-receipts/contribution-limits/>

As I explained in chapter 2, wealthy people have opportunities to contribute to public deliberation that simply are not accessible to economically marginalized people; the ultra-wealthy enjoy considerable social power or influence in the public sphere, thereby making their views marketable as news, and they may also control public information in less overt ways, such as by paying news corporations to publicize certain information or by owning a news outlet outright.

The polity and its representatives are already asking questions about the role of the news and social media in politics; at the same time as social media and search giants like Facebook and Google have been under congressional investigation for antitrust violations, news outlets and social media alike are reckoning with their roles in spreading misinformation about the 2020 election results and the COVID-19 pandemic. Some politicians, notably former president Donald Trump, have been banned from social media for spreading disinformation, leading to a national conversation on the rights and responsibilities of media owners in relation to the public that consumes their product.

These conversations, while interesting and productive, miss a crucial point: the problem is not merely that certain individuals have a monopoly on news and social media, but that political knowledge has been commodified at all. Because news outlets and social media sites are owned and operated by wealthy people for the purpose of profit, CEOs and boards of trustees are in the position of deciding what is disseminated to the public and what is not. This is a troubling state of affairs because, when news and social media are for-profit institutions, economic interests will always play a role in decisions about what to feature and what to ban. For example, although Donald Trump had been openly proclaiming falsehoods about American politicians,

foreign policy, election safety, and COVID-19 for most of his campaign and presidency, it was only after those falsehoods led to the January 6th insurrection that he received a long-term ban from Facebook and Twitter, and news coverage of his falsehoods continued unabated both on television and in newspapers. This is because Trump, as a wealthy and powerful person, is a profitable source of coverage for news outlets and social media; he brought in users and subscribers to social media platforms and had one of the largest Twitter followings to date. Trump's tweet that he won the 2020 election "BY A LOT!", while false, was liked and shared over 4.7 million times across various social media platforms (Alba et al., 2021). When news and social media outlets are operated for profit by wealthy people, economic considerations often outweigh accuracy, lack of bias, and responsibility in reporting and media practices.

Decisions about what information the public receives should not be based on economic interests. While the recent discussion of breaking up media monopolies would help to mitigate the power of the wealthiest media magnates, a more effective solution would be to ensure that news and social media are not-for-profit institutions in the public sphere. This may involve state purchase and ownership of news stations and papers, while social media could be treated as a public utility subject to state standards for accuracy of information.

Legislation

One of the final sites of epistemic saturation along economic lines in our political lives is legislative deliberation itself. Legislative deliberation, on Habermas' view, is (or ought to be) the stage of political discourse that most closely approximates the ideal speech situation; legislative deliberation is subject to special rules and customs intended to create a procedure that is fair and "free from constraint" except the "unforced force of the better argument." In practice, however,

legislative debate is, as I have shown in chapter 2, subject to a number of economic constraints and forces that have a tremendous influence on the outcome of policy deliberation; two chief “forces” at work are the exorbitant cost of running for national public office – resulting in an epistemically skewed pool of representatives in charge of legislative deliberation – and external financial pressure from lobbyists.

There are potential ways forward in mitigating the effect of personal wealth in legislative debate. First and foremost, as I have already discussed, the FEC can and should impose a cap on personal campaign spending; as campaign costs rise and economic inequality widens in the United States, it is increasingly difficult for middle class, working class, and otherwise economically precarious or marginalized individuals both to run for national public office and to contribute meaningfully to a campaign by a person who represents their economic positioning. Imposing a personal campaign spending cap would level the playing field somewhat for individuals interested in running for office but without personal fortunes on which to fall back. Combined with stricter campaign contribution limits on the polity at large, limiting personal campaign contributions will help to mitigate the possibility that wealthy candidates will still out-fundraise their competitors by relying on their wealthy friends, family, and associates.

The goal of these changes is to minimize both the personal and financial investment of our lawmakers in for-profit institutions. These investments have serious consequences for policy outcomes; after their super PAC took a million dollars from an apartment rental company, House democrats allowed the pandemic eviction moratorium to expire (Perez and Warner, 2021). It is also worth noting that multiple Congressmembers, including Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi,

are personally invested in real estate. These investments act as a constraint on legislative deliberation, with worse resultant outcomes for economically marginalized people.

Epistemic diversity in national public office is merely one step toward the broader goal of unconstrained, unforced policy debate; there is also a great need to curb financial influences that are external to policy deliberation, like lobbying.

Lobbying is a complicated institution because it can both serve and obfuscate public interests. Lobbying can be a way for a sector, organization, or corporation to ensure that an important policy issue receives due consideration in legislative debate. The education sector, for example, might lobby the federal government in order to be considered for greater funding for public schools. Renewable energy companies might lobby the federal government to try to convince legislators to invest public funds in solar infrastructure. Lobbying can be a way of advocating for the needs and interests of the public. A problem arises, however, when we recognize that not all industries, sectors, and organizations have equal opportunities to introduce issues through the practice of lobbying.

The practice of lobbying as it actually occurs in the United States tends to manifest as a feedback loop; those industries or sectors that have the most to spend on lobbying tend to win consideration – and often funding or other economic support – from the federal government. As I showed in chapter 2, the sectors that have spent the most on lobbying over the past several decades have enjoyed more advantageous policy outcomes; the high lobbying expenditures by the pharmaceutical, defense, fossil fuel, and automotive industries have been rewarded with policies that, while advantageous for those industries, result in worse material outcomes for the polity at large. These include but are not limited to high drug costs, outsize defense budgets,

subsidies for fossil fuels, and bailouts for the flagging automotive industry. These policy outcomes are not only troubling in the short term – such as when funds are diverted from education, healthcare, or infrastructure to fund the military or when tens of thousands of diabetes patients are unable to afford insulin – but also in the long term; ongoing support of the fossil fuel industry, for example, is already resulting in catastrophic climate change that is likely to affect the poorest among us, not just in the United States but globally, sooner and more severely than the wealthy.⁶

Corporations and industries may lobby, not just got funding or state support, but also for deregulation and lack of oversight. This kind of lobbying action hugely benefits corporations and wealthy people by keeping wages low, allowing corporations to avoid taxation, and preventing censure for poor environmental conduct. Meanwhile, once again it is the economically marginalized who suffer from low pay, lower allocations for infrastructure and state projects, and environmental degradation. As I mentioned in chapter 2, the Center for Responsive Politics reports that in 2020 lobbying expenditures for businesses reached nearly \$3 billion for over 85% of total lobbying expenditures for that year, while lobbying expenditures for labor did not even reach \$50 thousand.

