



# Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcri20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/fcri20)

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**To cite this article:** Katharina Bauer (22 Apr 2024): The power of hope? Powerlessness and strong democratic hope, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, DOI: [10.1080/13698230.2024.2344381](https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2024.2344381)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2024.2344381>



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Published online: 22 Apr 2024.



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# The power of hope? Powerlessness and strong democratic hope

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss how and to what extent core elements of Beatrice Han-Pile's account of a constitutive experience of powerlessness at the centre of hope can be fruitfully transferred to a collective political level. Despite its constitutive relation to uncertainty, we often talk about the power of hope as a motivating and activating force that helps us to cope with challenges, overcome obstacles and pursue plans. Hoping with an awareness of the limitations of one's individual power can at the same time be a strong motivation for acting in concert and thereby establishing power as a collective practice. I will explore how democratic hope that is empowering participation can be distinguished from disempowering political hopes. Finally, I will argue that integrating experiences of *relative* powerlessness and reflecting them explicitly is constitutive for 'strong democratic hope', while the experience of powerlessness can remain pre-reflective on the individual psychological level. At the same time strong democratic hope is directed towards preventing experiences of *radical* powerlessness.

**KEYWORDS** Hope; uncertainty; powerlessness; empowerment; political agency; democratic hope

## Introduction

Where we hope for something, we cannot just do it or bring it about. Hope is constitutively connected to uncertainty, and it can always be disappointed. In spite of this, we often talk about the power of hope, assuming that hope is a motivating and activating force that helps us to cope with challenges, overcome obstacles, pursue plans, and serve as protection against a 'loss of heart' (Pettit, 2004, p. 158). However, as Beatrice Han-Pile has pointed out in her reflections on the psychology of hope, 'hope constitutively involves a (pre-)reflective experience of powerlessness' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 178). She introduces the 'strong hoper' who has the capacity to integrate this experience of powerlessness into an

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exercise of letting go, renouncing full control, and thereby staying empowered to act. Hoping with an awareness of a powerlessness that is constitutive of hope implies a fundamental insight into the uncertainty of the future and into existential and very concrete practical limitations to human control and agency. Transferred to a political level, the awareness of powerlessness can at the same time be a strong motivation to join forces – and to establish power as ‘*pouvoir-en-commun*’.

In this paper I will start from the assumption that hope includes a somewhat paradoxical but at the same time productive tension between awareness of different limitations of one’s powers and individual or collective empowerment to action (section [The power of hope? Agency amid uncertainty](#)). Based on Han-Pile’s account of powerlessness at the centre of hope and on her understanding of strong hope and medio-passive agency (section [Hope, powerlessness, empowerment](#)) I will discuss the conditions, advantages, and limitations of transferring this conceptual framework from the individual psychological level to a collective level of political agency (section [Hope, political powerlessness, and political power](#)). Finally, I will introduce a specific conception of ‘strong democratic hope’, to show how precisely the integration of an experience of powerlessness is decisive in a democratic context (section [Strong democratic hope](#)). I will argue that strong democratic hope is preventing experiences of radical powerlessness, while at the same time constitutively integrating experiences of relative powerlessness. While on the individual level, the experience of powerlessness within hope can remain pre-reflective, it ought to be reflected and made explicit on the political level.

## **The power of hope? Agency amid uncertainty**

When I use the term ‘hope’ in this paper, I primarily mean hope that is referring to one’s own agency and/or the agency of others (hoping to be able to perform an action, hoping for the agency to succeed, hoping to bring about change, hoping to be able to make a difference) which has to be distinguished from a passive hope that merely relates to external factors (hoping for better weather conditions) or religious hope relating to higher powers (hoping for salvation). Hoping agents do not just see themselves as playthings of destiny, chance, or any kind of external powers. Still, if they are *hoping* in relation to their own agency, they acknowledge at least implicitly that they do not have complete power over the execution and success of their actions, be it because of their own specific limitations, of general human limitations, or because of concrete experiences of powerlessness in relation to the power of others.

