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Democratic Catastrophes and European Unification in Ortega y Gasset's Postwar Political Thought

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(Received 29 January 2024; revised 20 August 2024; accepted 5 December 2024)

For a major liberal theorist of totalitarianism's rise and early advocate for European unification, it is surprising how little Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's views on the Second World War have factored into studies of his political thought. In this article, I show that Ortega described the conflict as a "catastrophe" that motivated European unification. Rather than an ex post facto interpretation, this was for him the fulfillment of a prophecy. As early as 1930, Ortega had predicted an impending catastrophe that would represent both a consequence of and a corrective for interwar democracy. European unification, then, was only possible to pursue after such an event. Noting that Ortega's casting of European unification as a response to the Second World War reflects common contemporary assumptions, I also argue that he exhibits how this logic can be enlisted in the service of constraining democracy.

Introduction

The Second World War has long been viewed as a "catastrophe" that furnished Europeans with the crucial incitements (or, more euphemistically, "collective learning processes") to pursue a formal political union.¹ According to one influential exponent of this view, Jürgen Habermas, the war cultivated a cosmopolitan consciousness that subsequently facilitated movement toward a post-national Europe. For him, this harrowing experience might even have been necessary to transcend the nation-state; as

¹ As Patel puts it, "without the destruction, the delegitimation of hypertrophic nationalism, the decline of European global dominance and the fear of further German aggression—European integration would never have shifted from the realm of the thinkable to the realm of the politically plausible." Klaus Kiran Patel, *Project Europe: A History*, trans. Meredith Dale (Cambridge, 2020), 6–7. The phrase "collective learning processes" comes from Konrad Jarausch, *Out of Ashes: A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 2015), 401. For recent iterations of this view see Stella Gervas, *Conquering Peace: From Enlightenment to the European Union* (Cambridge, MA, 2021); Catherine Guisan, *A Political Theory of Identity in European Integration* (New York, 2012); and Peter J. Verovšek, *Memory and the Future: Rupture and Integration in the Wake of Total War* (Manchester, 2020).

Habermas writes, it may be not so much “that we *can* learn from catastrophes, but indeed that we *only* learn from catastrophes.”² Following this logic, the war’s “nationalist excess and moral abyss” can be understood in retrospect as part of a “painful learning process” that served to “ease [Europe’s] transition to postnational democracy.”³ Once “educated by the moral catastrophe,” then, it would on Habermas’s view be possible to pursue deliberative democracy and communicative action as the dominant modes of European politics.⁴

In this article, however, I turn to the political thought of Spanish liberal philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) to show that such emphasis on catastrophe as a precursor to European integration is far from necessarily harmonious with democratic ideals. Like Habermas, Ortega did not perceive the Second World War purely in terms of mass destruction and annihilation; instead, he contended that “European man begins to rise from the catastrophe and *thanks* to the catastrophe” toward “the ultranation using ‘hypernationalisms’ as instruments.”⁵ Yet for Ortega, I demonstrate, the war ought to inspire a European political project that would not only transcend the nation-state, but also cure the democratic pathologies of the interwar period. This meant rendering catastrophe and European unification as interdependent components of a corrective to mass democracy.

This may seem an eccentric claim. However, it is important to note that some of Ortega’s ideas concerning European integration synchronize with the liberal orientation reflected in the dominant legitimating narratives of the European Union. Unlike his more nationalistic and reactionary contemporaries, Ortega did not champion a vision of Europe’s unification under the command of a single nation,⁶ nor in explicit terms of empire.⁷ Instead, drawing on J. S. Mill and nineteenth-century French liberalism, Ortega contended that European integration would further catalyze cultural diversity while dissolving the defunct political and economic frontiers of the nation-state.⁸ This, he believed, would equip Europeans with an inspiring collective project akin to Stalin’s five-year plans. Accordingly, most scholarship has

²Jürgen Habermas, “Learning from Catastrophe? A Look Back at the Short Twentieth Century,” in Max Pensky, ed., *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 38–57, at 49, original emphasis.

³Jürgen Habermas, “Why Europe Needs a Constitution,” in Ralf Rogowski and Charles Turner, eds., *The Shape of the New Europe* (Cambridge, 2006), 25–45, at 38–9.

⁴Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 234.

⁵José Ortega y Gasset, “Sobre un Goethe bicentenario” (1949), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, vol. 6 (Madrid, 2010), 549–62, at 559, original emphasis. All translations from Spanish sources are my own.

⁶See Vanessa Conze, “Facing the Future Backwards: ‘Abendland’ as an Anti-liberal Idea of Europe in Germany between the First World War and the 1960s,” in Dieter Gosewinkel, ed., *Anti-liberal Europe: A Neglected Story of Europeanization* (New York, 2015), 72–89.

⁷See Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism* (London, 2014), Ch. 2. Spanish fascists, however, seized on Ortega’s case for European unification as if it were indeed imperialist in implication. Ismael Saz Campos, *España contra España: Los nacionalismos franquistas* (Madrid, 2003), 287 n. 53.

⁸See Brendon Westler, “Against Disassociation: Unity and Pluralism in José Ortega y Gasset,” in Henry T. Edmondson III and Peter Mentzel, eds., *Imagining Europe: Essays on the Past, Present, and Future of the European Union* (Lanham, MD, 2021), 55–66.

characterized Ortega's advocacy for European integration (as distinct from Spain's particular need to "Europeanize"⁹) as a "democratic, liberal and moderate" alternative to "fascist and communist extremisms."¹⁰ Such accounts accentuate how Ortega's principles of "civilization"—defined by inclusivity and toleration—ground his rejection of "barbarism"—embodied in the dissociative tendencies of nationalism—in favor of a continental order that would "count on all."¹¹ In addition to neatly harmonizing with postwar neoliberals seeking "economic organization that transcends national limits,"¹² such liberal dimensions of Ortega's thought have informed recent depictions of him as a major figure in the intellectual history of "the idea of Europe" and European unity.¹³ In these regards, indeed, Ortega was perhaps justified in labeling himself the "dean of the Idea of Europe."¹⁴

⁹The literature treating this theme is vast. See e.g. José María Beneyto, *Tragedia y razón: Europa en el pensamiento español del siglo XX* (Madrid, 1999), 125–58.

¹⁰Lucio García Fernández, "La Europa latente de José Ortega y Gasset: Análisis y valoración de su idea de Europa," *Bajo palabra: Revista de filosofía* 2/17 (2017), 597–618, at 613. See also e.g. Beneyto, *Tragedia y razón*, 151–8; Ricardo Martín de la Guardia and Guillermo A. Pérez Sánchez, "En el cincuentenario de la muerte de Ortega y Gasset: El europeísmo de Ortega y el proceso de integración Europea," *Revista de Estudios Europeos* 40 (2005), 3–10; Harold C. Raley, *José Ortega y Gasset: Philosopher of European Unity* (Tuscaloosa, 1971); Jesús J. Sebastian Lorente, "La idea de Europa en el pensamiento político de Ortega y Gasset," *Revista de estudios políticos* 83 (1994), 221–47; Javier Zamora Bonilla, *Ortega y Gasset* (Barcelona, 2002), 301–2. On such readings and their dependence on the problematic suggestion that Ortega employs a straightforwardly "modern concept of Europe" see Carl Antonius Lemke Duque, "El concepto de 'Europa' en la *Revista de Occidente* (1923–1936) y su recepción en José Ortega y Gasset," *Política y Sociedad* 52/2 (2015), 556–75. Against the consensus view, José Luis Villacañas Berlanga has argued that Ortega's ideas about European unification are authoritarian and antidemocratic. See José Luis Villacañas Berlanga, *Ortega y Gasset: Una experiencia filosófica española* (Madrid, 2023), 979–1048; see also Jordi Gracia, *La resistencia silenciosa: Fascismo y cultura en España* (Barcelona, 2006), Ch. 1. While accepting aspects of this line of argument, I contend that there is more evidence to suggest that Ortega understood European unification (in tandem with catastrophe) as a project that would address democracy's deficiencies rather than eradicate it altogether.

¹¹José Lasaga Medina and Antonio López Vega, *Ortega y Marañón ante la crisis del liberalismo* (Madrid, 2017), 66; Brendon Westler, *The Revolting Masses: José Ortega y Gasset's Liberalism against Populism* (Philadelphia, 2024), 110–52.

¹²See José Ortega y Gasset, "El fondo social del *management* Europeo" (1954), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, vol. 10 (Madrid, 2012), 441–60, at 453–5. On this theme in neoliberal thought see Thomas Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* (Stanford, 2017), Chs. 6–7.

¹³See Béatrice Fonck, *José Ortega y Gasset: Penseur de l'Europe* (Paris, 2023); Mark Hewitson, "Inventing Europe and Reinventing the Nation-State in a New World Order," in Mark Hewitson and Matthew D'Auria, eds., *Europe in Crisis: Intellectuals and the European Idea, 1917–1957* (New York, 2012), 63–81; Anthony Pagden, *The Pursuit of Europe: A History* (Oxford, 2022); Shane Weller, *The Idea of Europe: A Critical History* (Cambridge, 2021).

¹⁴For Ortega's self-description see José Ortega y Gasset, "Cultura europea y pueblos europeos" (1954), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 931–52, at 949. This claim to authority is more plausible if limited to the framework of Spanish political thought; as Beneyto, *Tragedia y razón*, 125, writes, "there is nothing more central to the great Ortega myth in Spanish culture than his Europeanism." However, at least one major non-Spanish advocate for European unification, Pan-Europa founder Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, was wholly convinced by Ortega's self-presentation. See Belén Becerril Atienza, "Malheureusement impossible: La relación de Ortega y Gasset y Coudenhove-Kalergi, fundador de la Unión Paneuropea," *Revista de estudios orteguianos* 39 (2019), 117–49.