One further issue with devastating econo-epistemic effects on the institution of lobbying is the so-called “revolving door loophole” that permits former government officials to join lobbying firms at the end of their tenure, now with crucial insights about how to influence their former colleagues. President Biden recently stipulated that former government officials may not lobby their own agencies for a period of two years following the end of their government

⁶ According to the 2017 CDP Carbon Majors report, just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of carbon emissions since 1988. These companies include Shell and ExxonMobil. See Griffin 2017.

appointment, but this new regulation does not go far enough, both because state servants turned K Street lobbyists still have tremendous influence and because Biden has failed to prevent practices of “shadow lobbying”; because corporate consultants need not register as lobbyists, many former officials are still able to unofficially lobby former agencies as employees of big corporations (Rock and Perez, 2021). The “revolving door” also rotates the other way; many of Biden’s cabinet picks had served on corporate boards, bringing financial interests directly to Capitol Hill. We see, then, that the institution of lobbying, while ideally advocating for public interests in Washington, is flawed insofar as there are too many allowed areas of overlap between the private interest and the public sector.

Curbing the effect of massive financial interests on policy debate is a complex issue; while the institution of lobbying is a valuable one for ensuring that public interests aren’t left out of legislative deliberation, the high lobbying expenditures by already wealthy corporations and private interests preclude government “hearing” or being responsive to the needs of economically marginalized people in the polity. The epistemic saturation of government by knowledges developed in contexts of wealth and economic privilege is intensified when former government employees lobby their own agencies and former lobbyists are in the position of influencing legislative deliberation. If we wish to retain the institution of lobbying for the good it can do in ensuring special interests are not left out of legislative debate, we will need to make some modifications and reforms.

My proposals in remedying this state of affairs are two-fold. First, I would propose an expansion of Biden’s present mandate against former government officials turned lobbyists lobbying their own agencies for two years; the President should expand this waiting period to at

least a decade. Second, I would propose a cap on lobbying expenditures, which could be accomplished either as a cap of raw expenditures or as a cap on proportionate expenditures. This is to say that the government could cap expenditures on lobbying either at a specific dollar amount or demand that no sector or interest can account for more than a specific percentage of total lobbying expenditures annually. Sectors, interests, or industries that exceed this percentage would need to face penalties the following year.

These measures would serve to curb the effect of private financial interests in public debate. Combined with more robust campaign finance regulation that addresses the disparities in both donations and self-funding, these measures would go a long way toward making room for knowledges developed in contexts of economic marginalization in legislative deliberation and, ultimately, policy.

I have thus far proposed several ways forward within the bounds of our current politico-economic configuration that would promote epistemic inclusion in the United States' capitalist democracy. Many of these proposals would already be considered radical in the United States; it is the life's work of some politicians and community organizers to instantiate just one or two of them. And yet, even these melioristic proposals that do little to change the underlying structure of our economy and politics are not enough, because, as I will show, it is that underlying structure itself that results in politico-epistemic constraint.

Thus far, my proposals have served to expand access to democratic deliberation within the bounds of our current politico-economic configuration, a capitalist democracy. This is a system characterized inherently by economic inequality, and my proposals above are directed at expanding access to political power and self-determination despite this inequality. However,

simply expanding access to democratic deliberation within an economically hierarchical system is an example of what Raekstad and Gradin term “vanguardism,” or the effort to target and assume influence in “key institutions” of political power; essentially, expanding opportunities for economically marginalized people to participate in democratic self-determination means identifying important loci of political power – like the right to vote, mass media, or Congress – and ensuring they are controlled by a greater number of people. While this is certainly progress from a perspective located inside the system of capitalist democracy itself, inviting greater epistemic diversity into our political institutions is not enough to address the root cause of economic and political inequality under our present system.

Prefigurativism presents an alternative to vanguardism that emphasizes democratizing our politico-economic system as a whole, rather than just specific institutions within that system. Raekstad and Gradin argue that power is “located everywhere in society,” although distributed unequally, and therefore that efforts to take over hierarchical institutions are likely to simply result in new hierarchies; “While there are places and relationships in society where power is particularly concentrated, simply wiping them out or having the right leaders seize control of them is not sufficient of all-round human emancipation. Other forms of oppression and hierarchy will still remain; and those who take over these institutions will be likely to create new hierarchies” (Raekstad & Gradin 2020, 32).

The goal of prefigurativism is not to reproduce hierarchies with new leaders or to create new hierarchies; instead, “everyone must participate in decision-making, and our more free, equal, and democratic politics must be practiced in real life to whatever extent that is possible” (Raekstad & Gradin 2020, 32). Democratizing not just specific institutions but entire systems

requires further-reaching reforms and shifts in the very political and economic ideologies we espouse as a nation; while including economically marginalized people in the process of collective self-determination by diversifying our political institutions is a vital first step, “we need to transform those institutions, and broader society, so that the state, large corporations, and so on, no longer fulfil a domineering function” (Raekstad & Gradin 2020, 33).

My argument in the next section of this chapter is that capitalism by its very logic performs a “domineering function” in our democracy. Although the steps I have outlined above are important first steps, our practical and ideological political goal should be to transition the United States to a politico-economic system that does not prescribe strict economic hierarchies of the kind that characterize capitalism. I will demonstrate below that this transition is essential for instantiating the ideals of deliberative democracy.

Capitalist Democracy and the Narrowing of Collective Self-Determination

There is a tension between capitalist economic structures and democratic political structures. This tension, as critical and democratic theorists alike argue, will inevitably lead to a crisis for democracy under capitalism. Although reforming capitalist democracy is an important transitional step, we should ultimately work toward an economic system that is compatible with democratic collective self-determination.

In her essay “A Wide Concept of Economy” (2017), Rahel Jaeggi argues that we should understand capitalist economies not simply as instrumentally rational systems, but rather as webs of social practices; capitalism depends on a background lifeworld that governs economic norms. What counts as property, as fair exchange, or as labor depends on the norms established in and by what Habermas calls the sociocultural lifeworld. For example, the United States has

established that the air above an owned or rented building or utility is the sort of thing one can own, prompting the development of entire legal codes governing what are now called “air rights.” We also have socially determined what counts as work for which one should be compensated; although, for example, domestic labor is essential to capitalism insofar as it reproduces (both literally and socially) a labor force and keeps the cost of labor low, the pervading social norm is that domestic labor is not the sort of thing that is compensated, unless it is in someone else’s domicile.⁷ What we understand from Jaeggi’s argument here is that the economic functions of property, exchange, and labor depend on public understanding and endorsement.