In our agency as human beings we are confronted with uncertainty and improbability, with contingency, limits to the predictability of the future,

limits of our knowledge and control, limitations imposed upon us by others, as well as limits to the stability and reliability of existing normative frameworks. In awareness of all these uncertainties and limitations, what is called 'hope' can keep us going and motivate us to act or to uphold long-term projects related to our self-understanding as practical agents – agents who can make a difference that can, potentially, help to shape a better future. Hope can empower agents in the face of uncertainty.

The standard account of hope in analytic philosophy considers hope to be a desire with the potential to be realized, while this realization is neither certain nor completely impossible.<sup>1</sup> Philip Pettit, for instance, defends the rationality of hope and considers hope to be a constitutive element of agency within a planning model of action. He describes hope as the equivalent to precaution. Precaution helps us to stay aware of rather improbable but possible dangers. Hope allows us to keep track of plans and decisions despite uncertainty. It stabilizes self-efficiency and serves as a protection 'against the danger of loss of heart' (Pettit, 2004, p. 158). Beyond that Pettit also argues that a hope for the ability to reason, for the cooperativeness of the other and for mutual respect towards each other as persons is a necessary element of interaction. Here, hope comes very close to trust. All in all, Pettit clearly underlines the function of hope in achieving stability – despite uncertainty – both in planning individual actions as well as in any kind of interaction with others, including in the political sphere.

While Pettit's rational hope could also be described as an optimist stance towards successful planning in awareness of uncertainty, hope can also be distinguished from optimism by allowing to integrate a rather pessimistic attitude concerning the success of realizing desired outcomes in awareness of strong improbability. It is possible to 'hope against hope' (Martin, 2014, p. 5) or against the odds. From a Kantian perspective, one can argue that we need hope, in order to 'sustain our commitment to action' particularly 'in cases where the odds of making a difference are dim' (Huber, 2021, p. 727). Against the background of the potential of total despair especially in contexts of inhumaneness, political oppression, and terror – thus in extreme experiences of powerlessness – hope can be understood as a condition of preserving one's humanity (McGeer, 2004),<sup>2</sup> whereby one's humanity (again in a Kantian framework) includes the potential to set oneself ends and the capacity for moral agency and harmonious interaction.

This does not mean that hope is the only motivating force of agency, in particular not of political agency. Katie Stockdale, for example, points out the political value of anger and bitterness in her analysis of hope under oppression (Stockdale, 2021b). Psychological studies on the motivational mindsets among climate activists have shown the relevance of fear, anger, and ascriptions of guilt – particularly among activists in the Global South who are already far more directly affected by the consequences of the climate crisis,

though having contributed less to its causation. Ascriptions of guilt and responsibility as well as the anger resulting from them serve as a mitigation of 'the potentially demobilizing effect of acute fear (powerlessness)' (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017, p. 516). However, an underlying hope remains necessary as a motivation for activist agency, though the form of hope is changed from 'hope as a choice to be pleasurable and creatively enjoyed' into 'hope as a necessity to sustain any action at all' (ibid.) – the most fundamental form of active hope.

Integrating the idea of an acceptance of our limitations, the specific motivational structure of hope toward action can be described as follows:

In spite of any acknowledged limitation of our agency, hope implies the mobilization of our energy toward the future [...] because it promotes both our *patience* to wait for any favoring conditions [...] and our *readiness* to take advantage of such opportunities. (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010, p. 267)

The readiness to seize an opportunity at the right moment – despite the uncertainty of success – implies a certain willingness to take risks. Hope in this definition also includes a long-term vision – it allows for patience over long periods of time and is not immediately disappointed when quick successes are not achieved. In a slightly different approach, the idea of 'patient hope' (Milona, 2019; see Stockdale, 2021a, p. 11) can also be related to what others have characterized as 'hope in a minor key': a hope that is 'doing away with grand visions that supposedly speak for all, without giving up on the possibility of building on collective feeling' (Millner, 2017, p. 65). A cautious and humble hope seems adequate in the awareness of the uncertainty regarding hope's goodness. As well as power, hope as such is normatively neutral. It can help to stabilize democratic power, to contribute to positive societal change and to a constant struggle for justice. However, one can also hope for something that is morally wrong or politically undesirable, for instance for seizing absolute power, for dominating or violating others. The object of hope always requires a critical normative examination. And especially in a pluralistic democratic framework it cannot be assumed that neither grand visions of the future nor specific political hopes, for instance of passing a new tax law, speak for all. Still, this does not change the fact that individual hope for being able to act well and bring about something good and collective hope for a good life in just institutions can be essential for realizing morally and politically desirable agency – even more as this often requires a lot of patience in waiting for favorable conditions and a courageous readiness to seize the right opportunity. And in view of potential disagreement about what is good or what is just and the principal uncertainty whether and how we can bring it about, we even more need hope to sustain the commitment to such agency.

