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A Democracy Capable of Defending Itself. Revisiting the Legacy of Karl Loewenstein

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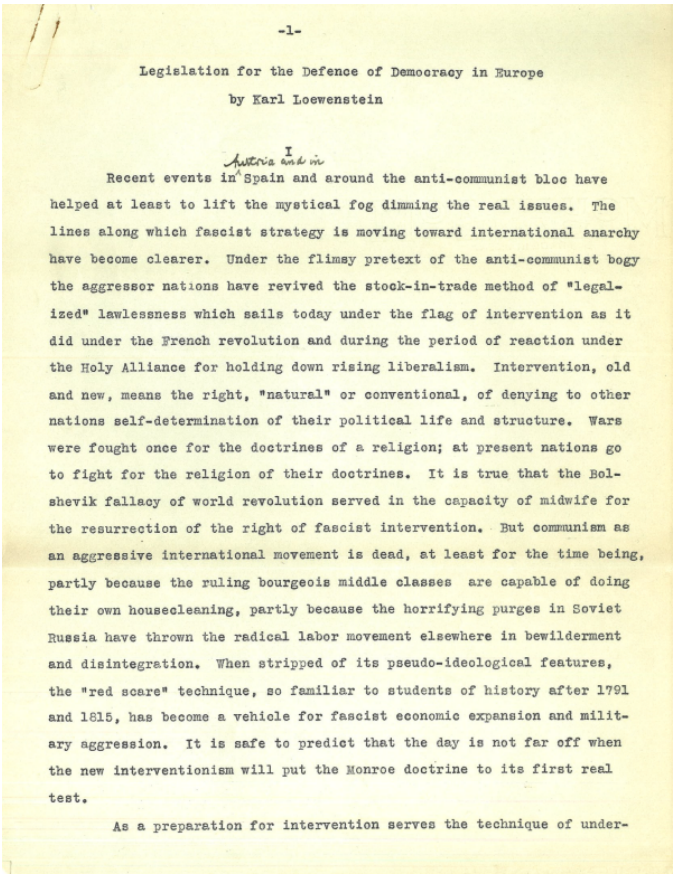
Liberal democracies, at this stage of the twenty-first century, are reenacting an old paradox that has resurfaced with particular intensity, their greatest innovative strength, pluralistic openness to organized dissent, can become the channel of their self-destruction. Contemporary authoritarianism rarely erupts through coups d'état or the sudden abolition of constitutions. Rather, it advances from within institutions, using elections, parliaments, and courts to gradually erode the rule of law.

This phenomenon, observable today across different regions, was analyzed with remarkable clarity by the German jurist Karl Loewenstein nearly a century ago. In the 1930s, amid the collapse of European democracies, Loewenstein formulated a warning that remains uncomfortable for liberalism: a democracy that grants unlimited rights to those who seek to destroy it risks committing legal suicide. His response to this dilemma was the concept of militant democracy, an idea conceived not as a rupture with liberalism, but as its mechanism of self-defense.

My review of Karl Loewenstein's papers, preserved in the archives of Amherst College, has led me to a body of documents that recurrently address various facets of his political, legal, and ethical thought. The central lesson I draw from these texts is not merely historical; it is normative and profoundly contemporary. Liberal democracy, for Loewenstein, was not an automatic mechanism nor a self-regulating system that could afford unlimited neutrality toward its enemies. It is a demanding political order, which presupposes minimal loyalty to the rules of the game, acceptance of pluralism, and the renunciation of violence as a method of political competition. When these assumptions cease to hold, democracy cannot simply observe it must defend itself.

The Man and His Circumstances

The intellectual trajectory of Karl Loewenstein (1891–1973) paradigmatically embodies the tensions of the twentieth century between authoritarianism, exile, and democratic reconstruction. Born in Munich into an assimilated Jewish family, Loewenstein studied law at several European universities, Munich, Heidelberg, Paris, and Berlin, before earning his doctorate in 1919 and practicing as a lawyer and academic in the Weimar Republic. His early intellectual socialization in cosmopolitan environments and his contact with the thought of Max Weber profoundly shaped his comparative approach to law and politics.