Capitalism qua economic system depends not only on the tacit understanding and endorsement of the public that participates in it, but the explicit endorsement and enforcement of the federal government. The government must define – and enforce definitions of – what counts as property, what counts as exchange, what counts as money, and what counts as labor. If we take labor as an example again, the United States decides who can work and how much they must be compensated; the United States has outlawed child labor, for instance, and mandates and enforces a \$7.25/hour minimum wage⁸. The United States also governs the process of incorporation within its national boundaries, makes laws about which businesses may operate on US soil, and has crafted policies dictating the role of corporations in political elections. The United States decides with whom US businesses can trade and may regulate that trade. The government may also support capitalist economic practices by *not* regulating; manufacture and

⁷ See Holstrom 1981.

⁸ Except for felons, a state of affairs which many advocates for prison reform have likened to modern day slavery.

production become much easier when few regulations exist to prevent dumping waste, polluting air and waterways, and using fossil fuels.

The federal government also makes the operations of a capitalist economy in the United States possible in less overt ways, specifically by using money levied in taxes to provide infrastructure and social support on which corporations depend. The roads that companies need to move their products, the water that supplies the buildings that house corporations and their workers, the public schools that educate corporate employees, all are the result of federal regulation, taxation, and oversight. The federal government also provides welfare that enables corporations to pay low wages. Many full-time employees of major corporations depend on Medicaid and food stamps; Amazon, McDonald's, and Walmart are among the top employers of workers relying on Medicaid and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) (Kaissar and O'Brien 2021).

Finally, the federal government dictates the background conditions of the relationship between workers and capitalists under capitalism; "Capitalist democracy is different from plain capitalism, since workers possess political rights," such as freedom of speech, freedom of association, in some cases the right to form unions, and "other actions...which can influence the behavior of capital by influencing state policies" (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 50). Owners and corporations also have these rights but are also granted the abilities to hire and fire, to determine the direction and working culture in a company, and to set compensation as long as it complies with the legal minimum.

Federal regulation and enforcement – or lack thereof – is the background condition that makes capitalism possible.

In a capitalist democracy, the power to define and enforce practices for capitalist economies must be derived from the people and their representatives. However, Nancy Fraser argues that the instrumentalist logic of accumulation that is inherent to capitalism results in a tension; she writes, “*every* capitalist social formation harbors a deep-seated *political* ‘crisis tendency’ or ‘contradiction.’ On the one hand, legitimate, efficacious public power is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism’s drive to endless accumulation tends to destabilize the very public power on which it relies” (Fraser 2015, 159). Her argument here is that, in a capitalist democracy, the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few chips away at the very political mechanism that makes capitalism possible in the first place. When political power is concentrated along economic lines in a democracy, we encounter a “crisis” wherein the government that guarantees capitalist economic practices is no longer a legitimate democracy.⁹

Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers explain this tension between capitalist economy and democratic government further in their 1983 book *On Democracy*. They make an argument similar to Jaeggi’s contention that we cannot understand capitalism without understanding the political conditions of possibility for capitalist economic structures, but their argument is bi-directional; they argue that “Capitalist democracy is neither just capitalism, not just democracy, not just some combination of the two that does not change its component parts... [E]ven to think of such separate ‘parts’ is to miss the vital integrity of the system,” which hangs together as a unified politico-economic structure (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 49). In short, we cannot understand capitalism and democracy as separate systems in the United States, and while it is true that

⁹ For more on problems for democratic legitimation under conditions of economic inequality, see my chapter 4.

democracy affects our capitalism, it is equally true that our capitalism affects our democracy. Ultimately, Cohen and Rogers contend that capitalism limits the possibility of the exercise of political rights in a democratic state. Political theorist Wendy Brown goes even further in her account of neoliberal ideology: “neoliberalism, a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms” “assaults the principles, practices, cultures, subjects, and institutions of democracy understood as rule by the people” (Brown 2015, 17 & 9).¹⁰

Cohen and Rogers argue that, while democracy technically grants workers under capitalism certain political rights, capitalism constrains the *exercise* of those political rights in two ways. The first way in which capitalism constrains the exercise of political rights is what the authors term a “*resource constraint*” brought about because “the political rights granted to all citizens...are formal or procedural, not substantive. That is, they do not take into account in their own form and application the inequalities in the distribution of resources, characteristic of capitalism, which decisively affect the exercise of political rights and importantly limit their power of expression” (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 50). Here, Cohen and Rogers are making a point very similar to the one I developed in chapter 2, namely that our politico-economic institutions privilege knowledge contributions by wealthy people. It’s hard to exercise your political rights without wealth. They give an example, saying that “Both an unemployed worker and a millionaire owner of a major television station enjoy the same formal right of free speech, but their power to express and give substance to that right are radically different” in virtue of the differences in their positioning within capitalism’s socioeconomic hierarchy (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 50). Opportunities to take advantage of “universal” rights are limited in a politico-

¹⁰ I have combined Brown’s definition of neoliberalism from page 17 with her claim about its consequences on page 9.

economic system that by its very logic prescribes a hierarchy of access to wealth and material resources.

Cohen and Rogers' second constraint on the exercise of political rights under capitalism is, in my view, even more valuable in understanding the tensions inherent in capitalist democracy. They term this second constraint the "*demand constraint*," arguing that capitalism not only limits the resources available to make political demands but also limits the nature of those demands themselves; they write "Capitalist democracy also tends to direct the exercise of political rights toward the satisfaction of certain interests. This structuring of political demand, or what we shall call the 'demand constraint,' is crucial to the process of consent" (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 51). What the authors argue here is that capitalism prescribes the sorts of political demands the polity makes and, in satisfying those demands, garners the consent of the governed.

Cohen and Rogers elaborate on this "demand constraint," writing that "It is clear within capitalist democracies there are profound underlying structural inequalities that shape the normal course of politics. What is less clear is how that normal course is possible at all. How is it that politics in a capitalist democracy can proceed at all without the underlying inequalities themselves becoming a central object of political conflict?" What the authors are asking here is why, in a capitalist democracy, the people marginalized by capitalist economic structures don't rebel against those structures. "Why do people consent?" (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 51).

Cohen and Rogers reject two possible explanations for the consent of the governed to capitalist economy: people consent out of fear of violence and retaliation, or they consent as a result of false consciousness. But the authors think both these explanations are oversimplifications; they argue instead for the "nonapologetic alternative" that "capitalist

democracy is capable of satisfying the standards of rational calculation encouraged by its structure,” and the polity rationally consents to that structure (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 51). Here the authors contend that it is neither ignorance nor fear that motivates the polity to consent to capitalist democracy, but rather a process of reasoning; capitalist democracy is something we choose.