Hope, as I understand it, allows for *stabilisation* of motivation and patience in agency. At the same time, it allows for *mobilization* towards acting and taking opportunities, and *flexibilization* in terms of seeing new possibilities. The power of hope is established on the margins between the uncertain (but possible) and the impossible and situated in the transitions from passivity to activity. I will follow Beatrice Han-Pile in demonstrating how this transition and the specific 'power of hope' related to agency can more accurately be described as a transition from powerlessness to empowerment.

### Hope, powerlessness, empowerment

In her investigations of the psychological structures of hope, Beatrice Han-Pile (2017) has pointed out that 'hope constitutively involves a (pre-)reflective experience of powerlessness' (p. 178). For hoping it is essential 'to be (pre-)reflectively aware that no matter what we do, our desire may not be satisfied' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 179). If I know from experience that agency 'is both up to me and within my own power alone' – which is our usual attitude towards a wide range of agency in everyday life – I 'cannot hope' for it (ibid.). It might be even more accurate to say that, in such a case, it would not make sense to describe the attitude of the agent towards their agency as an attitude of hoping. Under 'normal' conditions for each individual agent a broad range of rather simple agency – like reaching for a glass of water on the table, pressing the start button of the computer – and everyday activities – like preparing meals, doing their work, having a walk – is available and rather reliably under their control. If it is my daily routine to have a walk in the morning and I say that *I hope to have a walk today* I already express some doubts about the availability of this routine due to circumstances that make it uncertain (like a full schedule). If I tell someone that *I hope* to raise my arm and reach out for the glass of water on the table right in front of me now, the other would probably assume that I have (at least some) doubts whether I will really be able to do so, for instance because of some muscular problems or because I assume that the other will intervene and prevent me from doing so. We say that someone *hopes* to do something to mark a difference towards just knowing or deciding that they will do something that is reliably under their own control and within their power. Our vocabulary of hope implies an awareness of uncertainty regarding the potential satisfaction of a desire. In this sense, it is constitutive of the phenomenon we call hope, that hope can always be disappointed (Bloch, 1977).

Han-Pile explains that the awareness of uncertainty is not necessarily the outcome of a reflection or a calculation of probability, but there can be a pre-reflective experience of powerlessness in the sense of an experience of the limits of one's own control and agency. It is the experience of one's own

agency not being sufficient to bring about the desired outcome. The experience of powerlessness can be *radical* if one is (in that case also reflectively) aware that what one hopes for lies completely beyond one's direct control, such as hoping for the success of surgery upon a loved one in which one is not directly involved. The experience of powerlessness can be *relative*, if one has at least a certain degree of control over the desired outcomes, but it is not completely within one's own power alone to bring them about through one's own agency (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 180).

According to its orthodox definition hoping means desiring 'an outcome we deem neither certain nor impossible' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 176; Martin, 2014). Han-Pile extends this definition to desiring an outcome 'we deem possible but beyond our own power alone to bring about' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 180). A core reason for the extension of the definition and the introduction of the experience of powerlessness is that the orthodox definition is not able to completely capture the attitude of *strong hopers*. Strong hopers can overcome the problem of very low probability of the desired outcomes. They hope against the odds, despite and in the face of the improbable, of high uncertainty, and potential despair. Han-Pile points out that it is not just the fact *that* they hope despite low probability, but 'the way(s) in which they do' that 'are not captured by the OD [the orthodox definition]' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 177). Strong hopers do not deny the low probability of achieving the desired outcomes nor the limits to their own agency but have the capacity to accept the experience of powerlessness and use it in a productive way through an exercise of letting go, renouncing full control, and *thereby* staying empowered to act: 'the letting go of the strong hoper is such that the agent feels empowered by it. It is akin to a giving in, but not to a giving up' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 199).