Yet this article shows that Ortega could also be characterized as “dean” of several less widely celebrated facets of the intellectual history of European integration. First, he is reflective of a strand of postwar thought that saw “the experiences of the recent past” as evidence that “democracy needed to be constrained by free institutions and the rule of law.”¹⁵ This cast of intellectual and political elites conceived European integration as “a set of institutions and attendant justifications ... deeply imprinted with antitotalitarianism,” and thus calibrated it to remove certain spheres—for instance, the economic—from “the public domain of democratic power and accountability.”¹⁶ In addition to seeing European integration as a vehicle for democratic constraint, Ortega also evinced contemporary assumptions that the Second World War represented the zenith of a European crisis of meaning. According to this view, the very survival of Western civilization was at risk, unless and until a comprehensive reorientation of Europe toward a “common culture” could be undertaken.¹⁷ To be sure, Ortega did not endorse the prominent postwar conviction that Europe’s salvation required “re-rediscovering [its] religious roots” and resuscitating an older, arguably illiberal *Abendland* (Christian West). But insofar as he sought an ideal that would “instill real political passion for Europe” and “spread the feeling of shared affiliation,” Ortega’s postwar stance bears certain similarities to that of “Christian Democratic Europeanism.”¹⁸

While representative of these multiple postwar political and intellectual trends, however, Ortega’s vision for European unification is distinguished by its insistence upon the *necessity* of catastrophe. Far from a bewildering revelation of the depths of human evil that required creating wholly new modes of analysis, Ortega presented Europe’s catastrophe as the predictable outcome of the pathologies of mass democracy *and* a vital factor enabling and inspiring post-national unification.¹⁹ In exploring this aspect of Ortega’s thought, I show that his advocacy for European unification is

¹⁵Martin Conway, *Western Europe’s Democratic Age: 1945–1968* (Princeton, 2020), 110, 122. This was, of course, not the only conception of the war’s significance for democracy; on contemporary “engaged democrats” who thought that the general population “could be cultivated only through the process of politics itself” and thus advocated a participatory form of democracy, see Sean A. Forner, *German Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democratic Renewal: Culture and Politics after 1945* (Cambridge, 2017), 113.

¹⁶Michael A. Wilkinson, *Authoritarian Liberalism and the Transformation of Modern Europe* (Oxford, 2021), 1; Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe* (New Haven, 2011), 129–30.

¹⁷Of course, this general claim that a newly united Europe could forestall civilizational decline was bound up with elite anxieties over how to maintain power amid the demise of European imperialism. On these discourses, which originated prior to the Second World War, see Dina Gusejnova, *European Elites and Ideas of Empire, 1917–1957* (Cambridge, 2016). On the larger postwar discourse surrounding “civilization,” see Paul Betts, *Ruin and Renewal: Civilising Europe after the Second World War* (London, 2020), Chs. 1–2.

¹⁸Rosario Forlenza, “The Politics of the *Abendland*: Christian Democracy and the Idea of Europe after the Second World War,” *Contemporary European History* 26/2 (2017), 261–86, at 271, 279–80.

¹⁹In this sense, Ortega was far from sharing the outlook of major intellectuals like Hannah Arendt and Karl Polanyi, who conceived the war and totalitarianism as marking “a monumental breach, a rupture more deep and more fundamental than almost any other critical juncture in human history.” Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (Columbia, 2003), 50–51, 64. On the postwar feeling of total disorientation see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *In a Cold Crater: Cultural and Intellectual Life in Berlin, 1945–1948*, trans. Kelly Barry (Berkeley, 1998), esp. 18–22.

an extension not only of his liberal values, but also of his famous interwar critique of democracy. As previous scholarship has demonstrated, Ortega suggested that mass illiberal democracies would produce catastrophes in the form of harsh dictatorships that teach the people liberalism's value.²⁰ But his postwar writings and speeches expand this logic beyond the interwar crisis of liberalism and into the broader register of European unification. Rather than dictatorship impressing a sense of liberalism's significance upon the masses specifically, during the postwar period Ortega indicated that the experience of catastrophic war would make continental unification possible by discrediting the demagogical and utopian modes of democratic politics which had led to Europe's ruin.²¹ In addition, as Ortega believed that such catastrophes were *foreseeable* in the light of historical patterns, he maintained that any postwar political order would require empowering a type of intellectual who could perceive history's rhythms and, in turn, conjure orientations for Europe's collective future. While Ortega does not recommend democracy's outright annulment, then, his postwar thought offers an illustration of how the association of European unification with catastrophe can itself legitimize the forging of "democratic deficits."

In what follows, I attend to Ortega's argument that catastrophe serves as a precondition for European unity, focusing on how his attitude toward democracy grounds this view. I begin with an examination of Ortega's use of "historical reason" to outline Europe's postwar predicament, with attention to how he believes democracy undermines collective belief and sets the conditions for catastrophe. Next, I turn to his identification of the Second World War as one such "democratic catastrophe" (i.e. catastrophe wrought in democratic conditions) that would enable a transformation in European political life. I then detail the particular transformation Ortega has in mind—Europe's political unification—with attention to how it corresponds to his preceding analysis. I conclude by considering how Ortega's position relates to enduring tensions concerning catastrophe, European integration, and democracy.

Democracy, belief, and catastrophe

José Ortega y Gasset, born in Madrid in 1883, became a major intellectual figure in Spain during the first decade of the twentieth century. In addition to popularizing German philosophical currents—particularly neo-Kantianism—from his position as chair of metaphysics at the Central University of Madrid, in politics Ortega was

²⁰See Alec Dinnin, "Indocile Democracy: Ortega y Gasset, Liberalism, and the Humiliation of the Masses," *History of Political Thought* 42 (2021), 342–72. On Ortega's claim that the war could prepare "the masses" for new enterprises see also José Luis Villacañas Berlanga, "Hacia la definición de un nuevo liberalismo: El pensamiento tardío de Ortega y Gasset," *ARBOR Ciencia, Pensamiento y Cultura* 187/750 (2011), 741–54; and John T. Graham, *The Social Thought of Ortega y Gasset: A Systematic Synthesis in Postmodernism and Interdisciplinarity* (Columbia, MO, 2001), 276–330.

²¹This aspect of Ortega's thought reflects what Vázquez-Arroyo has identified as the "depoliticizing effect of the catastrophization of political life that ... forestalls democratic alternatives and possibilities." I argue that Ortega attempts to harness such qualities in the service of European unification. See Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "How Not to Learn from Catastrophe: Habermas, Critical Theory and the 'Catastrophization' of Political Life," *Political Theory* 41/5 (2013), 738–65, at 757.

initially associated with ambitious efforts to develop a “new liberalism,”²² as well as to democratize the notoriously corrupt political system of the Spanish Restoration.²³ While not abandoning these early principles, from 1915 Ortega grew increasingly skeptical of Spain’s readiness to realize them. This informed his controversial ambivalence toward General Miguel Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship (1923–30). However, Ortega enjoyed his greatest influence on Spanish politics immediately following the 1930 publication of *The Revolt of the Masses*, which blended liberal concerns over mass democracy and extremism together with then prominent narratives of civilizational decline.²⁴ Over the ensuing two years, he produced a series of political essays that helped turn popular opinion against the Alfonsine monarchy, was directly involved in founding and drafting the constitution of the Second Spanish Republic (1931–6), and served as a member of Spain’s parliament, leading his own centrist political party, La Agrupación al Servicio de la República.²⁵ Following this brief but intense period of engagement, though, Ortega soured on the direction of Spain’s so-called “first democracy.” In 1933, he resigned not only from parliament, but from commenting on Spanish political affairs altogether—and professed to maintain this silence until his death in 1955.²⁶

Yet Ortega was not silent on politics altogether during this later period. Rather, his final two decades of output feature a subtle brand of social and political analysis informed by what Ortega calls “historical reason.”²⁷ On one level, this amounted to an attempt to fuse history and reason together, so that “history” would be transformed into an “instrument to overcome the variability of historical matter, just as physics

²²See Alec Dinnin, “Disoriented Liberalism: Ortega y Gasset in the Ruins of Empire,” *Political Theory* 47/5 (2019), 619–45.

²³See José Francisco Jiménez Díaz, “La visión político-educativa del joven Ortega y Gasset ante el problema de España,” *Política y Sociedad* 58/2 (2021), 1–15; Lior Rabi, “The Democratic Challenge Designed for the Spanish Intellectuals in the Political Thought of José Ortega y Gasset,” *History of European Ideas* 38/2 (2012), 266–87.

²⁴The influence of Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, which cast “historic decline as part of an overarching process of decay in Europe” was pronounced in interwar Spain. For an account of Spengler’s impact on Spanish intellectuals see Carl Antonius Lemke Duque, “Fervent Spenglerians: Romanising the Historic Morphology of Cultures in Spain (1922–1938),” *History of European Ideas* 48/5 (2022), 594–613. It is worth noting that Ortega himself, however, was somewhat dismissive of the scale of Spengler’s ultimate contribution. See José Ortega y Gasset, “Las Atlántidas” (1924), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, vol. 3 (Madrid, 2012), 745–76, esp. 760–73.

²⁵On Ortega’s political engagement during this period see Margarita Márquez Padorno, *La agrupación al servicio de la República: La acción de los intelectuales en la génesis de un nuevo Estado* (Madrid, 2003).

²⁶See José Lasaga Medina, “Sobre el silencio de Ortega: El silencio del hombre y el silencio del intelectual,” *Cuadernos hispanoamericanos* 745 (2012), 33–56. For a skeptical account of Ortega’s “silence” see Eve Giustiniani, “Sobre el ‘silencio político’ de Ortega: Una lectura contextualizada de *Del imperio romano* (1941),” in José Lasaga Medina, ed., *Ortega en pasado y en futuro* (Madrid, 2007), 1–15.