So why do we choose capitalist democracy? “Why do people consent?” Brown argues that neoliberalism and capitalist democracy depend on “consensus and buy-in,” rather than “violence, dictatorial command, or even overt political platforms” (Brown 2015, 35). Cohen and Rogers assert that it is because capitalist democracy “is...capable of satisfying the interests encouraged by capitalist democracy itself, namely, interests in short-term material gain” (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 51). Their claim here is similar to one that Herbert Marcuse makes in *One-Dimensional Man*; Marcuse, following Marx, describes capitalism as a system with a particular *telos*, specifically the accumulation of capital. In this sense, capitalism is inherently expansionist; it must always find ways to accumulate more capital. Sometimes this takes the form of seeking new markets or creating new products to fill an existing need, but Marcuse argues that an important function of capitalism is also the creation of needs themselves. He differentiates between “true” and “false” needs (Marcuse 1964, 5-6); the former are needs like food and shelter that are endemic to the embodied character of human existence, while the latter are socially created and perpetuated, like the “need” for a new cell phone, a dress that we’re told will make us pretty and desirable, a watch that signals success and status. Capitalism must create false needs, on Marcuse’s view, in order for the process of capital accumulation to continue.

On Cohen and Rogers' view, capitalist democracies are very, very good at both creating and fulfilling these "false needs"; capitalist democracy "rewards and thereby promotes certain sorts of interests and patterns of behavior based on those interests, and given those interests and patterns of behavior it is capable of providing satisfaction" (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 52).

Capitalist democracies create short-term needs and meet those needs. Our present capitalist democracy is, in many ways, characterized by abundance, even as some more basic, "true" needs are not met. With a couple clicks, I can order almost any conceivable convenience and it will arrive at my door in a matter of days, if not hours. I need not wait for a new computer keyboard, a Crunch Wrap Supreme¹¹, a box of coffee filters; capitalism provides.

A capitalist democracy is, in this sense, an internally rational system, implicitly presented as "sophisticated common sense" (Brown 2015, 35); Marcuse refers to this internal rationality as "technological rationality," Habermas calls it "purposive" rationality, Brown calls it "neoliberal rationality,"¹² but all three are essentially referring to what Cohen & Rogers simply term "economic rationality" (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 52), or the ability of the capitalist democratic system to fulfill its own created needs. This requires, as Brown puts it, "the 'economization' of heretofore noneconomic spheres and practices" (Brown 2015, 30).

This "economic rationality" is central, on Cohen and Rogers' view, to the consent of the polity in a capitalist democracy; because their needs are being met, at least in the short term,

¹¹ I've never had one, but I'm told the Crunch Wrap Supreme is a true fast-food delicacy.

¹² Brown's account of neoliberal rationality also implies some additional policies and political practices. She writes, "Neoliberalism is most commonly understood as enacting an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets. These include deregulation of industries...; radical reduction in welfare state provisions and protections...; privatized and outsourced public goods...; replacement of progressive with regressive tax and tariff schemes; ...the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise...; and...the financialization of everything..." (Brown 2015, 28).

people are not motivated to reject the system that causes disparity, inequality, and material lack in the long term. The authors are careful to qualify this claim, arguing that people's political motives in an economic democracy are not solely economic. Rather, "economic rationality...has a *special* importance in capitalist democracy because it is especially encouraged by the system and its pursuit tends to reproduce that system over time" by continuing to instantiate policy that privileges wealthy people and their economic interests (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 52, emphasis mine).¹³ This economic rationality is why there are compelling reasons to consent to capitalist democracy; economic issues take on a privileged status in political debate, and because capitalism is good at meeting created needs people are unlikely to reject it.

A capitalist democracy cannot, however, instantiate the ideals of experimentalist deliberative democracy because there is an irresolvable tension between capitalism and democracy, one that fundamentally limits the nature of political discourse under capitalist democracy: "capitalist democracy tends to reduce political conflict to conflict over short-term material advantage" (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 52). The authors' claim here is that deliberation in a capitalist democracy is truncated in some significant ways; because economic rationality has a

¹³ Brown's position is at odds with Cohen and Rogers' claim that people's political motives are not solely economic ones; in her analysis of neoliberal democracy, she writes that, under neoliberalism, "All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized. In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*..." (Brown 2015, 10). She continues that "My argument is not merely that markets and money are corrupting or degrading democracy, that political institutions and outcomes are increasingly dominated by finance and corporate capital, or that democracy is being replaced by plutocracy – rule by and for the rich. Rather, neoliberal reason...is converting the distinctly *political* character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into *economic* ones. Liberal democratic institutions, practices, and habits may not survive this conversion. Radical democratic dreams may not, either" (Brown 2015, 17). Here, she is making a stronger claim than Cohen and Rogers do; where Cohen and Rogers argue that economic issues assume special importance in capitalist democracies, Brown is claiming that neoliberal ideologies subsume and ultimately eradicate other kinds of political interest under capitalist democracy. However, their arguments ultimately arrive at a similar claim; economic rationality constrains political movements beyond or against capitalism by truncating possibilities for political demand to economic demands.

“special importance” in a capitalist democracy, there is little motivation or room to debate policies that would contribute to the long term well-being of the polity. According to Cohen and Rogers, a capitalist democracy generalizes the political interests of the capitalists, while “the welfare of workers” – and I would argue those who are marginalized by the class system itself, like those who are unemployed or unable to work – “remains structurally secondary to the welfare of capitalists [and]...depends directly on the decisions of capitalists” (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 53). The result is that “the interests of capitalists appear as general interests of the society as a whole,” while the interests of “everyone else appear as merely particular, or ‘special’” (Cohen & Rogers, 53). When the interests of the majority are treated as “special interests,” the majority of democratic deliberation centers on the interests of the capitalists.

The interests of the capitalists are relatively narrow because the aim of capitalism itself is narrow; in a capitalist democracy, both economy and politics are directed at the accumulation of capital. This shared telos largely truncates political deliberation to discussing ways to maximize profit, often at the expense of the well-being and long-term aims of the polity as a whole; as Brown writes, “when the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things...” (Brown 2015, 39). We see examples of this collapse of the political into the economic in political discourse in the United States almost daily. News coverage of climate change is often accompanied by reminders that stricter environmental protections would hurt the fossil fuel, automotive, and airline industries. Discussions about returning to work amidst the rise of the delta variant of COVID-19 inevitably refer to the impact on the stock market if working from home continues. And legislative debate about universal healthcare stalls because deliberation often centers on the impact on drug and

insurance companies. We see in all of these debates examples of Cohen & Rogers' claim that political debate is reduced to short-term economic gain that benefits the capitalist rather than the polity as a whole. This is an important consequence of the demand constraint; there is little room in a capitalist democracy to debate needs and interests other than those of the capitalist. The result is material inequality, uncertainty, and harm to the polity at large.