In Han-Pile's account of strong hope, this empowerment through integrating powerlessness also means to blur the lines between activity and passivity and give up a picture of hope and agency merely being characterized through rational self-regulation. Instead, she introduces the idea of 'mediopassive agency' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 194), agency that includes passivity in terms of responsiveness to the situation and one's own limitations. Openness towards passivity is understood as a source of capacities that can be empowering in a very specific way: the capacity to understand the limits of one's agency and of giving in to a loss of control is at the same time a capacity to see how the passivity is 'making things fluid' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 200; Marcel, 2010, p. 35). The writer and activist Rebecca Solnit has described such an experience of a new fluidity during the COVID-19 crisis 'as akin to a spring thaw: it's as if the pack ice has broken up, the water starts flowing again and boats can move through places they could not during winter' (Solnit, 2020). She expressed strong hopes for breaking the ice of the status quo of power structures and behaviour patterns in order to allow for change.<sup>3</sup>

Strong hope, as conceived by Han-Pile, allows seeing unforeseen possibilities for agency and understanding one's own openness to 'the possibility of self-transformation' that can open up a completely new framework for the range of one's own abilities for agency: 'we open ourselves to the indeterminacy of the future in a way which changes our experience of the present situation, and of ourselves' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 197). This can mean to conceive of the impossible (of what was regarded as impossible within a specific set of values, an unimaginable or inconceivable outcome that we lack the resources to fully understand), in Jonathan Lear's sense of radical hope, opening the possibility to rethink our understanding of goodness (Lear, 2006). It can also mean to open new possibilities for collective political agency.

Han-Pile's account of powerlessness within hope and strong-hope as letting-go cannot be transferred from the individual psychological to the political sphere on a one-to-one basis, but it can be made fruitful for political contexts, by helping to reveal the ambivalences – or rather the dialectics – between powerlessness and power in political hope and by further developing the idea of strong hope into an account of *strong democratic hope*.

### Hope, political powerlessness, and political power

Awareness of the powerlessness within hope can help in detecting what is possible within and beyond the limits of one's own individual control, agency, and power. If an experience of *relative* powerlessness reveals that it is not in one's own power *alone* to bring about a result that one hopes for, this can at the same time be a strong motivation for activating collective efforts to extend these limits and overcome political powerlessness and domination.

This aspect of the dialectics between power and powerlessness in political hope is lucidly illustrated in the following literary example. The example is not set in a democratic context (and situated in a war, which makes the power relations and political implications even more complicated), so it is not yet an example of the idea of democratic hope. Precisely because of this, however, it will also serve to illustrate the differences between political hope in general and the specific structures of strong democratic hope that will be explicated in paragraph 5.

'You must be our every hope.' This claim towards an individual person to be or rather to embody collective hope is expressed in Maaza Mengiste's novel *The Shadow King* (Mengiste, 2020). The novel is set in Ethiopia under the Italian invasion (1935–37). Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian Emperor, the embodiment of power, literally regarded as the human manifestation of the sun, is in exile. The situation of the Ethiopians seems hopeless, they are descending into despair. A squad of the Ethiopian army is planning an ambush, but even this does not seem very promising, and the soldiers are demotivated. Then Hirut, the female

protagonist of the novel, finds Minim – his name means nothing – a poor peasant, a nobody, who is fortunately a look alike of Haile Selassie. They give him a uniform and put him on a horse. ‘You must be our every hope,’ they tell him. He is transformed into the ‘Shadow King’. Inspired by the shadow image of their leader who is regarded as an image of the sun, they are not winning the war, but at least their ambush is successful and for a moment it demoralizes the Italian troops. In the midst of despair and a radical experience of powerlessness, there is at least some hope – hope against hope. And the experience of a collective capacity of re-staging, re-creating and performing a practice of hope is a re-enabling, re-empowering experience.

What interests me in this example is the fact that the embodied representation of hope is at the same time a representation of power (as Minim represents the emperor) – and in the narrative of Mengiste, both hope and power share a paradoxical relation to powerlessness. Furthermore, the story of Minim representing Selassie, representing power, being the Shadow King of the Sun King, is embedded in a story of female empowerment, hope, and solidarity. Though the emperor has ordered families to send their oldest son to the army, which at that time was purely a male affair, more and more Ethiopian women start joining and fighting side by side with the men. Two young girls are the proud guards of the Shadow King.