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Legislation for the Defence of Democracy in Europe

by Karl Loewenstein

I

Recent events in Austria and in Spain and around the anti-communist bloc have helped at least to lift the mystical fog dimming the real issues. The lines along which fascist strategy is moving toward international anarchy have become clearer. Under the flimsy pretext of the anti-communist bogy the aggressor nations have revived the stock-in-trade method of "legalized" lawlessness which sails today under the flag of intervention as it did under the French revolution and during the period of reaction under the Holy Alliance for holding down rising liberalism. Intervention, old and new, means the right, "natural" or conventional, of denying to other nations self-determination of their political life and structure. Wars were fought once for the doctrines of a religion; at present nations go to fight for the religion of their doctrines. It is true that the Bolshevik fallacy of world revolution served in the capacity of midwife for the resurrection of the right of fascist intervention. But communism as an aggressive international movement is dead, at least for the time being, partly because the ruling bourgeois middle classes are capable of doing their own housecleaning, partly because the horrifying purges in Soviet Russia have thrown the radical labor movement elsewhere in bewilderment and disintegration. When stripped of its pseudo-ideological features, the "red scare" technique, so familiar to students of history after 1791 and 1815, has become a vehicle for fascist economic expansion and military aggression. It is safe to predict that the day is not far off when the new interventionism will put the Monroe doctrine to its first real test.

As a preparation for intervention serves the technique of under-

Figure 1. Legislation for the Defence of Democracy in Europe. Source: Karl Loewenstein Papers. *Amherst College Archives & Special Collections.*

The rise of Nazism in 1933 marked a decisive turning point. As a Jewish scholar and critical intellectual, Loewenstein was expelled from the German university system, beginning an exile that would take him to the United States, where he developed the most influential part of his career at Amherst College. This displacement was not only geographical but also

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epistemological, his work began to articulate a systematic reflection on the conditions for the survival of democracy in the face of its internal enemies. In this context, he formulated one of his most enduring contributions, the concept of "militant democracy", understood as the need for democratic regimes to adopt constitutional mechanisms capable of defending themselves against anti-democratic movements that seek to destroy them from within.

During the 1930s and the Second World War, Loewenstein analyzed the collapse of European democracies and the rise of fascism, arguing that liberal systems had lacked effective instruments to protect themselves against authoritarian actors. His work from this period reflects a central tension: how to preserve freedoms without allowing them to be instrumentalized to abolish the democratic order. This concern placed him within an intellectual tradition that combines political realism with a normative commitment to constitutionalism.

After the war, Loewenstein actively participated in the institutional reconstruction of Germany as an advisor to the U.S. military government, contributing to denazification processes and legal reform. His direct experience in these processes reinforced his conviction that democracy is not a spontaneous order, but an institutional construction that requires vigilance and conscious design. At the same time, he continued developing a comparative theory of constitutions, distinguishing between normative, nominal, and semantic constitutions according to their actual effectiveness in organizing political power.

Intellectually prolific, Loewenstein published numerous works on constitutional law, political science, and the history of political thought, influencing both American and European academia. His figure has been described as representative of broader processes of internationalization and Westernization of German political thought in the twentieth century. However, his trajectory was also singular: trained as a jurist, he never abandoned the theory of the state, even as he contributed to consolidating political science as an autonomous discipline in the postwar period. His death in 1973, in Heidelberg, after a life marked by exile, intellectual commitment, and the defense of constitutional democracy, left a legacy that remains relevant in contemporary debates on how democracies can, and must, defend themselves against authoritarian threats without renouncing their fundamental principles.

Authoritarianism as Threat and the Early Defense of Democracy

One of Loewenstein's most contemporary contributions is his characterization of fascism not so much as an ideology, but as a technique for the conquest of power. In *Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights* (1937), the jurist argues that fascist movements triumphed not through revolutionary force, but through their ability to emotionally exploit the rules of democratic competition. They did not operate clandestinely, but rather "in the open competition of the political marketplace", protected by the freedoms they would later abolish.