Cohen and Rogers elaborate a further consequence of the demand constraint, namely that the demands the polity at large *is* able to make are reduced to demands for short-term maintenance and survival. The generalization of capitalist interests serves to reproduce the system of capitalist democracy itself, thereby reproducing the inequalities inherent in that system. Cohen and Rogers claim that “to say that material uncertainty...is never eliminated in a capitalist democracy is really only to restate a defining characteristic of that system...”; capitalism is an inherently unequal system, and one that grants political and material privilege to the capitalists.

They continue that “The reproduction of capitalist democracy reconstitutes material uncertainty, and thus reconstitutes the conditions that encourage the reduction of political demand to the defense or promotion of material interests” (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 55). In the face of material uncertainty, the polity is forced to make political demands that help to mitigate that uncertainty under the conditions in which they live; we argue for increases to minimum wage, lower drug costs, modest environmental regulation, extensions of unemployment benefits and temporary measures to curb evictions. Living wages, universal basic income, employee-controlled corporations, universal healthcare, sweeping environmental protections, investment in renewable energy infrastructure, the right to work, and universal housing – capitalist democracy

obfuscates even the possibility of making these demands. There is no space, under conditions of consistent and dire material uncertainty, to look beyond those conditions themselves, to instead demand radical changes to the econo-political system that creates material uncertainty in the first place.

Capitalist democracy is, thus, a self-perpetuating system, one that by its very structure limits the possibility for the polity to demand better.

Under these conditions, no reforms will be adequate to achieve the deliberative democratic ideal that Gutmann and Thompson outline; deliberative democracy requires a lack of constraint on public will formation, but as Cohen and Rogers have revealed, capitalist structures themselves constitute a constraint that narrows the demands of the polity to short-term, material issues.

At this point, we must take seriously the notion that capitalism itself exists in tension with democratic will formation insofar as it constitutes a serious constraint on both the polity's ability to exercise the political rights inherent to democracy and its ability to engage in public will formation. If we take Cohen and Rogers' insight here even further, we arrive at Honneth's contention that deliberative public will formation is only possible and legitimate if members of a democratic polity are free and autonomous agents in both the intimate and economic spheres (Honneth 2014, 254-255); the exercise of our political rights as members of a democratic state is contingent on our economic freedom. In short, political freedom depends on economic freedom.

How we ought to act in the face of Honneth's assertion here depends on how we – and he – understand freedom. For Honneth, freedom refers to agency within social institutions, whether they be intimate, economic, or political. Because we exercise agency within the context of

relationships and systems, freedom is always in some sense collective, both contingent on our institutions and exercised communally. Living in a democracy indicates that we have the freedom to collectively self-govern and self-determine, and we have codified that freedom as a right.

As Honneth contends, however, our rights are not inviolable; when a system or institution restricts our freedoms in the economic sphere, our political freedoms are also restricted. We no longer have access to the freedom of collective will formation and self-determination under capitalism, which narrows our political focus to short-term material gains, demands for minor reforms, and survival. This narrowing of focus does not only occur at the level of everyday discourse, but is also reflected at the mass media and legislative levels of political deliberation.

Capitalism thus represents a significant obstacle for our political system to be responsive to political knowledge, and therefore for deliberative democracy. Elizabeth Anderson contends that a political system must display three constitutive features in order to effectively incorporate and respond to political knowledge: “diversity, discussion, and dynamism” (Anderson 2006, 13). A responsive state must incorporate epistemic diversity, free and open deliberation, and a mechanism for registering dissent. Capitalist economic structures preclude all three of these features of an effective deliberative democracy; it limits epistemic diversity by preventing economically marginalized members of the polity from exercising their political rights to contribute political knowledge. It constrains and narrows political deliberation to issues of short-term material survival and advantage. And, as Cohen and Rogers assert, these limits to epistemic diversity under capitalist democracy create “concomitant difficulties associated with any attempt to move out of this system to a materially more satisfying form of social organization” (Cohen &

Rogers 1983, 52). This is to say that the epistemic narrowing of democratic deliberation under capitalism further makes it difficult to modify or replace capitalism; dynamism and dissent are impossible.¹⁴

In order to more closely instantiate the ideals of deliberative democracy, we need to eliminate (or at least to mitigate) the inequality endemic to a capitalist structure of economic organization. If we take Honneth's claim seriously, freedom in the political sphere requires freedom in the economic sphere. If we understand freedom as collective self-determination and the ability to exercise our political rights, then we can transpose Honneth's claim to this, my overarching claim in this chapter: *the condition for political democracy is economic democracy*.

Economic Democracy and Freedom in the Economic Sphere

The claim that political democracy requires economic democracy, or that economic democracy is a necessary condition for instantiating the ideals of deliberative democracy as I have outlined them in my previous chapter, begs an additional question: what is economic democracy and how would it work?

David Schweickart provides a possible answer in *After Capitalism*, an explanation of economic democracy. In this work, Schweickart characterizes economic democracy¹⁵ as a kind of market socialism and argues that members of a polity should have the same rights and

¹⁴ Again, Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* provides a useful discussion of resistance to/under capitalism; some forms of resistance are dismissed as lunacy and the dissidents shunned, whereas other kinds of resistance to capitalist modes of social organization are subsumed by capitalism itself. He provides the example of attending religious services; once considered an escape from the tedium and hard work of the week, capitalism now depends on these spiritual escapes to keep its workforce healthy and willing to return to work. Capitalism coopts attempts to escape or resist it. A more contemporary example is the relatively new "wellness industry," which peddles everything from mindfulness apps to beauty products in the name of self-care and relaxation. We purchase relaxation from our workday on the commodity market, thereby continuing to participate in capitalist modes of social organization even in our down time.

¹⁵ Schweickart capitalizes the term "Economic Democracy," but I will use the lower case unless quoting directly.

freedoms of collective self-determination in their work as they are granted by law in the public political sphere. Schweickart's economic democracy would serve to increase freedom in the public sphere, thereby removing some key obstacles to the exercise of rights in the public political sphere, and mitigate the economic inequality that narrows the scope of political discourse itself.

Schweickart differentiates economic democracy from capitalism by identifying three constitutive features of capitalist economy and arguing that his market socialist system differs in two of these features. Capitalism is an economic system with a specific *telos*, namely the accumulation of capital. To this end, capitalism "is characterized by three basic institutions: private ownership of means of production, the market, and wage labor" (Schweickart 2002, 47). These features enable those who own the means of production to keep labor and material costs low and profits high, simultaneously aiding in the accumulation of capital and compromising the material and economic security of those forced to sell their labor power.