²⁷Ortega’s contention is that human beings come into the world *disoriented*, and that orientation can only be found with recourse to history. However, as history is always in flux, fixed responses to disorientation do not exist. As Ortega puts it, “the structure of disoriented life does not permit of firm and stable positions from which man can once and for all come to terms with himself.” Reason, guided by the “historical gaze,” must thus be “mobile like the very reality that it contemplates.” José Ortega y Gasset, “En torno a Galileo” (1949), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 371–508, at 462; Ortega, “Cultura europea,” 934.

is not nature but ... an attempt to master matter.”²⁸ But Ortega also described historical reason as a practical enterprise which utilizes “history in order to find in her an orientation that permits us to resolve the emergencies of the present.”²⁹ Such an orientation did not entail imbibing the teleological dimensions of Hegelian “rational history,” according to which history moves with determinacy toward particular outcomes.³⁰ It meant, instead, transforming historical knowledge into the “capitalism of memory”—the marshaling of a distinctly human resource (memory) as a guide for action.³¹ In the aftermath of the violent conflicts which had torn Europe asunder, Ortega cast this mode of thought as suitable for a time of “enormous uncertainty over the future.” To navigate such conditions, he claims, “the arsenal of our means is in what has already happened to us.”³²

But what had “already happened” in Europe in around 1945, and what insight could this yield concerning the future? Like many of his contemporaries in other European contexts, Ortega sought insights not by studying the recent past, but rather by looking to ancient Rome and its decline.³³ Indeed, while his most sustained application of historical reason—a Madrid lecture series titled “Sobre una nueva interpretación de la historia universal” (1948–9)—advertised itself as a critical commentary on English historian Arnold J. Toynbee’s *A Study of History* (1934–61), the lecture’s content reveals that Ortega’s concern is less Toynbee himself than “how and why a civilization goes down and succumbs.”³⁴ There are, he claims, “two gigantic examples” of this phenomenon: first, the crisis that ended the Roman Republic, and second, “the times which we ourselves are encouraging.”³⁵ The dynamics of postwar Europe, then, were for Ortega analogous to those that saw Rome become an imperial dictatorship—both circumstances, he contends, exemplify the key quality of civilizational decline: “the unsettling, dreadful ambit of constitutive illegitimacy.”³⁶

²⁸ Ortega, “Las Atlántidas,” 772–3.

²⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, “Prólogo a *Las épocas de la historia alemana*, de Johannes Haller” (1941), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 32–40, at 33.

³⁰ On Ortega’s differences with Hegel, see Antolin Sánchez Cuervo, “Ortega y Hegel: La interpretación de la historia y sus trampas,” *Daimon Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 67 (2016), 59–60, at 65.

³¹ José Ortega y Gasset, “Pasado y provenir para el hombre actual” (1951), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 778–96, at 785–6.

³² José Ortega y Gasset, “Sobre una nueva interpretación de la historia universal: Exposición y examen de la obra de Arnold Toynbee: *A Study of History*” (1948), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, vol. 9 (Madrid, 2009), 1187–1408, at 1215.

³³ Ortega is one among many who, as Voegelin writes, found “in the decline of Rome ... the forces at work which also determine the decline of the West.” Eric Voegelin, “Cycle Theory and Disintegration,” in William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, eds., *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939–1985* (Columbia, MO, 2004), 41–52, at 49. In many ways, Ortega’s employment of ancient Rome mirrors that of Hannah Arendt, as studied in A. Dirk Moses, “*Das römische Gespräch* in a New Key: Hannah Arendt, Genocide, and the Defense of Republican Civilization,” *Journal of Modern History* 85/4 (2013), 867–913. Ortega does not go so far as to pitch European unification as a renewal of Rome—as Moses represents Arendt—but shares Arendt’s suggestion that Roman “worldlessness” (for him, belieflessness) facilitated its decline and fall. *Ibid.*, 880.

³⁴ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1279.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1328.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1275–6. Strikingly, Ortega here cites the penultimate chapter of *La rebelión de las masas* as proof that he has been concerned with just this condition of constitutive illegitimacy for half of his life.

Ortega thus sets out to illuminate the “constitutive illegitimacy” plaguing twentieth-century Europe by narrating its emergence in ancient Rome. This historical process, he argues, begins in the period “without established order, no law, no legitimacy.” With the development and institutionalization of Roman religious rituals, though, legitimacy (firm collective belief concerning who should rule) emerges. This is because “men of certain families” were accorded the role of carrying out “the principal rites” most important to “the collectivity as such.” Eventually, “the first stable authority” of the state arose in the *rex sacrorum*, “the man whose mission is to carry out the rites of the religious life with precision.” By serving as “the general of the army, the legislator, and the supreme judge,” Ortega claims that this figure inaugurates *imperium legitimum*: monarchical rule exercised “not spontaneously,” but “with legitimate title.”³⁷

For Ortega, these foundations in religious authority reveal that legitimacy in its fullest sense must be religious, in the sense that it must manifest as an almost unreflective faith.³⁸ Indeed, he goes so far as to insist that monarchical legitimacy is “legitimacy *par excellence*.”³⁹ This view echoes an earlier series of essays, written in the immediate aftermath of the Spanish Civil War (1936–9), wherein Ortega distinguishes between those “political struggles ... [that] forge a better state” and those which portend the kind of civil wars that undermined the Roman Republic.⁴⁰ Once more referencing ancient Roman history—specifically Cicero—he defines “the body of opinions that nurture the life of a people” as “constituted by a series of layers.” Disagreements within the top layers are beneficial for social order in that they “confirm and consolidate the accord at the basis of collective life.”⁴¹ But discord that touches base layers of common belief, including those pertaining to legitimacy and the question of “who shall rule and obey,” is liable to pitch the body politic into chaos.⁴² In 1940, Ortega claims that this cosmic turmoil, which destroyed the late Roman Republic, is the “same experience” that his readership has passed through, and thus likens the political dynamics of the late Roman Republic to those that brought the Second Spanish Republic—Spain’s ill-fated “first democracy”—to an end. This suggests not only that the sociopolitical dynamics of the late Roman Republic are comparable to those of pre-Civil War Spain, but also, as we shall see, that the disintegration of common belief is a potential consequence of unalloyed democratic politics.⁴³

Indeed, when his lectures on Toynbee shifted focus from the monarchy to the Roman Republic, Ortega marked the rise of a new, fundamentally different kind of legitimacy, which he identifies as growing first among “the people” (*plebs*). The latter did not follow the monarch and the Senate in grounding their claim to exercise authority upon “immemorial tradition.” Rather, faced with “new problems brought by new life,” Ortega contends that the plebeians felt “obliged to invent new institutions which

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1283–4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1294.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1288.

⁴⁰ José Ortega y Gasset, “Del imperio romano” (1940), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 83–134, at 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 90.

... founded their validity not on the grace of God, not on immemorial tradition, but simply on their effectiveness.” This “effectiveness” referred to the practical weight and concrete importance of “the people” in Roman affairs. As the plebs “represent numerically an overwhelming majority,” “create and possess the new wealth of commerce and industry,” and contributed “a greater number of men to the wars than the patricians,” they believed that they deserved “to participate in rule, in *imperium*.” “Popular committees and universal suffrage” are thus the institutional embodiments of the plebeian claim, which brought democratic legitimacy to life.⁴⁴

For Ortega, however, democracy’s “weak and deficient character” sets it apart from other forms of legitimacy.⁴⁵ Indeed, he labels democracy both the thinnest and, crucially, the *final* form of legitimacy. Democratic legitimacy, Ortega argues, confers the title of “chief of state” solely by “election emanating from popular sovereignty”—nothing more.⁴⁶ Yet, as we have seen, for him “something is juridically legitimate ... when its exercise of power is founded on the compact belief that shelters all the people” concerning who it is that “has the right to exercise it.” One might think that the majoritarian principle would be sufficient. But for Ortega, belief about political rule cannot stand on its own authority; rather, legitimacy must flow from a consensus “conception of the world” that is “religious”—meaning faith-like, almost unreflective in character.⁴⁷ Legitimacy of this kind, he notes, “has not occurred in Europe since the French Revolution”—since the advent, in other words, of the very modern democratic trajectory that brought Europe to the Second World War.⁴⁸

Ortega’s contention, then, is that democracy fails to measure up to the standard of pure legitimacy because it does not form part of (and thus derive authority from) a broader hierarchy of shared beliefs.⁴⁹ As he makes clear in the Toynbee lectures, the basis of democracy is neither law nor tradition nor any religious conception of the world, but sheer presentism and “effectiveness”—in other words, its own capacity to adequately resolve new problems and challenges. “Like every present,” Ortega writes, democracy “affirmed itself in itself, without more; that is, without seeking previous justification in law, without formally pretending to legitimacy.”⁵⁰ But in his view, this lack of connection to “a total belief in a certain conception of the world” leaves democracy with an unsettled and malleable quality.⁵¹ Unlike monarchical legitimacy, democratic legitimacy enjoyed no sublime endorsement that “disciplines and limits man automatically and from within.” Instead, it crowns all human beings sovereigns, leading to an

⁴⁴ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1291–2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1290.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1289.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1293–4. Ortega diagnoses the lack of such a “religious” faith—which, given that he counts Marxism as an example, is not necessarily theological—as a result of excessive “faith” in reason. See José Ortega y Gasset, “Apuntes sobre el pensamiento, su teúrgia y su demiúrgia” (1941), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 3–29, at 8–10.

⁴⁸ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1293.

⁴⁹ Ortega is far from the only twentieth-century European liberal to make this claim about democracy’s anti-foundationalism. See Kevin Duong, “Does Democracy End in Terror? Transformations of Antitotalitarianism in Postwar France,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14/2 (2017), 537–63.