In this regard, alluding to the extremes of both the right and the left, Loewenstein acknowledged that, in times of crisis, political ideas tend to be virulently contagious. At the same time, he identified within the fascist movement a method for seizing power, one predicated upon the destruction of democracy from within. Curiously, Loewenstein linked this strategy. In an impassioned style, serving as a clarion call to the European public conscience and opinion, Loewenstein wrote:

> *"¿What is to be done to save democracy and liberty and all the achievement of history dear to mankind from destruction? (.) Liberal tolerance seems ill, advice towards a political creed which uses democracy only to destroy it, which decries violence to make it the gospel when the time is ripe (.) democracy has been too generous in the toleration of the ideas subversive for democracy and this untimely generosity has weakened the spirit of self-defense of her own basic principles. Only the most energetic assertion and application of the right of self-defense is apt to counterbalance the assault of the fascist forces menacing the foundation of our political life. What' is needed is a re-awakening of the old democratic fighting spirit. A militant democracy learning from the militant spirit of her foes in the pursuit of their antidemocratic aims".*[2]

This observation is crucial for understanding the strikingly convergent behavior of contemporary threats to democracy. Today's illiberal populisms do not present themselves as declared enemies of democracy. They define themselves as its authentic interpreters, denounce elites, promise order and efficiency, and use existing legality to hollow it out from within. Loewenstein described this process as the creation of a "dual legality", formal loyalty to the state and real loyalty to the movement, the leader, or the cause.

In *Legislation for the Defence of Democracy in Europe* (1937), Loewenstein is categorical, democratic defense is effective only in the early stages of authoritarianism, when anti-democratic movements still operate under the cover of legality. Waiting for them to openly cross the threshold into violence or dictatorship is, in his words, "to open the Trojan horse within the walls". Hence his insistence on concrete and verifiable measures: banning partisan militias, restricting the intimidating use of public space, limiting speech that incites hatred or the destruction of constitutional order, and, in extreme cases, outlawing parties that explicitly reject democratic pluralism.

[2]Militant Democracy - letter to the editor, undated, Box: 27, Folder: 10. Karl Loewenstein Papers, MA-00206. AC Archives and Special Collections.

Far from constituting an authoritarian program, these measures sought to preserve the legitimate monopoly of coercion and prevent the normalization of political violence.

In a forceful, almost admonitory tone directed at European public opinion, Loewenstein wrote:

> *"¿What is to be done to save democracy and liberty and all the achievement of history dear to mankind from destruction? (.) Liberal tolerance seems ill, advice towards a political creed which uses democracy only to destroy it, which decries violence to make it the gospel when the time is ripe (.) democracy has been too generous in the toleration of the ideas subversive for democracy and this untimely generosity has weakened the spirit of self-defense of her own basic principles. Only the most energetic assertion and application of the right of self-defense is apt to counterbalance the assault of the fascist forces menacing the foundation of our political life. What' is needed is a re-awakening of the old democratic fighting spirit. A militant democracy learning from the militant spirit of her foes in the pursuit of their antidemocratic aims".*[3]

For Loewenstein, Weimar's fatal error was not economic or cultural weakness, but normative indulgence, the belief that all actors would respect the rules of the game even while openly proclaiming their contempt for them. In contrast, militant democracy introduces an unavoidable tension with the liberal ideal of tolerance. Isaiah Berlin captured this tension from another angle by warning that absolute liberty may destroy itself if it fails to recognize limits.

At this point, Loewenstein is more explicit and less accommodating: there is no democratic right to organize the end of democracy. This is not a denial of negative liberty, but an affirmation of its conditions of possibility. As Loewenstein argued, democracy cannot treat as legitimate adversaries those who deny pluralism, alternation in power, and equality before the law. To do so is not neutrality; it is an abdication of democratic responsibility. Identifying by name those governments in which he saw both possibility and responsibility in defending European democracy under fascist siege, Loewenstein was particularly clear:

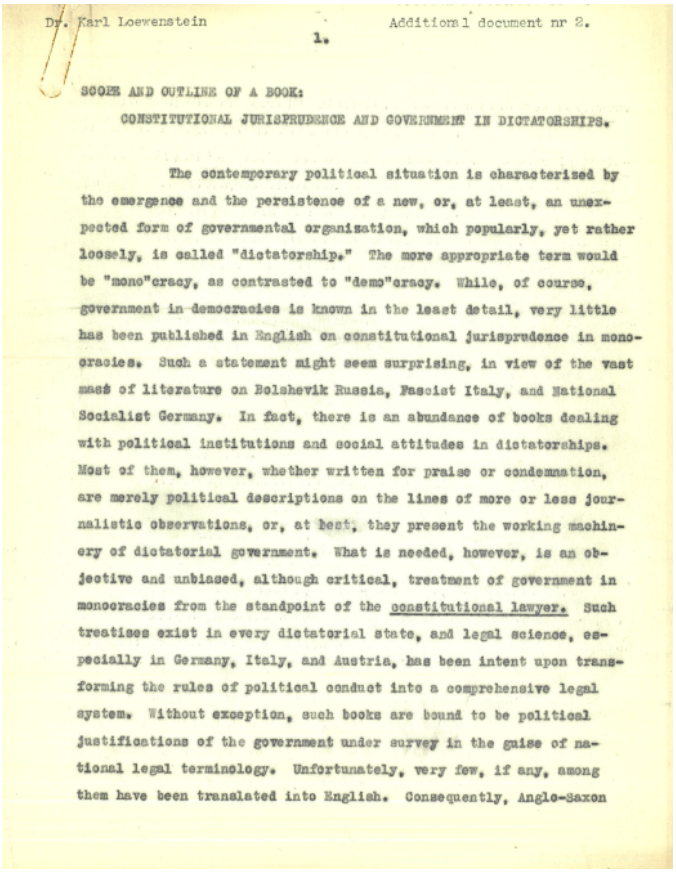
> *"Who is not willing to observe the rules of the game should be excluded from the field. There is no freedom of political gangsterism. If democracy wants to survive it has to become militant. Fire must be fought by fire. Only disciplined democracy is free government".*[4]

The Role of Intellectual Complicity

[3]Militant Democracy - letter to the editor, undated, Box: 27, Folder: 10. Karl Loewenstein Papers, MA-00206. AC Archives and Special Collections.

[4]Legislation for the defense of democracy in Europe - typescript drafts, undated, Box: 25, Folder: 28. Karl Loewenstein Papers, MA-00206. A. C. Archives & Special Collections

Yet the history of the twentieth century offers a persistent and disturbing warning: authoritarian and totalitarian regimes do not impose themselves solely through brute force, but rely on intellectuals capable of providing them with conceptual, legal, and moral legitimacy. In this sense, *Observations on the Personality and Work of Professor Carl Schmitt* constitutes a profound reflection on the political responsibility of the intellectual, the corruption of thought by power, and the need for defenders of democracy to confront, without ambiguity, those who place their talent at the service of authoritarianism.



Dr. Karl Loewenstein Additional document nr 2.

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SCOPE AND OUTLINE OF A BOOK:

CONSTITUTIONAL JURISPRUDENCE AND GOVERNMENT IN DICTATORSHIPS.

The contemporary political situation is characterised by the emergence and the persistence of a new, or, at least, an unexpected form of governmental organization, which popularly, yet rather loosely, is called "dictatorship." The more appropriate term would be "mono"cracy, as contrasted to "demo"cracy. While, of course, government in democracies is known in the least detail, very little has been published in English on constitutional jurisprudence in monocracies. Such a statement might seem surprising, in view of the vast mass of literature on Bolshevik Russia, Fascist Italy, and National Socialist Germany. In fact, there is an abundance of books dealing with political institutions and social attitudes in dictatorships. Most of them, however, whether written for praise or condemnation, are merely political descriptions on the lines of more or less journalistic observations, or, at best, they present the working machinery of dictatorial government. What is needed, however, is an objective and unbiased, although critical, treatment of government in monocracies from the standpoint of the constitutional lawyer. Such treatises exist in every dictatorial state, and legal science, especially in Germany, Italy, and Austria, has been intent upon transforming the rules of political conduct into a comprehensive legal system. Without exception, such books are bound to be political justifications of the government under survey in the guise of national legal terminology. Unfortunately, very few, if any, among them have been translated into English. Consequently, Anglo-Saxon

Figure 2. Constitutional Jurisprudence and Government in Dictatorships. Source: Karl Loewenstein Papers. *Amherst College Archives & Special Collections.*

The starting point of Loewenstein's argument is deliberately uncomfortable: Carl Schmitt was not a mediocre propagandist or a bureaucrat of thought, but one of the most brilliant jurists and political theorists of his time, an intellectual of "almost genius," endowed with exceptional erudition, political imagination, and a rare ability to translate abstract ideas into operational concepts for power. Precisely for that reason, his case is paradigmatic.