The scene described by Mengiste can be read as a demonstration of how collective hope can be used as an instrument of power. The mise-en-scene of the King on the hill is evoking, steering, directing the hopes of others. One could regard this as a clear example of the manipulation of the hopes of others which can be disabling rather than enabling with regard to individual agency. However, Mengiste presents this story to the reader as a story of enabling the collective agency of a group and as a story of feminist empowerment. At the same time, the fragility of the created hope is clearly exposed in the narrative. It lies in its uncertainty, but is also related to the fictionality of the power, which is still not just an illusion as it actually makes collective agency possible. The most interesting aspect about this is that even those who make up the story, who fashion the man called ‘nothing’, who know his name, who create the fiction – who know about the desperate situation, about the absence of the true bearer of power, and about the fragility of the hope they are creating – gain new hope. They are stabilizing their own hope and thereby reestablishing their power as a collective practice. They realize their capacity to create a transition from powerlessness to power and from the impossible to the possible:

This is what’s possible, Kidane [the commander of the Ethiopians] thinks as he stares, stunned, at Minim sitting straight and tall on Aduna. He has to remind himself it is not the emperor. Kidane bows deeply before the man and raises his head toward the sky. He shuts his eyes from the brilliance of the morning sun.

[. . .]. I didn't know this was possible. [. . .] I did not understand that we could make a man appear where there was once no more than empty space. [. . .] Kidane takes his rifle and holds it in front of him. He salutes the King of Kings. He shouts all the names of the emperor, feeling the earth trembling beneath him as villagers in the valley below shift forward to get a better look. [. . .] He says quietly to the ghost of his son: [. . .] I thought all this time that there was no hope for me. Then Kidane turns to open his arms wide at the top of the hill, and in that gesture, he gathers his people together and holds them in his embrace. (Mengiste, 2020, p. 239)

Kidane's gesture of gathering his people in his embrace can be interpreted as a gesture of power (in this case of male power), but also as a gesture of solidarity and care. Does the empowerment take place, even though he and the others know about their powerlessness towards the superiority of the Italian army and about the very low probability of realizing their hope? It rather seems that this happens *because* they know about it. They are fully aware of the uncertainty concerning the realization of their hope and about the vulnerability of the power they create – though at some points they might have to 'remind [themselves] it is not the emperor.' Their awareness of their own powerlessness makes them aware of the necessity to revitalize, represent, perform, and protect their hope together. Those who set the stage for a powerful representation of hope have obviously been able to see the fluidity of new possibilities and to activate their own capacity of seizing opportunities and thereby participating in the creation of further opportunities in a hopeless situation. They realize their own capacity to 'create' a hope, that is partly imaginary, containing an 'as if', and that is thereby even more a product of their own making, *their* 'every hope'.

The paradox of hope that becomes visible in this story consists in the fact that the experience of powerlessness does not weaken but strengthens the hope. Its motivational force, its power to bring about collective action is not reduced but enforced by the awareness of the vulnerability of a hope and a collective power that ought to be protected through collective efforts. Transferred to a collective level, Han-Pile's idea of hope that is integrating powerlessness into empowerment, can thus be complemented by actively caring for a shared hope. Victoria McGeer coins the term 'hope of care' as a hope that is implying responsiveness and respect towards the agency of others and their end setting capacities (McGeer, 2004, p. 123). Realizing practices of care for shared hopes in mutual respect and in awareness of one's own individual powerlessness or one's relative powerlessness as a group can be empowering as these are at the same time practices of solidarity that are feeding or supporting new and restored hopes. As activities of acting in concert these practices are practices of power.