⁵⁰ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1291.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1294.

arrangement where all “proclaim what their interest or caprice or intellectual mania dictates.”⁵² It is in this sense that Ortega deems democracy a “deficient, unsaturated, superficial form” of legitimacy, which lacks “deep roots in the collective soul.”⁵³

Democracy thus represents the attempt to construct political legitimacy without any anchor in the basic layers of common belief. This results in more than mere disunity, as democracy’s anti-foundationalism also gradually coarsens the popular character. Without beliefs to lean on, Ortega observes, human beings are forced to endure the intolerable experience of being “without any certainty before the Universe.” Lacking resources to produce meaning—and incapable of creating them—this direct confrontation with reality leaves the average person “stupefied” and “without any adequate reaction.” Quickly, according to Ortega, stupefaction spirals out of control, generating obscene “stages of general imbecility” which are “swollen with superstition” and myth. The absence of common beliefs, in short, produces a vulnerability to ideas that have no basis in historical reality and thus can be considered, in Ortega’s terms, “utopian.”⁵⁴

It is important to note how these ideas complement and build upon Ortega’s interwar theories of mass revolt. One of the cardinal features of the latter was a dangerous psychology of “indocility,” which “esteems the necessity of serving as an oppression” and is thus impervious to the influence of authority and expertise.⁵⁵ In Ortega’s view, such indocility defines the masses’ revolt against not only liberal democracy, but also intellectual authority as such. To be clear, he did not mean to suggest that either interwar Europe or the Roman Republic had established direct democracy in an institutional sense. Instead, he labeled the “demagogical” politicians representative of these historical periods—including those of the Second Spanish Republic, Mussolini, Hitler, and, perhaps surprisingly, Roosevelt—as themselves “mass-men” who mirrored and flattered the masses’ overconfidence, irresponsibility, and ignorance.⁵⁶ Accordingly, for Ortega such figures consolidated the rule of the indocile masses and exacerbated the rootless character of democratic legitimacy.

Yet demagogues also appeared to grasp—or at least exploit—the popular need for a new common belief. As Ortega puts it, “the essential demagoguery of the demagogue is in his mind and lies in his irresponsibility before the very ideas that he handles”; demagogues “denigrate service to truth” and “instead propose us: *myths*.” Using the latter, they whip the masses “into a passion” responsive to “nothing more than a chain

⁵²Ortega, “Del imperio romano,” 93. As Ortega writes in a working paper, “nothing disciplines like belief.” José Ortega y Gasset, “Mediterráneo,” ID 212, Signatura 8/34 (Fundación José Ortega y Gasset–Gregorio Marañón, Madrid).

⁵³Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1289.

⁵⁴José Ortega y Gasset, “La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva” (1947), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 9: 929–1176, at 1155. As Villacañas puts it, the “*res nullius* of the mass ... offered the open door through which abstract universalism entered.” Villacañas, “Hacia la definición,” 743.

⁵⁵José Ortega y Gasset, *La rebelión de las masas* (Madrid, 2005), 118–19.

⁵⁶In an unpublished working paper, Ortega describes Roosevelt’s demagoguery as that of “a man that promises to resolve all problems.” For him, this promise is irresponsible, as “truly human problems are insoluble.” José Ortega y Gasset, “Segundo: Artículos,” ID 240, Signatura 10/2 (Fundación José Ortega y Gasset–Gregorio Marañón, Madrid). In a separate set of notes, Ortega remarks that demagoguery’s essence resides in men making “decisions about issues that they know nothing about.” Ortega, “Lo colectivo,” ID 178, Signatura 8/12 (Fundación José Ortega y Gasset–Gregorio Marañón, Madrid).

of stupidities, which we might better call *unchaining*.” This amounts to the replacement of stable, common social consensus with an “unchained” condition that Ortega depicts as rule by nonsense. Yet the result of such demagoguery is far from frivolous; rather, it is a world “filled with crimes,” where “human life loses value” and suffers “all forms of violence and spoliation.”⁵⁷

While these disorders are troubling enough, the grimmest aspect of Ortega’s diagnosis of demagogical democracy’s collective stupidity, indocility, and violence is its cure. As previous scholarship has shown, in his earlier writings Ortega evinced a deep frustration with Spain’s inability to initiate new, unifying political endeavors in the aftermath of its 1898 imperial dispossession by the United States.⁵⁸ For him, this inability was attributable to an overweening form of democratic egalitarianism in the masses, who did “not want to be influenced” and were “not willing to listen humbly.”⁵⁹ Later, Ortega extended this view to interwar European democracy more broadly, insisting that it was plagued by illiberal masses “incapable of submitting to direction of any kind.”⁶⁰ In such a state of affairs, one could do no more than witness as “one institution breaks down today, another tomorrow, until complete historic collapse will overtake us.”⁶¹ After this bitter experience, Ortega concluded, the masses would realize that “they are not the ones called upon to rule.”⁶²

By the time of his 1948–9 Toynbee lectures, Ortega had integrated these erstwhile “prophetic” claims into historical reason and refashioned them as authoritative interpretations of Europe’s recent past. But in doing so, he opened new uncertainty about Europe’s future. Of course, taking Ortega’s predictions and his historical inquiries together, an antidemocratic implication readily suggests itself: if the masses and their demagogues are the “great stranglers of civilization,”⁶³ and democracy has a propensity to produce them, then it would perhaps be best to set democracy aside. Yet Ortega’s unpublished working papers evince a less fatalistic outlook. “It is true,” Ortega writes in one such paper, “that democracy facilitates demagoguery” insofar as the former allocates power according to who is most capable of influencing electorates and assemblies.⁶⁴ He goes on to suggest, however, that the two phenomena might be separable, and that “the reform of democracy with the precise intention of avoiding demagoguery” “would be interesting to consider”—particularly as “all objections to democracy are strictly speaking only objections to demagoguery.”⁶⁵ How, though, would

⁵⁷José Ortega y Gasset, “Prólogo para franceses,” in Ortega, *La rebelión de las masas*, 65, original emphasis; Ortega, “El hombre y la gente (Curso de 1949–1950)” (1950), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 10: 139–328, at 154.

⁵⁸See Dinnin, “Disoriented Liberalism”; and Dinnin, “Indocile Democracy.”

⁵⁹See José Ortega y Gasset, “España invertebrada: Bosquejo de algunos pensamientos históricos” (1922), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 3: 423–514, at 483; and Ortega, “Democracia moribunda” (1916), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, vol. 2 (Madrid, 2004), 271–5.

⁶⁰Ortega, *La rebelión de las masas*, 67.

⁶¹Ortega, “España invertebrada,” 481, 483.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 483.

⁶³Ortega, “Prólogo para franceses,” 65.

⁶⁴Ortega, “Príncipe,” ID 212, Signatura 8/34 (Fundación José Ortega y Gasset–Gregorio Marañón, Madrid).

⁶⁵Ortega, “Derecho y estado I,” ID 238, Signatura 8/61 (Fundación José Ortega y Gasset–Gregorio Marañón, Madrid). Ortega returns to this idea in his 1949 comment that “every form of government brings

it be possible to modify democracy to avoid demagoguery and guard against collective stupidity—in other words, to “ensure that there is no significant demagoguery in society today”?⁶⁶ As the next section shows, Ortega would identify the catastrophe of the Second World War as the first step toward this end.

The pedagogy of catastrophe

As the previous section argued, Ortega viewed democracy as a weak form of political legitimacy that enabled the rise of indocile masses and dangerous demagogues. For him, a cure to this situation could only be pursued in the wake of a “historic collapse.” In this section, I show that Ortega framed the Second World War as just such an event. Specifically, I argue that he interpreted the war as a catastrophe that represented not only the natural consequence of democracy’s pathologies—above all, its undermining of collective belief—but also the precondition for their correction.

Ortega’s lectures on Toynbee do not mention the Second World War explicitly. But by likening postwar Europe to the *end* of the Roman Republic—when demagoguery had given way to illegitimacy—he implies that, in 1948, the predicted “historic collapse” had already occurred. In ancient Rome, the latter entailed an extended catastrophe: no less than eleven civil wars (themselves propelled by demagogues), which led to the Republic’s demise and the birth of the Roman Empire. Following two world wars of unprecedented destruction, Europe found itself in conditions essentially identical to the Roman Republic at its terminal point: confusion, disorientation, and despair—or, as he put it, “fatigue.”⁶⁷

Ortega defined this desperate condition as the legacy of democratic dynamics akin to those discussed in his Toynbee lectures. Under Hitler, Ortega maintained in a 1949 lecture delivered at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany had come to see itself as “the most important part of the universe” and, “to exercise corresponding hegemony,” aimed “to make Humanity German.”⁶⁸ Such “hypernationalism” accounted for the Second World War’s major novelty—namely that it featured the spectacle of entire European peoples attempting to annihilate each other.⁶⁹ But Ortega did not mean to suggest that the war could be attributed to nationalism as an independent and free-standing phenomenon. Rather, he claims that hypernationalism was only possible

with its possible virtues and possible vices,” which renders it sensible to couple adherence to democracy with “the concern and work of avoiding its vicious possibility.” One way to do this, he quotes Tocqueville to suggest, involves ensuring that democratic electorates pick the right men to govern them. José Ortega y Gasset, “De Europa Meditatio Quaedam” (1949), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 10: 73–138, at 91 n. 2.

⁶⁶Ortega, “Lo colectivo.”

⁶⁷See e.g. Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1330.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 1220; Ortega, “De Europa,” 123.