For Loewenstein, Schmitt's turn toward Nazism was neither accidental nor coerced, but the logical culmination of

an authoritarian intellectual evolution. Schmitt embodies the intellectual who betrays the emancipatory promise of thought. His early contributions to the analysis of the Weimar Constitution and to the theory of dictatorship identified real weaknesses in German democracy. However, those critiques, which could have served to strengthen the constitutional order, were redirected toward the justification of decisionism, permanent exceptionality, and the subordination of law to the will of the sovereign. Schmitt's famous formula according to which "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" is not, in Loewenstein's view, merely an analytical thesis, but the prelude to the demolition of democratic constitutionalism.

One of Loewenstein's most significant contributions is his rejection of the exculpatory narrative according to which authoritarian intellectuals are merely opportunists or victims of coercion. In Schmitt's case, the evidence points in the opposite direction: he was an active, creative, and enthusiastic agent in the ideological construction of the regime. His early adhesion to Hitler's regime, his legal defense of the extrajudicial killings of 1934, and his doctrinal production in the service of German imperial expansion demonstrate how thought can become a direct instrument of political violence. His international prestige granted Nazism a veneer of legal respectability that confused external observers and weakened moral resistance both within and outside Germany.

In his report, Loewenstein was able to recognize Schmitt's intellectual quality while simultaneously assigning him the corresponding responsibility, political, legal, and moral, for his support of the Nazi state. In this regard, he was unequivocal:

> *"Schmitt is the significant propagator of fascism and totalitarianism. His writings are not orientated towards the democratic west, on the contrary he did all in his power to convert the Western States into totalitarian satellites of Hitler's Germany. His arrest will, be considered, and is so considered, by responsible Germans as an act of justice on the part of Military Government. His release, if such is contemplated, would constitute a blow to incipient democracy in Germany and to public opinion abroad (.) Schmitt qualifies as a war criminal. He is one of the intellectual instigators of Hitlers acts of aggression and aided and abetted them by his influential authorship. I hardly know of any individual person who has contributed more for the defense of the Nazi regimes than Carl Schmitt. I suggest that the case be submitted to the War Criminals Commission for further action".*[5]

This point is crucial for the normative argument of the present essay. From Loewenstein's perspective, which I share, intellectuals complicit with authoritarianism are not simply commentators with "controversial" ideas; they are producers of interpretive frameworks that normalize the suspension of rights, the concentration of power, and the exclusion of the "enemy". Their responsibility is greater precisely because they operate in the realm of ideas, where the limits of what is thinkable and legitimate are defined. From this standpoint, indulgence toward such actors is not academic neutrality, but passive collaboration.

Loewenstein warns that allowing figures such as Schmitt to continue teaching and publishing after the defeat of Nazism would have meant a devastating blow to the nascent German democracy, by sending the message that intellectual betrayal carries no consequences.

From Loewenstein's critique follows a first obligation for democratic intellectuals: to name things clearly. Intellectual authoritarianism often disguises itself in technical, historicist, or "realist" language. Schmitt spoke of order, decision, people, and spatial greatness; others today speak of illiberal sovereignty, executive efficiency, or "non-liberal" democracy. In all cases, the democratic task is to unmask the normative content of these discourses. Effectively characterizing authoritarian intellectuals implies showing how their concepts erode basic principles such as the separation of powers, equality before the law, and the protection of minorities.

Loewenstein does not limit himself to denouncing Schmitt's Nazi affiliation; he patiently reconstructs the internal coherence of his work and demonstrates how it converges in the legitimation of totalitarianism. This method, rigorous, contextualized, and morally explicit, offers a model for democratic critique.

Although Loewenstein's text is rooted in the context of Nazism, its warning transcends that historical moment. Today, intellectuals in various regions of the world legitimize authoritarian regimes, relativize systematic human rights violations, or present the concentration of power as a necessary response to real or fabricated crises. The parallel is not mechanical, but the structure of the problem is the same, the relationship between intellectuals and authoritarian power does not belong exclusively to Europe's interwar past.