Schweickart, like Cohen and Rogers, points to the destabilizing influence of capitalism on democratic government. Because "the bulk of capital in a capitalist society belongs to private individuals," the vicissitudes of the market rest on the decisions a powerful few make about how and when to spend, hoard, or invest wealth. Collective self-determination is out of reach for those without the resources to exercise that "freedom" of choice that wealth provides. The consequence is that "[f]inancial markets now rule, however 'democratic' our political systems purport to be, and this rule is often capricious, often destructive" (Schweickart 2011, 47); the collective must endure the whims of the capitalist and their effects on the market.

By contrast, economic democracy, or Schweickart's market socialist alternative to capitalism, "abolishes private ownership of the means of production and wage labor, but retains the market" (Schweickart 2002, 47). More specifically,

Economic Democracy, like capitalism, can be defined in terms of three basic features, the second of which it shares with capitalism:

- *Worker self-management*: Each productive enterprise is controlled democratically by its workers.
- *The market*: These enterprises interact with one another and with consumers in an environment largely free of government price controls. Raw materials, instruments of production, and consumer goods are all bought and sold at prices largely determined by the forces of supply and demand.
- *Social control of investment*: Funds for new investment are generated by a capital assets tax and are returned to the economic through a network of public investment banks. (Schweickart 2011, 47)

Here, Schweickart outlines the crucial ways in which market socialism differs from capitalism; under this proposal, workers would have greater control over their working conditions, compensation, and company structure, and assets generated by these democratically controlled companies would be subject to social, rather than private, control (and benefit society rather than private individuals). The main feature that market socialism has in common with capitalism on Schweickart's definition is that the market is not subject to state control; the state would not have the authority to set prices for raw materials or finished goods, for example.¹⁶

Each of these three features of market socialism maximizes freedom of collective self-determination in the economic sphere. Workers have greater power to make decisions about how their companies run, their compensation, and the kinds of needs they will fill.¹⁷ They can elect

¹⁶ Schweickart notes that this aspect of his proposal differs from something like the socialism of the Soviet Union in that economic democracy is a "competitive economy" (Schweickart 2011, 56).

¹⁷ Greater decision-making power on the part of workers maximizes economic freedom to an even greater extent when we consider that Schweickart also advocates for the right to work; anyone who wants a job ought to be able to

leaders or make decisions as a collective, set prices, and determine their own wages. The polity, both at the national and local levels, would have greater control over how to spend funds generated by a capital assets tax on companies' earnings; Schweickart proposes that these funds be dispersed essentially as loans from state banks and could be used for whatever communities determine is necessary, from infrastructure to home loans to capital for starting a new company. And crucially, Schweickart's proposal retains what he identifies as the most democratic feature of capitalism: a market controlled by consumer demand, rather than by state authority.

In maximizing collective self-determination in the economic sphere, Schweickart's market socialism would therefore also maximize collective self-determination in the political sphere; in eliminating the economic inequality that not only characterizes but *defines* capitalism as an economic structure, his socialism removes opportunities for epistemic saturation of political institutions by the ultra-wealthy. Greater worker self-determination means that workers can more easily take time off to participate in deliberation, voting, and protest. Wage gaps will be much smaller, meaning that modest political donations will be more meaningful, particularly combined with reforms to campaign finance regulation for PACs and corporations. Media companies will be controlled by the polity and their profits subject to public dispersal per the capital assets tax, which removes incentives to sell news media as a product and makes room for reporting on issues important for the polity as a whole.

have one. This is a significant departure from capitalism, which requires at least some base level of unemployment in order to ensure that the workforce is always expendable. This helps to keep wages low and concentrates decision-making power in a capitalist economy. Giving every person the right to work under this market socialist proposal, by contrast, grants every member of the polity the power of collective self-determination in the economic sphere, although employees of the government under right to work programs would have less opportunities to contribute to collective self-determination than those employed by worker collectives.

Perhaps the greatest political shift that would take place as a result of democratizing our economy would be in the legislative phase of deliberation. The first and perhaps most obvious change would be that individuals would no longer have such vast reserves of wealth on which to draw to finance campaigns, opening up the field for candidates more representative of the people's interests, but this is neither the sole nor most important shift in legislative deliberation. A market socialist system would greatly mitigate opportunities for legislators' personal economic interests to inform their political positions, as well as for powerful lobbies to unduly influence legislation. Combined with greater regulation of the lobbying process and caps to lobbying expenditures, an economic system that curbs inequality and returns profits to the polity would go a long way toward promoting epistemic diversity in legislative deliberation.¹⁸

Economic democracy of the kind that Schweickart describes serves not only to democratize labor through support for worker collectives and collaboratives; it would also democratize capital itself by granting the polity the decision-making power to disperse or invest capital generated by those worker cooperatives. The political consequence is a democratization of democracy itself – a reversal of the material financial conditions that under capitalist democracy limit the exercise of political rights for the vast majority of the polity.

Two of the primary objections to economic democracy of the kind that Schweickart describes are a) that it is unrealistic or too ideal, and b) that workers are insufficiently educated or knowledgeable to make decisions about how companies ought to run. This second objection is

¹⁸ Schweickart does not provide a thorough-going account of the kinds of government reforms that would work alongside or in support of economic democracy, but acknowledges that a socialist economy would rely on a socialized state in many practical ways. He does mention, however, that certain “public sector institutions... would be present in any real-world instantiation of Economy Democracy,” namely “universal health care, quality child care, free education, decent retirement benefits...” (Schweickart 2002, 71).

particularly salient to my project given that it echoes Jason Brennan’s principal objection to political democracy, namely that members of the polity are insufficiently educated or knowledgeable to make decisions about how their state ought to run. Schweickart simultaneously rejects both of these charges by providing an example of an existing, successful worker cooperative corporation: the Mondragon Corporation (Schweickart 2002, 60). The Mondragon Corporation was founded in Basque Spain in 1956 and by 2015 was worth nearly \$25 billion, making it one of the largest corporations in Spain. The experiment was so successful that American corporations, including United Steelworks, have made efforts to duplicate it.¹⁹ Indeed, there already exist over 400 worker cooperatives in the United States to date. Schweickart provides further examples of workplace democracy, including workers in the “plywood cooperatives in the Pacific Northwest” who “have been electing their managers since the 1940s” and a study of 85 Italian worker cooperatives (Schweickart 2011, 58).