⁶⁹Ortega, “De Europa,” 82. It is unclear why Ortega did not see the First World War similarly—and why he seems to have only begun using the term “catastrophe” to refer to violent conflict after the Second World War began. Yet his references to “catastrophes” in the plural open the possibility that, much like in ancient Rome, the Second World War was only the latest and most decisive in a series of democracy-driven disasters. Even during the First World War, in fact, Ortega spoke of the conflict in terms of ruin and renewal, in alignment with how he would later frame catastrophe. See Ferran Archilés Cardona, “Una nación descamisada: Ortega y Gasset y su idea de España durante la Primera Guerra Mundial (1914–1918),” *Rubrica contemporánea* 4/8 (2015), 29–47.

thanks to the eighteenth-century advent of *democracy*. It was with democracy's emergence, Ortega declares, that "the peoples of the West began to fall under the deleterious power of the demagogues," who were able to "intoxicate the masses" by converting "the consciousness of nationality ... into a political program." As "demagoguery is alcoholization of the masses" and "alcoholics need an increasingly strong alcohol," Ortega suggests that such a politics was doomed to spiral into ruthless violence and punctuate the period of democratic belieflessness with the catastrophe of the Second World War.⁷⁰

Ortega's postwar speeches and writings often expressed horror at Europe's devastation, calling attention to the "economic penury, political confusion," and hopeless desperation that had left the continent "magnificently mutilated."⁷¹ In a series of lectures given across Germany to commemorate the 1949 bicentennial of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's birth, he depicted the country's postwar condition and the attitudes of the German masses in particularly grim terms. "You all live in Berlin within an immense skeleton," Ortega declared, "as if housed in the ribs of a gigantic carion."⁷² The political dangers of this "extreme vital exhaustion," moreover, were visible in the widespread sense that "someone, whoever it be, should exercise the public power, command, and put an end to anarchy."⁷³ The postwar moment, in short, was one of "constitutive illegitimacy," where clarity concerning both societal problems and their solutions is unavailable, and dictatorship looms as a distinct possibility.

But like many of his contemporaries, Ortega was determined to overcome this demoralizing "zero hour" by reframing Europe's ruined cities and social disarray as a historic opportunity.⁷⁴ "A catastrophe can be so radical that the people affected die," he observed in Darmstadt in 1951. Yet "the recent and gigantic catastrophe had not managed to kill Germany" or Europe; rather, it induced a "twilight of the morning."⁷⁵ While "ruins are certainly terrible for the ruined," Ortega insisted, "a history incapable of ruins would be more terrible still." This is because—from a historical perspective—profound destruction provokes action and even renders it unavoidable, in much the same way as a shipwreck can become "the great stimulant of man," awakening "his most profound energies" and "convert[ing] him into a swimmer." Ortega therefore suggests that Germans (and Europeans more broadly) ought to regard their suffering and devastation not as symptoms of Europe's civilizational demise, but rather as sources

⁷⁰ Ortega, "De Europa," 114. As Ouimette writes, the effect of democracy "had been to deform nationalizing impulses into their opposite, political principles, nationalism." Victor Ouimette, *Ortega y Gasset* (Boston, MA, 1978), 148. On Ortega's attempt to attribute nationalism to democracy see also Villacañas, *Ortega y Gasset*, 994–1000, 1006–7.

⁷¹ Ortega, "Sobre un Goethe," 550.

⁷² José Ortega y Gasset, "Discurso a los universitarios de Berlín" (1949), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 567–73, at 572.

⁷³ José Ortega y Gasset, "Un capítulo sobre la cuestión de cómo muere una creencia" (1954), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 10: 409–25, at 412; Ortega, "Sobre una nueva interpretación," 1330.

⁷⁴ See Betts, *Ruin and Renewal*, Ch. 1.

⁷⁵ José Ortega y Gasset, "En torno al 'Coloquio de Darmstadt, 1951'" (1952), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 797–810, at 797; Ortega, "Discurso a los universitarios," 569.

promising renewal. After all, as he put it, “a humanity without catastrophes would fall into indolence” and “lose all its creative power.”⁷⁶

In his postwar writings and speeches, Ortega did not hesitate to remind audiences and readers that “half of the unhappy things that are taking place today” are happening “just as [he] prophesied that they would, as long ago as 1922.”⁷⁷ According to him, this is because the “dissociative forces” of belieflessness and demagogical democracy “have only one possible correction”: “catastrophes.”⁷⁸ Crucially, though, by framing the Second World War as a “correction” for Europe’s interwar crisis of authority, Ortega theorized “catastrophe” as a repository of lessons for those who suffer them. It is necessary, then, to examine just what “lessons” he believed the war had imparted.

First, Ortega’s postwar writings express confidence that the conflict would sober the masses and consequently terminate their revolt. As we have seen, Ortega believed that interwar democracy had nurtured indocility vertically as well as horizontally, gaining “social groups that before demanded more of themselves, that lived more alert and with greater discipline, that were select minorities and not stray mass.” Over time, he maintained, this psychology would elicit “human catastrophes that are increasingly more catastrophic, more radical, and more extensive.”⁷⁹ However, Ortega also claimed that catastrophes were the only viable means to reform masses who had proven “incapable of listening” and “closed to all learning.” Indeed, he argued that the “war that is now taking place” would, like an “ax blow,” “open the [mass-man’s] head” to “the incongruence of his topical opinions with reality.” This experience, however painful, would be akin to a massive surgical intervention enabling eventual recovery.⁸⁰ Though Ortega does not develop this idea systematically, the suggestion is that the masses would recognize their complicity in the demagogical political dynamics that sparked the war, and that this would infuse them with a new humility and receptiveness to authority. As he puts it, once the masses “feel that their indocility has caused great catastrophes,” they would “start—even if very softly—to sense the necessity for a pilot.”⁸¹

In this way, Ortega saw the Second World War as dampening the intransigence of Europe’s indocile masses. Such arguments paralleled his interwar claims that “hyper-democracy” had to be permitted to fail before the masses would return to a more moderate and *liberal* democracy. However, whereas Ortega had previously focused on dictatorship as the “pedagogical experience” that would “serve the cause of liberalism,”⁸² his postwar writings and speeches focus more intently on the form of political authority that would avoid reproducing demagogical democracy and, by

⁷⁶Ortega, “Sobre un Goethe,” 559.

⁷⁷Ortega, “El hombre y la gente (Curso de 1949–1950),” 155.

⁷⁸José Ortega y Gasset, “Sobre la rebelión de las masas” (1951), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 10: 349–56, at 353, 355.

⁷⁹José Ortega y Gasset, “El hombre y la gente (Curso de 1939–1940)” (1940), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 9: 281–440, at 384.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 433–5.

⁸¹José Ortega y Gasset, “Las profesiones liberales” (1954), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 10: 426–40, at 434–6.

⁸²See Dinnin, “Indocile Democracy,” 364. Rather than “catastrophe,” Ortega’s interwar writings speak of a “pedagogical experience of failure.”

extension, Europe's recent catastrophe. For Ortega, this meant reading the latter as a lesson in the dangers not of illiberalism, but rather of a mass politics that lacks the guidance of "authentic" intellectuals.

Regarding intellectuals, it is vital to recognize that Ortega was far from uncritical. On the contrary, he bitterly attacked contemporary trends toward utopianism and idealism as "pseudo-intellectual," and indeed cast these habits of thought as complicit in the fertilization of demagoguery.⁸³ It might be said, then, that Ortega shared some of French sociologist Raymond Aron's famous criticisms of European intellectuals and their misguided proclivities toward utopian thinking.⁸⁴ But, also like Aron, Ortega affirmed a certain type of intellectual activity, which would "attempt to point out possibilities and elucidate, from the study of past and present societies, the goals one can aspire to."⁸⁵ Indeed, while Ortega saw the Second World War as discrediting utopianism and rationalism, he simultaneously believed that it would elevate a more historically sensitive type of intellectual. It was the latter, equipped with "historical reason" and thus inoculated from utopianism's political derangements, that Ortega designated as "authentic" and suited to the special task of deciphering and guiding Europe's political future.

Furthermore, Ortega maintained that the masses' fatigue presented intellectuals with an opportunity—or, as he put it, an "extremely favorable horizon"—to "recapture the great social power" that had been lost amid the "general imbecility" of the interwar period.⁸⁶ As he recounted in a 1949 interview, Ortega had for decades urged European intellectuals to resign themselves to "transitory taciturnity," which meant keeping silent on political matters and demonstrating "how to not exist."⁸⁷ This was at least in part because he did not think they were capable of garnering social influence in times when "the masses were going to seize historical power."⁸⁸ Yet now that European democracies had suffered a catastrophic "hormone injection,"⁸⁹ it would be both possible and necessary for intellectuals to assume the active performance of their societal functions. This would include executing the "most human mission" of "authentic intellectuals," namely

⁸³Indeed, Ortega represented his life's work as "an incessant battle against utopianism." José Ortega y Gasset, "Prólogo para alemanes" (1934), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 9: 125–65, at 152. On Ortega's later views on intellectuals, as well as the distinction between authentic and pseudo-intellectuals, see José Lasaga Medina, "El intelectual, Ortega y el otro (Escenas de postguerra)," *Colección* 28 (2017–18), 13–44.

⁸⁴Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New York, 1957).

⁸⁵Brendon Westler and Aurelian Craiutu, "Two Critical Spectators: José Ortega y Gasset and Raymond Aron," *Review of Politics* 77/4 (2015), 575–602, at 589. Here, Ortega is described as seeking to transcend ideology and partisanship in defense of liberal civilization's "values of a free and open society" (576, 587). This aim sits in tension, though not necessarily contradiction, with the critique of democracy and emphasis on the need for collective belief described in the present article.

⁸⁶Ortega, "Las profesiones liberales," 434–6. The initial statement of this idea is José Ortega y Gasset, "Reforma de la inteligencia" (1925), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, vol. 5 (Madrid, 2006), 205–11.

⁸⁷José Ortega y Gasset, "Conversación con Miguel Pérez Ferrero" (1949), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 10: 36–9, at 37.

⁸⁸José Ortega y Gasset, "El Intelectual y el Otro" (1940), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 5: 623–30, at 626.