As Loewenstein observed early on in his report on Carl Schmitt, authoritarian regimes always require more than coercion, they need legitimizing languages, conceptual categories, and normative rationalizations that transform the abuse of power into a historical, moral, or technical necessity. This function is not fulfilled by repressive apparatuses, but by complicit intellectuals.

From Loewenstein's text, and in comparison, with contemporary expressions, it is possible to propose a general analytical framework of authoritarian intellectual complicity, with

[5] "Observations on the personality and work of Professor Carl Schmitt"; "The Library of Professor Carl Schmitt", 1945 October-November, Box: 46, Folder: 46. Karl Loewenstein Papers, MA-00206. Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

recurring characteristics present both in openly authoritarian regimes and in democracies undergoing erosion:

1) High technical or theoretical competence, which grants credibility to discourse.
2) Reframing of exception as a structural necessity, not a temporary measure.
3) Displacement of the democratic subject (plural citizenry) by homogeneous entities (*"the people"*, *"the nation"*, *"civilization"*).
4) Subordination of law to political decision, presented as realism or pragmatism.
5) Subsequent denial of responsibility, appealing to context, pressure, or academic neutrality.

Loewenstein's report on Carl Schmitt is a warning that transcends time. It reminds us that democracy can be destroyed by those who understand it best, and that silence or indulgence toward intellectual complicity amounts to a sophisticated form of surrender.

Contemporary Echoes

Loewenstein's central lesson, the need for an uncompromising democratic confrontation, is fully applicable to contemporary contexts in Latin America, the United States, and Europe. Various authors today recover the Loewensteinian legacy, warning about current threats. Anne Applebaum (2020) has described how contemporary authoritarianism feeds on the moral defection of elites who deliberately abandon democratic rules. Robert Kagan (2008), for his part, reminds us that the liberal order is not a natural product of progress, but a fragile construction that requires political will. Both insights reinforce Loewenstein's central thesis: democracy does not survive by inertia; it must be defended with the participation of a conscious and politically mobilized citizenry.

A key contribution of Loewenstein's report is his rejection of the idea that intellectual complicity exists only under consolidated dictatorships. His warnings resonate strongly today in the United States, where the systematic delegitimization of electoral results, the politicization of justice, and the normalization of exclusionary language have put to the test democratic norms once considered robust. From a Loewensteinian perspective, the problem is not only the possibility of abrupt ruptures, but the prior erosion of basic constitutional consensus.

Schmitt acted before and during the Nazi regime, but he prepared the ground from within the legal framework of Weimar. This observation is fundamental for analyzing contemporary cases in democracies under strain. In the United States, the role of jurists such as John Yoo during the "war on terror" reveals a comparable dynamic. From elite academic positions, Yoo produced memoranda that reinterpreted constitutional and international law to legitimize torture, indefinite detention, and the extreme expansion of executive power. As in Schmitt's case, the core argument was exceptionality: an existential threat that would justify the suspension of legal limits.

Europe, for its part, offers an ambivalent lesson. On the one hand, postwar constitutionalism, especially in Germany, explicitly incorporated the logic of militant democracy, learning from Weimar. On the other, cases such as Hungary demonstrate how authoritarianism can consolidate itself through gradual legal reforms and formally competitive elections. The difficulty of the European Union in responding effectively reveals the current limits of supranational democratic solidarity. The war in Ukraine and the rise of illiberal populisms within the Schengen area show once again that the threat acquires its own momentum even where it was assumed to be preventable due to institutional, social, and cultural strength.

In the European intellectual field, thinkers associated with the new radical right have reused Schmittian categories, friend-enemy, sovereignty, homogeneity of the people, to challenge democratic liberalism. The work of Alain de Benoist, for example, has influenced identitarian currents that reject pluralism in the name of supposed cultural authenticity. The circulation of these ideas confirms a central thesis of Loewenstein: intellectual complicity is neither local nor episodic; it is a transnational network of legitimation. Accordingly, the democratic response cannot be purely national or conjunctural.