Part of assessing the success of worker cooperatives also means adjusting our barometer for corporate success; not only is it important for a corporation to be profitable, it must also provide job security, fair compensation, and a safe place to work. By these measures, worker cooperative corporations also excel; in the nearly 2,000 worker-owned cooperatives in France as of 2009, over 80% of jobs are full-time – far more than most private sector jobs in France – and over 65% of workers achieve “associated” status. Worker cooperatives also tend to employ women in greater numbers, although France’s worker cooperatives have not yet achieved gender

¹⁹ The United Steelworks “union co-op model” is available to read at the following link: <http://assets.usw.org/our-union/coops/The-Union-Co-op-Model-March-26-2012.pdf>
It was co-written by Michael Peck, of Mondragon International USA.

parity in executive positions. Worker-owned cooperatives accounted for over 40,000 jobs in France in 2009 and nearly €4 billion in sales (Castel et al. 2011).

What we see from examples like France's worker-owned cooperatives and Spain's Mondragon corporation is that economic democracy is both possible and desirable even in a capitalist democracy. While economic democracy of the kind that Schweickart advocates will do the best job of making space for epistemic diversity in both economy and politics, as Cohen and Rogers note, the narrowing of demands to short-term material ones under capitalism makes it difficult to transition all at once to a new form of economic organization (Cohen & Rogers 1983, 52); we can and should begin – or prefigure – the transition to economic democracy now by encouraging the formation of new worker cooperatives. This means crafting legislation and revising legal codes to make cooperatives easier to form and to ensure they are protected under corporate law going forward.

Neither mere reforms to our current capitalist democracy nor the encouragement of worker cooperatives will be sufficient to instantiate deliberative democracy in the United States; capitalism is far too entrenched and our political institutions far too saturated by wealth and the specific knowledges wealth creates for either of these measures to bring about the democratic ideals we as a polity claim to espouse. However, a combined and sustained effort to reform our public, media, and legislative institutions and to begin the process of transitioning to economic democracy can and would make space for epistemic inclusion and diversity in our democracy.

In the course of writing this chapter, I had both the occasion and the obligation to think through whether these reforms could or would ever happen. Writing this chapter after the 2020 election, the most expensive in history, and at a time when legislation on healthcare, education,

defense, and property favor the wealthy perhaps more than in any time in United States history, the situation feels a little hopeless. In the name of democracy, we are seeing sweeping voter suppression laws enacted in many states, redistricting and gerrymandering to ensure conservative majorities in Congress, and lack of accountability for wealthy politicians whose personal economic agendas influence their policy decisions. How can I dare to hope for even the meanest of these reforms?

I think there is a reckoning on the horizon for capitalist democracy, but it is not the hoped-for proletarian revolution that holds the promise of a new politico-economic configuration of life and society. I think instead that, sooner than most are willing to believe, the expansionist logic of capitalism will bump up against the finite – tragically finite – limits of our planet’s capacity to sustain production, financialization, and consumption. Capital has already set us on the path to its destruction, but not in the way Marx and Engels predicted; capitalism has not furnished the proletariat with the tools to overthrow the bourgeoisie, but rather it has begun chipping away at its own conditions for possibility in a more fundamental, more existentially threatening way. Capitalism has, in short, already irrevocably altered our climate, and by the time late capitalist society begins to reckon with that fact, it will be too late to reverse the damage we have already caused.

And yet, I think there is a little hope. Although Cohen and Rogers highlight the difficulty with a wholesale economic revolution, I think there is room for a prefigurative approach, an imperfect approach. I am reminded of Alexis Shotwell’s “imperfectionist ethic,” which calls on us to do what we can to make things better, even as we remain entangled in imperfect and often

harmful systems. We can, imperfectly, improve our lives and those lives with which we are entangled in this globalized, financialized, politicized mess. There is still time for that.

It is toward this imperfectionist end that I have presented a prefigurative approach to these changes to our economic system; there are some changes we can make now to make epistemic space in our current institutions, and some changes that will pave the way for a greater shift in our modes of economic organization in the future, when we are ready. My hope is that, by highlighting these changes, we can begin the urgent work of promoting political freedom on the way to a more economically and epistemically inclusive, deliberative democracy.

CONCLUSION

In this project, I have offered both a diagnosis and a solution for a problem identified by political theorist Jason Brennan: we, the polity of the United States, are not served as well as we should be by our policies and political practices. This is a particularly bad problem for an ostensibly democratic government, since it means that something has gone wrong in a system that purports to address the needs of the people as communicated by the people themselves.

While Brennan and I agree that the failures of the United States government to serve its polity as a problem, we offer different diagnoses and different solutions to this problem. Brennan argues that we can attribute these failures of governance to lack of political knowledge on the part of the polity; he thinks that the people are insufficiently educated to vote in line with their own needs and interests, and the resultant policies are so harmful that we should abandon democracy entirely for a form of government that would restrict voting to only the best educated epistocracy.

I offer a broader diagnosis of the problem facing American politics today; the problem is not that political knowledge *itself* is limited, but rather that opportunities to *express* political knowledge are limited. If politics is the experimental process of solving problems and managing consequences for a diverse polity, any member of that polity may develop political knowledge in virtue of living situated in that polity; in navigating social and political systems, hierarchies, and relationships, people develop knowledge about how social and political institutions can make their lives better and solve problems in their communities. This is properly political knowledge,

and, combined with the more formal “social scientific knowledge” that Brennan describes, it is valuable in crafting legislation that will address and improve the real, lived experience of members of the polity. However, our present political institutions are not set up to hear or respond to this important knowledge.

The political institutions that comprise and support democratic government – voting, protest, mass media, and legislation – are epistemically saturated by knowledge that is developed in contexts of wealth and privilege. They are not set up to respond to knowledges developed in contexts of what I call economic marginalization. Simply put: it’s really hard to contribute knowledge to political discourse in the United States unless you’re wealthy. I argued in this project that these barriers to epistemic inclusion and diversity in political discourse result in four major kinds of harms: moral harms in the form of epistemic injustice, procedural harms to the democratic process, material harms to those whose lives are made worse by policies that favor the wealthy, and, finally, harms to the legitimacy of the United States government and its policies.

Although Brennan and I share concerns about the efficacy of our present democracy, we offer opposite solutions; his epistocratic proposal calls for less democracy, and I call for more.

Instead of throwing out democracy as a guiding ideal for the United States, I propose ways that we can bring the United States closer to that ideal. Some of those ways involve changes to political laws and practices, while others are more ambitious. Ultimately, I argue that in order to instantiate the deliberative democratic ideals that we claim to espouse as a nation, we must make changes to the economic system that allows and promotes the wealth inequality that

has resulted in such massive disparities in political power in our country. In short, economic democracy is a necessary precondition for political democracy.