⁸⁹Ortega proposed to further investigate this phenomenon in an essay titled "Ruin as Aphrodisiac." See Ortega, "En torno al 'Coloquio de Darmstadt, 1951,'" 797–8.

“clarifying what happened” to “the peoples of the West,” “defining events to them and explaining their causes and their perspectives to them.”⁹⁰

To be sure, Ortega did not intend to suggest that even “authentic intellectuals” should become politicians; his recommendation was not for philosopher-kings. Rather, he argued that “authentic” intellectuals needed to exert their influence through renewed collaboration with political elites. This involved yet another transformation enabled by catastrophe. For generations, Ortega claimed, “politicians have declared themselves independent” and, guided by ideology as well as public (mass) opinion, have presumed to “ignore intellectuals.”⁹¹ But just as catastrophe had instilled the masses with a new receptiveness, so too did Ortega believe that the Second World War would break down the arrogant attitudes of politicians. After all, he thought it self-evident that they, too, shared blame for the catastrophe.

European politicians’ failure was in part a legacy of the historical influence exerted by the “pseudo-intellectuals” that Ortega opposed. Infused by “the rationalism of the seventeenth century,” he maintained, they had long confused “what it is to think about what things are with announcing what it seemed to them they should be.”⁹² The masses, of course, had proven easy for politicians to intoxicate with the conviction that historical and legal necessities could be subordinated to “desiderata of a moral and ethical, utopian and mystical order.”⁹³ But according to Ortega, such inattentiveness to the dictates of historical reality eventually carried disastrous consequences. As he put it, “catastrophes pertain to the normal economy of history” and are how “all unknown reality prepares its revenge”; “thanks to them, [history] regulates its deviations, and the man who refused to learn otherwise does so in the rending of his own flesh.”⁹⁴ After 1945, then, Ortega proclaimed that the old ways of doing democratic politics would no longer be tenable. “The present catastrophes,” he announced, must “open politicians’ eyes to the evident fact that there are men who, due to the issues they usually occupy themselves with or thanks to possessing sensitive souls like fine seismic registers, receive a view of the future before others.”⁹⁵ By accepting the guidance of such prescient minds, Ortega believed, politicians could shift away from the utopian modes of political thought and democratic practice that, in his view, were implicated in Europe’s near-complete destruction.

While Ortega’s account exudes a degree of confidence and certainty about the future, he did not deny that severe dangers remained. Specifically, if European societies were to revert to utopianism and demagoguery—where politicians imbibed the ideologies of pseudo-intellectuals and pandered to the masses instead of absorbing the guidance of “historical reason”—Ortega believed the continent could very well pitch back into crisis. Even if the Second World War had confronted the masses with the disastrous consequences of their attempt to exercise direct authority, then, it would still be

⁹⁰ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1251.

⁹¹ Ortega, “De Europa,” 92.

⁹² Ortega, “El hombre y la gente (Curso de 1939–1940),” 435.

⁹³ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 294.

⁹⁴ Ortega, “El hombre y la gente (Curso de 1939–1940),” 433–5; Ortega, “De Europa,” 132.

⁹⁵ Ortega, “De Europa,” 92.

necessary for intellectuals and political elites to define and pursue a future political project that would avoid repeating the same mistakes that had led to the catastrophe.⁹⁶

But what would this project be? While the arguments described in this section indicate the historical preconditions and anti-utopian emphases of Ortega's post-catastrophic politics, they leave substantive details—including the status of democracy—unspecified. Even Ortega's lectures on Toynbee, while discussing the postwar condition of belieflessness and "constitutive illegitimacy,"⁹⁷ avoid stating a preference for any particular political project, and perhaps for good reason, given the presence of Francoist authorities who were deeply suspicious of his liberal views.⁹⁸ In one of his final published writings, though, Ortega shed light on just this question. Returning once more to his analogy between late Republican Rome and postwar Europe, he observed that the Romans had responded to their catastrophic civil wars and "disappearance of beliefs" by resorting to dictatorship (i.e. the Empire). But whereas Ortega had previously refrained from judging this "remedy" to catastrophe, he now labeled it a clear *failure*. Instead of promulgating a "political idea" and offering grounds for a new collective belief,⁹⁹ he argued, the Romans had chosen to "fall into servitude" and convert themselves "into foul meat for the State's nourishment."¹⁰⁰ Their recourse to dictatorship—a life "without law" and "without gods"—could thus serve Europe only as a cautionary tale of how "the most elementary superstitions, the most stupid pseudo-philosophies, and theosophical charlatanism" can engender the "the collective stupidity of a great people."¹⁰¹

As these passages suggest, Ortega's hope was that postwar Europe could avoid reproducing not only the pathologies of interwar mass democracy, but also the "failure" of the late Roman Republic—specifically its submission to a dictatorship of necessity. For him, the latter was tantamount to the "pure compression of public power," founded purely on "fatigue" and "naked of consecration"—void, consequently, of foundation in shared belief.¹⁰² To be sure, Ortega suggested, history indicates that "every 'free' society arrives at a moment" when such recourse to illegitimate power becomes appealing. But he avoided concluding on this basis that "every future society is condemned

⁹⁶On the guiding social and political role of intellectuals in Ortega's thought see Ángel Peris Suay, "El concepto de 'opinión pública' en el pensamiento político de Ortega y Gasset," *Revista de estudios orteguianos* 18 (2009), 258–60.

⁹⁷Ortega, "Sobre una nueva interpretación," 1331.

⁹⁸See Gregorio Morán, *El maestro en el erial: Ortega y Gasset y la cultura del franquismo* (Barcelona, 1998), 189–93.

⁹⁹Ortega, "Un capítulo," 423–4.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 423–4.

¹⁰²Ortega, "Sobre una nueva interpretación," 1330–31. Such passages trouble Falangist appropriations of Ortega. For instance, Falangist thinker Jesús Fueyo converted this essay's conception of political freedom as a situation where "men live within their preferred institutions" into a defense of Francoism. See Tatjana Gajić, *Paradoxes of Stasis: Literature, Politics, and Thought in Francoist Spain* (Lincoln, 2019), 55–62. While provocative, this reading of "Del imperio romano" arguably says more about Fueyo's political intentions than about Ortega's intended argument, particularly given that in this same text he explicitly and repeatedly asserts that the Roman Empire—itsself a dictatorship—was *not* an instance of political freedom. Ortega, "Del imperio romano," 96, 120.

irremediably to the same fate.” Rather, “a technique of society, a hygiene, a medicine, a collective surgery” might be found which would make postwar Europe’s deviation from Rome’s trajectory possible.¹⁰³ Faced with “the ineluctable necessity to invent,” in short, he proclaimed that postwar Europe would need to coalesce around a new, carefully chosen, orienting idea.¹⁰⁴ But this could only be done by heeding the council of historical reason.

European unification against democratic catastrophe

The preceding sections reconstructed Ortega’s appraisal of the Second World War as both a consequence and a corrective for the pathologies of interwar mass democracy. Yet it would remain a preparatory step alone, he thought, without the pursuit of a new future ideal suited to avoiding both backsliding into the pernicious dynamics of interwar democracy and submission to dictatorship. In this section, I survey Ortega’s well-known defense of European unification, which represents this new ideal. As mentioned above, European unification was in part an extension of Ortega’s liberal commitments to pluralism and freedom; as one recent account puts it, “liberalism provided the moral impetus for [his] imaginative expansion of the state to encompass all of Europe.”¹⁰⁵ Yet in this section I aim to reveal how it also relates to his account of the democracy-induced catastrophe represented by the Second World War. On one level, I claim that he sees this project as historically grounded and indeed consonant with everyday European life. In this sense, European unification both avoids the catastrophe-producing dangers of utopianism, as Ortega conceives them, and stands as the foundation around which a new common belief might develop. On another level, I show that Ortega’s tethering of European unification to “historical reason” entails recourse to the guidance of intellectuals, and thus accommodates the deflation of political elites and masses alike that he sees as an imperative lesson to be drawn from the experience of the Second World War. In addition to serving as a new orienting belief that could alleviate postwar Europe’s “constitutive illegitimacy” and its dictatorial political implications, then, Ortega envisioned European unification as a means of guarding against the future recurrence of democratic catastrophes.

Ortega first entertained Europe’s political unification in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), where he gestures toward the “United States of Europe” as a collective project that could overcome both the appeal of bolshevism and the dynamics of imperial disintegration.¹⁰⁶ However, he did not repeat this early framing of the issue, and in fact did not return to the idea of European unification at all until a 1937 prologue to this same text, which features a more defensive account of the basis for unification. This

¹⁰³Ibid., 120.

¹⁰⁴Ortega, “Un capítulo,” 418, 422.

¹⁰⁵Westler, *The Revolving Masses*, 141.