This perspective also extends to the Eurasian sphere. In contemporary Russia, the role played by Aleksandr Dugin shows structural parallels with Schmitt. Dugin is not merely a propagandist of the Kremlin, but a producer of conceptual frameworks, civilization, multipolarity, historical destiny, that allow geopolitical aggression and internal repression to be presented as ontological imperatives. Like Schmitt, his influence transcends national borders and circulates through global intellectual networks.

In Latin America, the experience is even more telling. Venezuela and Nicaragua illustrate how initial tolerance toward plebiscitary leaderships evolved into authoritarian systems that retain empty electoral rituals. Here, the absence of early defense of the rule of law confirmed, once again, Loewenstein's diagnosis: when democracy decides to defend itself, it is often already too late. In this sense, militant democracy is not an anomaly within the liberal order, but one of its conditions of survival.

This logic is also visible among Latin American intellectuals who, from an emancipatory rhetoric, have justified the erosion

of pluralism in the name of "the people" or "the revolution". The case of Atilio Boron, a propagandist of Castroism and Chavismo, illustrates how seemingly progressive categories can serve to legitimize personalist regimes, the neutralization of opposition, and the subordination of law to the will of the leader. Following Loewenstein, the normative criterion is not whether criticism identifies real problems, it often does, but whether its horizon is democratic correction or the permanent suspension of democracy. When exception becomes the rule, the intellectual has crossed the threshold of complicity.

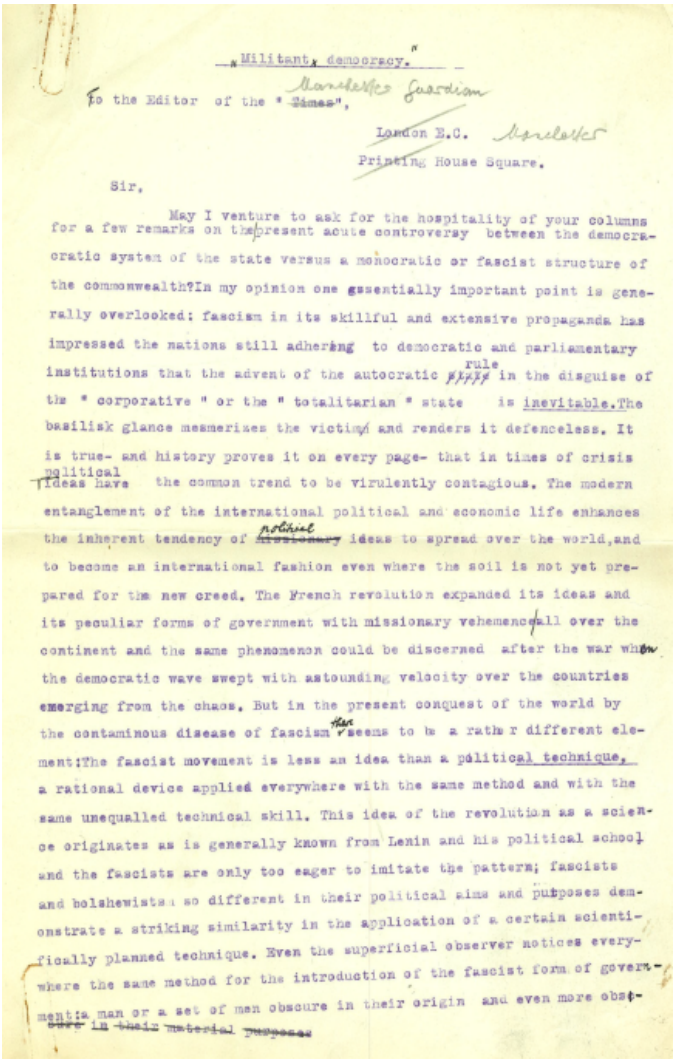
Defending Democracy: Between Principles and Practices

Defending democracy, in a militant sense, does not imply abandoning tolerance, pacifism, and openness to pluralism, core normative pillars of the liberal ethos, but rather assuming responsibility for their defense. It means recognizing that fundamental rights are not instruments for their own negation; that legality cannot become a refuge for openly anti-pluralist projects; and that tolerance ceases to be a virtue when it becomes passive complicity in the erosion of the rule of law.