Having discussed these weighty matters that bear so heavily on both our present lived experience and our future possibilities for collective self-determination, I now have the occasion to think about where to go from here. The question of “what next?” is an important one, both academically and personally; this project, as I hope my readers now know, goes beyond theory to discuss our actual political circumstances as they exist now, in 21st century America. In answering the question of what is next for this research, then, I will offer two responses; one will concern possible developments of this research itself, and the other will propose some uses for it.

There is a great deal that I have left out of this project. This was by necessity; a full account of the epistemic consequences of politico-economic inequality under capitalist democracy would take many volumes and perhaps even many lifetimes to accomplish. There are, however, some topics and some issues in this area that I would like to research and develop more fully. First and foremost, I have limited my analysis specifically to the capitalist democracy of the United States, and while my own country provides ample material for analysis, comparing the policies, practices, and regulations in other capitalist democracies to those of the United States would, I think, be a fruitful direction for future research on this topic. Some thinkers have already made a start on this behemoth task; Habermas and Honneth, for example, have written extensively on the institution of the mass media and legislation in Germany and some other Western European countries. There is also room for new analysis; I have described ways that economic marginalization acts as an epistemic barrier in the United States by limiting access to

voting, for example, so we might compare policy outcomes in the United States with those of nations in which voting is compulsory, like Australia.

Indeed, my focus in this project was even narrower than examining the United States alone; I focused my analysis primarily on federal politics, both in discussing our nation's politico-epistemic institutions and in analyzing policy outcomes. I limited my focus to federal politics for two principal reasons. First, there simply was not time or space to discuss state and local politics in the kind of depth that I felt necessary within the scope of this project. Second, much of this project focuses on the democratic ideals that we espouse, but often fail to instantiate, as a nation. Both the ideals themselves and our failures to live up to them are most evident at the federal level, whereas local politics tends to be more focused on meeting the particular needs of a community and in that way can be more responsive to the community itself.

There is a great deal of room, however, to expand the project to focus more specifically on state and local politics. This expansion is crucial for research in this area moving forward, since city and local politics are far more often sites for economically marginalized people and communities to do the work of knowledge-making and collective self-determination that is often inaccessible at the federal level. Local advocacy groups, unions, and faith communities represent ways for members of the polity to put their knowledge of their own communities' needs and interests to good use, and often to great effect. We can look to mutual aid networks and local advocacy centers as models for the kind of prefigurative politics we ought to be practicing at the federal level, while also acknowledging that they are legitimate political efforts in their own right.

A further gap in my analysis for this project is the role of the judiciary system in determining policy outcomes; my readers will find discussions of state and federal courts, as well as the Supreme Court, notably absent in this dissertation. I made the decision early on in the project not to focus on the role of courts in guiding policy outcomes because the role of the courts, and the judges that comprise them, is often opaquer than the role of the legislature and of the polity itself. Courts are not in the direct position of crafting legislation and, when appointed, are not directly accountable to the polity. However, the judiciary does have a tremendous impact on both our national policy and our lived experience, influencing everything from our access to healthcare to our compensation to our freedom of speech.¹ Further analysis of the epistemic conditions of the judiciary, as well as its consequences for our collective epistemic lives, would surely enrich the field of political epistemology and give us a better sense of just what kinds of knowledge are represented in and by the courts.

Finally, further research can and should center on possibilities for democratizing our economy and transitioning to socialist politico-economic systems. There is already a great deal of work, both theoretical and applied, that asks questions about what a post-capitalist economy might look like in the United States and in other nations, but there nevertheless remain several pressing debates in the literature that require further attention. Schweickart's market socialism, for example, is not an uncontroversial proposal insofar as many socialists call for a planned market rather than one that responds to solely to consumer demand. Schweickart himself

¹ Nancy MacLean's *Democracy In Chains* (2017) contains a rich analysis of ways in which judicial activism by the billionaire-funded far-right has both altered the trajectory of the Republican party and influenced federal policy over the past few decades. Her work on Charles Koch's investment – both ideological and literal – in promoting and codifying far-right fiscal policy is an excellent model for research concerned with the intersection of epistemology, politics, economics, and the judiciary.

acknowledges this point of contention with other socialist theorists, and I am interested in devoting future research to this argument.

Much of my work in this project illuminates questions that are still unanswered and nudges both me and other critical and democratic theorists toward future possible research. However, the work I have already done here also has some other uses; in thinking about what is next for this project, I am also compelled to think about what comes next for myself as a researcher. The applications of research on political epistemology and economic inequality are far-reaching; this research can inform policy, policy analysis, advocacy, and lobbying.

First and foremost, my analysis of economic barriers to the expression of political knowledge at the level of everyday discourse, which I have argued includes voting, is hugely relevant to the debate surrounding voting rights in the United States right now; many states are currently enacting so-called “voting reform” and “voter security” laws that are intended to ensure the validity of United States elections. My research reveals some ways in which those measures would actually act as a detriment to the democratic process in the United States by *de facto* disenfranchising many economically marginalized voters and communities that depend on mail-in voting and easy access to polling places. My research further reveals the kinds of infrastructure that is necessary in order for voters to participate in the democratic process, infrastructure like a properly funded postal service and robust systems of public transit. There are already politicians and volunteers working to advocate for economically and racially marginalized communities where these issues are concerned; Stacey Abrams’ work in Georgia comes to mind as one prevalent example. But as voter suppression not only continues but intensifies in the United States, my analysis could be usefully applied to broader legislative

negotiations about voter access; in short, this research could greatly benefit efforts to expand voter access through national democratic policy and policy analysis.

Along similar lines, my analysis may also prove useful in what is becoming an increasingly urgent national conversation about campaign finance regulation; as campaign spending spikes, the cost to run a national campaign becomes increasingly untenable, rendering legislative positions inaccessible for all but the wealthiest Americans. Useful, too, might be my section on the role of mass and social media in influencing national political deliberation, particularly as investigations into misinformation and partisanship on social media platforms continue to motivate the possibility for anti-trust reforms targeted at corporations like Facebook and Google. My section on lobbying, too, might be of interest in policy analysis efforts in the present political climate; even as President Biden attempts to close “revolving door” loopholes that allow former public servants to lobby their own agencies, K Street and Wall Street remain very well represented in his cabinet.

My aim in demonstrating the relevance of this research and analysis to present politics is to highlight that there are uses for philosophical, theoretical work outside of academia; while it is certainly useful to expand on this research, to learn more, and to create new theory, there is also urgent work to do now with what we already know. Now that we have identified some important sites of economic and epistemic injustice, we can start the unending process of striving to correct those injustices, of prefiguring something better.

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Dr. Friedman lives in Chicago with her husband, Matthew Volk, and his sourdough starter, Audrey II.