¹⁰⁶Ortega was disdainful of anticolonial movements. “It is truly comical,” he writes, “to contemplate how this or that little republic [*republiquita*] ... stands on its tip-toes and rebukes Europe, declaring her unemployment from universal history.” Ortega, *La rebelión de las masas*, 181–2. While he does not dwell on this particular topic and sentiment, Ortega’s writings often betray the sense that Europe ought to enjoy global supremacy; see e.g. José Ortega y Gasset, “En cuanto al pacifismo,” in *La rebelión de las masas* (Madrid, 2005), 256–7.

was not, Ortega contended, a call for constituting a brand-new supranational state that fused together previously alien peoples. Rather, he suggested that Europe's unification should be conceived as an integration of societies for whom "to live has always meant ... to move and act in a common space or environment."¹⁰⁷ "For a long time," he writes, "the peoples of Europe have actually made up a society," and this means not only that "there are European customs, European habits, European public opinion, [and] European law," but also that there is *already* a "European public power" governing each of its component societies.¹⁰⁸ The only distinction, Ortega hastens to point out, is that this regnant "public power" is not yet a state apparatus, but instead a "balance of power" that generates "dynamic unity" on a foundation of plurality. It is in this regard that he labels Europe "a swarm: many bees and a single flight."¹⁰⁹ The construction of a pan-European state would thus not require stamping out national cultural distinctions, nor would it constitute a comprehensive rupture with the past. Instead, Ortega maintained, the unification project would recognize and build upon Europe's long-standing experience of coexistence—or, as he put it, "make the unity of Europe advance, without losing the vitality of its interior nations, the glorious plurality in which the unparalleled richness and verve of its history consists."¹¹⁰

Already in this prologue, the fundamental elements that Ortega saw recommending European unity are clear. First, it could ground political and social order upon diversity, and thus avoid the perils of a stagnant homogeneity—in this respect, Ortega's vision aligns with liberal thinkers like J. S. Mill and the French *doctrinaires*, whom he referenced. But just as important, for Ortega European unification was an anti-utopian ideal consistent with historical reason, in that it builds on preexisting realities (or "circumstances") by elevating a deeply entrenched yet "diffuse" cultural subsoil to "full society." Practically speaking, this "new type of society," which Ortega called an "ultranation," would align with the "strict anatomy and clear structure" of historical reality by turning nations into "merely regional or provincial units" of a larger whole.¹¹¹ In addition, though, it would harmonize with popularly held assumptions about Europe's unity. While it remained a future-oriented enterprise, then, Ortega conceived European unification as the elaboration of an implicit and perhaps even unconscious collective *belief*.

In making the case for European unification as an advancement upon both historical reality and common beliefs, Ortega drew support from none other than conservative thinker Edmund Burke, whom he christened one of "the most intelligent men who have walked the earth's crust" and the progenitor of the "finest and deepest political ideology without fanfare."¹¹² For Ortega, Burke's value stemmed from his famous defense

¹⁰⁷ Ortega, "Prólogo para franceses," 44.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 48–9.

¹¹⁰ Ortega, "Prologo a *Las épocas de la historia alemana*," 40.

¹¹¹ Ortega, "El hombre y la gente (Curso de 1939–1940)," 433; Ortega, "De Europa," 125. Ortega is somewhat inconsistent on this. See e.g. José Ortega y Gasset, "Juan Luis Vives y su mundo" (1940), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 9: 441–70, at 452.

¹¹² Ortega, "El hombre y la gente (Curso de 1939–1940)," 419.

of “prejudice” as a freestanding and even suprarational source of normative authority, which could not and should not be lightly subverted—and certainly not by the “a priori spiderwebs” of utopians and demagogues.¹¹³ On the contrary, Ortega maintains that to “aspire to a new dawn” we must “feel [the past] under our feet because we have climbed upon it.”¹¹⁴ In his view, “a European union with some aspects of a confederation” would be consistent with this method of innovation insofar as it bore an organic credibility that emanated from the deep historical legacies of ancient Roman imperialism. “During certain periods it remained latent,” he writes, “under the riverbed, as if embedded in the earth of many European nations”—but the imperial “intent did not take long to regrow.”¹¹⁵ The project of unification is not one more a priori pipe dream, then, but an attempt “to give [a] very old reality a new shape.”¹¹⁶ Ortega did not hesitate to sketch the “new shape” he hoped would emerge: a supranational state, where “Europe as such acquires a legal figure” and nation-states, in turn, submit to the reality that their own “sovereignty has always been relative” to others—never absolute.¹¹⁷

At the same time, though, this would only become an authentic solution—a step taken from the platform of the past—in the aftermath of the catastrophic experiences postwar Europe had suffered. This was evident to Ortega as early as 1938, when he suggested it would be necessary to pass through “a stage of exacerbated nationalism” and “superlative dissociation”—both symptoms of “a crisis of its common faith, of [the] European faith”—until Europe’s nation-states “reach their own limits” and are forced to confront the need for a new mode of political community.¹¹⁸ He would convey this point even more sharply in his Toynbee lectures. The first thing that must be done to address a situation of “constitutive illegitimacy” like that which Europe faced after the catastrophe, Ortega maintained there, was simply “to swallow it.”¹¹⁹ In other words, the precondition for any true evolution into the future demanded contact with, and digestion of, the pain of the past. Without this essential ingredient, European unification would lack the cultural sediment—or, more specifically, the basis in collective belief—that its achievement required.

In addition to identifying European unification as a project to be pursued upon a “foundation” of catastrophe, though, Ortega indicated that it could not be accomplished through the direct and unmediated rule of public opinion. This is so despite his consistent claim that the nations comprising Europe already possessed a “common

¹¹³ Ortega, “De Europa,” 123.

¹¹⁴ Ortega, “El hombre y la gente (Curso de 1949–1950),” 157.

¹¹⁵ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1257.

¹¹⁶ Ortega, “De Europa,” 84. Much of this lecture consists of a critical engagement with German historian Friedrich Meinecke, whom Ortega utilized as evidence that even “a precursor of hypernationalism” like Meinecke was aware that the nation-state “cannot exist except in relation to a common European background.” *Ibid.*, 134–5. However, and despite some similarities in argument, Ortega makes no explicit reference to Meinecke’s late (and postwar) text *The German Catastrophe: Reflections and Recollections* (1946), trans. Sidney B. Fay (Boston, 1950), a copy of which can be found among the volumes of Ortega’s personal library in Madrid. Based on the extensive underlining and marginalia within, Ortega appears to have read it carefully.

¹¹⁷ Ortega, “Cultura europea,” 942–3.

¹¹⁸ Ortega, “En cuanto al pacifismo,” 271–2.

¹¹⁹ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1332.

conscience of a culture” and thus a “preexisting society” thanks to their long cohabitation.¹²⁰ While this common conscience was a critical precondition for the project of European unity—for Ortega, it provided a clear signal that unification aligned with prevailing historical rhythms—he did not believe that it would launch the masses into spontaneous agitation for a unified Europe. On the contrary, Ortega maintained that the war had rendered such feelings of unity temporarily dormant, replacing Europe’s “atmosphere of sociability” with a desperate, insular, and sterile orientation toward the future.¹²¹ For this reason, he remarked in 1949, “black clouds still gather on the horizon.”¹²² Even if European public opinion existed in some latent fashion, in short, Ortega denied that European unification would be accomplished simply by following the dictates of the people or relying on the educative effects of political participation.

Ortega’s rejection of straightforward recourse to participatory democracy and the popular will was grounded in his view of the kind of politics that European unification required. This would not be a question of creating a new European society through “agreement of wills” or a “contractual meeting.” Indeed, Ortega denied that societies could be constructed through legal or political action at all; in his estimation, this would be “the most foolish attempt yet made to put the cart before the horse.”¹²³ And in any case, he believed that Europe already existed as a society. The imperative of the postwar period, rather, was to confirm and further develop European unity through law. And that task, Ortega contended, was achievable only through a mode of politics animated by the guiding influence of intellectual elites.¹²⁴ Harking back to his analysis of the war and its implications, Ortega maintained that politicians must “listen” to intellectuals (or, as he preferred, “prophets”) who understood history’s movement and could therefore produce law not based on “formalist and abstract reason,” but rather “inspired in circumstances” underpinning European coexistence.¹²⁵ Though law in the truest sense is “the spontaneous secretion of society,” then, this “secretion” required intellectuals with exceptional historical sense to discern.¹²⁶ If such matters were left open to the vagaries of mass opinion or political contestation, Ortega maintained, Europe would once again face the pathologies of demagogic democracy, wherein law is treated as an infinitely malleable instrument and becomes “a fluid element on which one can only go tragically falling—decaying.”¹²⁷ Rather than surrender the fate of European unification to “a blind mechanic” like public opinion, in short, Ortega envisaged “subtle collaboration” between political and intellectual elites. This would involve a new mode

¹²⁰ Ortega, “Cultura europea,” 933.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 946.

¹²² Ortega, “De Europa,” 127, 132.

¹²³ Ortega, “Cultura europea,” 935–6.

¹²⁴ Such claims receive echo in other visions of European unification. In the service of his *Mitteleuropa* project, for instance, Naumann writes that historians must play a key role “in the background” of politics—after all, if “we must learn to discover the germs and tendencies, the prophecies and strivings of the future in the past,” then “historians are ultimately the educators of the people” and of statesmen alike. See Friedrich Naumann, *Central Europe*, trans. Christabel M. Meredith (London, 1916), 35–41.

¹²⁵ Ortega, “Del imperio romano,” 127.

¹²⁶ Ortega, “Cultura europea,” 936. On the qualities of this elite see Villacañas, *Ortega y Gasset*, 1015–17. There are, of course, questions about how this politics would be implemented which Ortega does not address.

¹²⁷ Ortega, “Sobre una nueva interpretación,” 1403.

of politics, one that featured the elite-led construction of “legal forms” and “precise agreements” upon a preexisting, permissive cultural bedrock.¹²⁸

It is thus tempting to align Ortega with prominent veins of postwar political thought that sought “to construct barriers within democracy against surges in popular passions” and “constrain popular participation.”¹²⁹ But while this may well be in keeping with his impulse regarding the indocile masses described in *The Revolt of the Masses*, it would be a mischaracterization of Ortega’s overall aim as far as popular involvement in politics is concerned. He spoke glowingly, for instance, of the plebeians of the ancient Roman Republic and their initial claim to “participate in government.” What distinguished these “healthy plebeians” from indocile masses, he observed, was their “live faith in the same image of the Universe and of life as the patricians,” and their saturation with “firm religious and earthly beliefs” that “erected checks of discipline and obedience within each man.” Given “radical concord” and “superabundant solidarity” with elites, simply put, Ortega was far from steadfastly opposed to mass political participation.¹³⁰ The key post-1945 consideration, rather, concerned whether it would be possible to construct a form of democracy that avoided demagoguery and the associated catastrophes that ancient Rome and interwar Europe had suffered. For Ortega, this would be less a matter of sidelining the masses by yoking democracy to concrete institutional constraints than of enlisting them in a future-oriented political project that harmonized with collective European beliefs. This was what he hoped European unification could achieve. On Ortega’s understanding, indeed, such a project would adhere to the true essence of democracy, which was not so much “universal secret and direct suffrage” as “the desire to count with everyone.”¹³¹ By seeking to build a supranational state that incorporated European peoples of diverse national origins, this supposedly essential democratic characteristic—inclusion—would be not only sustained, but advanced.