Nor can democracy treat authoritarian intellectuals as neutral interlocutors without risking its own survival: symbolic, academic, and political confrontation with them does not constitute censorship, but self-defense. As Loewenstein warned, there is no democratic right to constitutional suicide.

From this perspective, militant democracy demands uncomfortable but necessary decisions. It requires drawing clear lines against those who promote the subordination of justice to political power, the stigmatization of minorities, the systematic delegitimization of elections, or the creation of parallel loyalties to the constitutional order. It also requires strengthening independent institutions, protecting civic space, and preserving the legitimate monopoly of coercion against any form of militia, intimidation, or organized political violence. For this reason, the task of democratic intellectuals cannot be limited to the production of neutral knowledge; it must include an ethics of the public defense of freedom against its enemies.

Yet the normative dimension of this defense does not end at the domestic level. In an interdependent world, democratic erosion in one country weakens the liberal order. Militant democracy thus becomes an essential component of democratic solidarity: a shared commitment among democracies not to legitimize, through action or omission, processes of institutional hollowing presented under electoral guise. Coherence between domestic defense of the rule of law and foreign policy is part of this responsibility.



"Militant democracy."

To the Editor of the "Times", Manchester Guardian

London E.C. Manchester
Printing House Square.

Sir,

May I venture to ask for the hospitality of your columns for a few remarks on the present acute controversy between the democratic system of the state versus a monocratic or fascist structure of the commonwealth?In my opinion one essentially important point is generally overlooked: fascism in its skillful and extensive propaganda has impressed the nations still adhering to democratic and parliamentary institutions that the advent of the autocratic rule in the disguise of the " corporative " or the " totalitarian " state is inevitable.The basilisk glance mesmerizes the victim and renders it defenceless. It is true- and history proves it on every page- that in times of crisis political ideas have the common trend to be virulently contagious. The modern entanglement of the international political and economic life enhances the inherent tendency of ~~revolutionary~~ political ideas to spread over the world,and to become an international fashion even where the soil is not yet prepared for the new creed. The French revolution expanded its ideas and its peculiar forms of government with missionary vehemence all over the continent and the same phenomenon could be discerned after the war when the democratic wave swept with astounding velocity over the countries emerging from the chaos. But in the present conquest of the world by the contaminous disease of fascism that seems to be a rather different element:The fascist movement is less an idea than a political technique, a rational device applied everywhere with the same method and with the same unequalled technical skill. This idea of the revolution as a science originates as is generally known from Lenin and his political school and the fascists are only too eager to imitate the pattern; fascists and bolshewists so different in their political aims and purposes demonstrate a striking similarity in the application of a certain scientifically planned technique. Even the superficial observer notices everywhere the same method for the introduction of the fascist form of government a man or a set of men obscure in their origin and even more obs~~cure in their material purposes~~

Figure 3. Militant Democracy. Source: Karl Loewenstein Papers. *Amherst College Archives & Special Collections*.

Without internal self-defense, there can be no external democratic solidarity, nor credibility in the face of autocracies challenging liberalism from abroad. Karl Loewenstein understood earlier than many that liberal democracy faces enemies who speak its language and use its rules. His proposal of militant democracy was not an authoritarian plea, but a realist warning: unlimited tolerance toward the intolerant leads to the destruction of the pluralism it seeks to protect.

In a world where authoritarianism advances not against democracy but through it, recovering the core of this reflection is not a historical exercise but a political necessity. A democracy that renounces defending itself in the name of a misguided understanding of freedom does not become more noble; it becomes vulnerable.

Karl Loewenstein understood that democracy can only remain free if it accepts disciplining itself against those who reject its fundamental principles. Today, faced with authoritarianisms that advance gradually, invoking the people while dismantling their guarantees, this warning retains its full force. Defending democracy is not an act of intolerance; it is an act of fidelity to its promise. The contemporary challenge is not to choose between freedom and combativeness, but to understand that, without defense, freedom becomes ephemeral. The liberal democracy of the twenty-first century will survive only if it can exercise, prudently but without naïveté, its right, and its duty, of self-preservation.

Amherst, Massachusetts, February 2026.

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