In this sense, Ortega cast European unification as a historically grounded project that could be pursued through an elite-mediated form of democracy. It is important to recognize, additionally, that this did not merely involve affixing a new institutional or legal disguise to Europe’s status quo. Rather, in crafting an idea for the future that retains a basis in past and present practices, Ortega intended the pursuit of European unity as the groundwork for a future collective belief. This would generate those linkages between democratic legitimacy and collective faith that he perceived to have been lacking in democracies past—to ruinous effect. To be clear, Ortega does not explicitly articulate this precise argument in his postwar writings. But it follows directly from his claim that the ideas which lie behind any successful “project for action” “are those that future generations [will] enmesh within the layer of beliefs.” Simply put, regnant

¹²⁸ Ortega, “Cultura europea,” 944. The unintended resonances of this quote with Jean Monnet’s famous reference to “concrete achievements” speaks to Ortega’s basic alignment with some founding EU thinkers. See Kevin Featherstone, “Jean Monnet and the ‘Democratic Deficit’ in the European Union,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 32 (1994), 149–70.

¹²⁹ Conway, *Western Europe’s Democratic Age*, 111, 117.

¹³⁰ Ortega, “Del imperio romano,” 127–8, 131–2.

¹³¹ José Ortega y Gasset, “Qué pasa en el mundo? Algunas observaciones sobre nuestro tiempo” (1933), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 9: 9–26, at 23.

ideas “become beliefs, and disappear as ideas.”¹³² Ortega affirmed his own candidate “idea”—the project of European political unification—in the hope that its collective pursuit would readily anchor democratic politics to common belief. By exchanging utopianism for historical reality (as deciphered by authentic intellectuals), European unity possessed the very quality as an ideal that democracy lacked: “roots in the collective soul.” Consequently, Ortega vociferously denied that there was anything utopian about European unification—on the contrary, it was the “overwhelmingly realist” political ideal and basis for legitimacy in postwar Europe.¹³³

For Ortega, then, European unification was a way of introducing a vital measure of orientation to democratic politics. Of course, this view arises from a deep skepticism toward interwar mass democracy, which conditions his vision for Europe’s unification by rendering catastrophe integral to that process. But according to Ortega’s scheme, the postwar project of European unification would divert democracy away from the collective stupidity generated by myth, utopianism, and demagogues, and toward an ideal delineated by intellectuals employing historical reason. Even more importantly, while he offers few, if any, details concerning the institutional frameworks by which this ideal would be accomplished, Ortega did not hide that it necessitated a departure from the status quo practices of democracy. Rather than continue to be “progressively led by masses until they convert themselves ... into simple exponents of their momentary appetites,” he maintained, politicians would need to dispense with their demagogical tendencies and listen to intellectuals once again—after all, “there is no way to annul the cosmic reality that the intellectual is the man who leaves things be and, thanks to this condition, the only one who understands what they are.”¹³⁴ Any comprehensive attempt to overcome what led to the Second World War, in his view, therefore had to neutralize more than nationalism and ideological extremism. It would also need to address and resolve the anti-foundationalism of interwar European democracy.

Conclusion

In his final published essay, Ortega remarked upon the strange combination of human unity and plurality that made Europe unique. “As Western peoples developed,” he observed, “each both formed its peculiar genius and created a common repertoire of ideas, manners, enthusiasms.” This meant that Europe simultaneously became “progressively homogeneous and progressively diverse,” as “each new principle fertilized diversification.”¹³⁵ What Ortega championed in the unification of Europe was, in part, the prospect of politically institutionalizing this dynamic of facilitating and synthesizing difference. It is no distortion to see such a project as an extension of Ortega’s liberal principles beyond the borders of the nation-state. But as this article has argued, it is also crucial to recognize that this project is fundamentally calibrated as an antidote to what Ortega saw as the problems of interwar mass democracy.

¹³² Ortega, “Un capítulo,” 422.

¹³³ Ortega, “De Europa,” 120.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91–2.

¹³⁵ José Ortega y Gasset, “La edad media y la idea de nación” (1955), in Ortega, *Obras Completas*, 6: 953–64, at 954.

For Ortega, specifically, European unification functioned along with *catastrophe* as a two-step cure for the democratic pathologies that produced the Second World War. This is because, in his view, interwar democracy's lack of foundations had fostered a loss of collective belief, which in turn fueled a demagogical mode of politics that only a ruinous catastrophe could decisively discredit. Identifying the Second World War as just such a transformative event, Ortega deemed Europe's postwar circumstances ideal for the rectification of democracy through the resuscitation of collective belief.

As we have seen, this corresponded to a shift in Ortega's outlook on the role of intellectuals in politics. Whereas he had previously declared the futility of intellectual attempts to alter the trajectory of mass democratic politics, in the aftermath of the Second World War Ortega began calling "authentic," historically sensitive intellectuals to rouse newly chastened political elites with a future project for European unity. Intellectuals' guiding influence was necessary, in his view, because only they possessed the "historical reason" required to develop a responsible and effective orienting ideal for postwar Europe. As Ortega put it, "a healthy politics without long historical anticipation, without prophecy is less and less possible."¹³⁶ By embodying such a "healthy" politics, in short, he hoped that European unification would not only decontaminate democracy of its demagogical elements, but also circumnavigate the rise of democratic catastrophes in the future.

This indicates, however, that for Ortega the fundamental contours of a post-catastrophic European order could only be shaped by intellectuals in alliance with political elites. Even if the Second World War set the stage to overcome the problems of demagogical democracy, its occurrence alone did not immunize Europe against the reemergence of similar pathologies in the future. Such a safeguard could only be secured if the ongoing project of European unity—"an enormous enterprise" and "inspired rhyme" "that cannot be improvised"—were to be elite-mediated in the way Ortega described.¹³⁷ Democracy in the sense of unmitigated rule by public opinion, quite simply, could not "support the lever to lift the political situation of the world."¹³⁸

Ortega's later political thought thus illustrates how characterizing the Second World War as a necessary precondition for European integration can legitimate the attenuation of more popular forms of democratic politics. Admittedly, his arguments build upon a quite negative interpretation of interwar democracy. Yet in entertaining the idea that catastrophes are necessary preconditions for the transcendence of profound social problems, it is crucial to remember that Ortega is not alone. In his 1994 essay "Learning from Catastrophe? A Look Back at the Short Twentieth Century," Jürgen Habermas entertained precisely this possibility in his search for political reform projects that would address dangers surrounding globalization. Such "institutional innovations," he writes, "come out of societies whose political elites find a resonance and support for them in the already transformed basic value orientations of their populations." What is it that transforms these "basic value orientations"? To the extent that Habermas has an

¹³⁶Ortega, "De Europa," 92.

¹³⁷Ortega, "Cultura europea," 933; Ortega, "Del imperio romano," 127.

¹³⁸Ignorance of this fact was, for Ortega, tantamount to complicity in new disasters; as he put it, "the entire responsibility for the catastrophe weighs on" those who continue to "believe the contrary." Ortega, "De Europa," 77.

answer, it comes in the following “encouraging example”: “the pacifist consciousness that had clearly developed in the wake of two barbaric world wars.”¹³⁹ Catastrophe, in short, set the stage for subsequent elite-led change.

To be sure, Habermas would not subscribe to Ortega’s rendering of catastrophe, nor to his vision of European unification more broadly. While Ortega saw Europe’s war as the means to prepare public opinion for a post-national European polity that would guard against the recurrence of catastrophe by deriving orientation from intellectuals, Habermas has insisted upon the enduring need to pursue European integration through deliberative democratic political processes.¹⁴⁰ In other words, to theorize the Second World War as a preparatory spark for European integration is not itself to endorse Ortega’s framing of democracy, nor is it to accept any of the other top-down models of democracy that proliferated during the postwar period and arguably informed the subsequent composition of the European Union.¹⁴¹ However, given the resurgence of allegedly unreachable, illiberal, and demagogical political forces within today’s democratic societies—including in Europe—it is well worth pondering not only whether something other than catastrophe might remedy the dangers Ortega identified, but also whether his post-catastrophic politics can truly perform the work he hoped it would.

Acknowledgments. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt Political Theory Colloquium and the King’s College London Political Theory Workshop. I thank the participants at each, as well as Rainer Forst and Darrel Moellendorf, and Robin Douglass, respectively, for the opportunity to present. I would also like to express gratitude to the excellent library staff at the Fundación José Ortega y Gasset–Gregorio Marañón in Madrid for granting me access to Ortega’s working papers. Finally, for invaluable comments and feedback, special thanks are owed to *Modern Intellectual History* editor Tracie Matysik and three anonymous reviewers, as well as to Thomas Biebricher, Manolo Giner Escobar, Steven Klein, Pilar Morales, Daniel O’Neill, and Cain Shelley.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹³⁹Habermas, “Learning from Catastrophe?”, 56.

¹⁴⁰See Habermas, “Why Europe Needs a Constitution.”

¹⁴¹See Conway, *Western Europe’s Democratic Age*; Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, esp. 146–50; Wilkinson, *Authoritarian Liberalism*.

Cite this article: Alec Dinnin, “Democratic Catastrophes and European Unification in Ortega y Gasset’s Postwar Political Thought” *Modern Intellectual History* (2025), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000568>