Still, the idea of a strong hope as a collective hope of care might seem naïve when it comes to experiences of a powerlessness that are caused by

being deprived of one's power for agency or being oppressed by others or overwhelmed by their power in interpersonal relationships or political settings where one's own agency and end-setting capacities are clearly disrespected. First, in such situations the lines between relative and radical powerlessness can be blurred. In a relationship with a narcissist partner one's scope of agency can be clearly restricted through psychological manipulation.<sup>4</sup> This experience of powerlessness might be relative, because one could escape the manipulation with the help of good friends or, more likely, of a psychologist. Still, from the first-person perspective within the situation the experience can at the same time be radical because the manipulative partner controls the manipulated person to the extent that the latter does not feel able to act without the narcissist partner's consent. In cases of political manipulation, wrongful domination, or systemic injustice the distinction between radical and relative powerlessness can become even more difficult. Under dictatorship, for instance, the powerlessness of individuals is relative, as in principle, a coup or revolution through collective action might be possible. Nevertheless, for each individual agent the powerlessness might also be experienced as radical, when every effort at political change is immediately suppressed through imprisonment or physical violence. In addition, different experiences of relative powerlessness, for instance as a member of an ethnic minority and a gender minority, can intersect and add up to radical powerlessness in the face of a political system that is making use of various subtle forms of political oppression and exclusion. Especially then, hope against all odds is needed for being empowered to contribute to political change for a more just society. Can this hope against all odds be accurately described as strong hope in Han-Pile's sense – a hope that successfully integrates the experience of powerlessness and transforms it into empowerment?

On the political level hope is usually discussed as being either enabling/empowering or disabling/disempowering. This corresponds to the more fundamental distinction between active hope, which is mobilizing agency, in opposition to passive hope in terms of passively awaiting the fulfilment of a desire (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010, pp. 266ff.). On the one hand 'hope can function as a motor for social struggle and foster solidarity among the participants' (Blöser et al., 2020, p. 3), for instance within social justice movements or activist groups. On the other hand, 'hope is frequently said to disempower and demotivate' (ibid.). Hope can be misused for ideological manipulation and serve as a tool for the powerful to keep the oppressed in their place:

The logic here is that, with hope, one can endure dispossession today in anticipation of a reward tomorrow. By reaching to the future, a politics of hope is able to maintain the status quo; where it succeeds in instilling hope,

it succeeds in endlessly postponing the materialisation of promises. (Lindroth & Sinevaara-Niskanen, 2019, p. 646)

A fantasy of the future is offered instead of a solution for present problems. This framework of politics of hope is a common feature of many political ideologies and systems of religious power. Apparently, an exercise of letting go and giving in can become very problematic when it comes to ideological manipulation, political oppression, and wrongful domination. Here active resistance seems to be required and medio-passive agency seems to be out of place. These reflections can also be applied to the *Shadow King* example: the collective hope is just an illusion and on the long run it might help to keep the subjects of the emperor – also the women – in their place in the Ethiopian society.<sup>5</sup> The shared hope is still focused on a male and aristocratic center of power. The collectively created representation of power is unfolding its motivating and connecting force because it evokes patterns of a quasi-religious faith into this power – which is after all the power of the sun.<sup>6</sup> This would mean that the collective empowerment is not building a *pouvoir-en-commun* but turns into submission to the power of one individual sovereign. Giving in would then lead to completely giving up one's own sovereignty. The hope that is shared here is clearly not a democratic hope.

And still, the co-creation of a representation of power and the active collective caretaking for a shared hope allows for an experience of equal participation. One could imagine that the experience of turning powerlessness into collective agency might lead to hopes for a more democratic form of collective power or at least it can lead to a more sceptic attitude towards authoritarian power. The collective empowerment described in the novel contains an experience of powerlessness in the center of power. All involved are aware that the center of the power that connects them is empty, that it is embodied by a powerless, even nameless peasant and guarded by the formerly powerless women. It does not matter who is in power, they can be replaced, power structures can change. At the same time, this means that everyone can participate in the creation and exercise of power, the power only exists by being created and supported together. If precisely these insights, based on an experience of powerlessness within the center of power, are reflected by those involved, this could inspire their democratic hopes for a true realization of sharing power.

### **Strong democratic hope**

Jakob Huber points out that a specific 'contingency, which is endemic to democratic life, confronts citizens with their own agential limitations in a particularly acute way' (Huber, 2021, p. 730). Huber understands democracy 'as built on the regulative norm that we act in concert with others' –

whereby, following Hannah Arendt, acting in concert defines power (Huber, 2021, p. 729). This regulative norm directs us towards establishing collective practices within plurality 'with the aim of making laws that aspire to speak in the name of all' (ibid.). Not only in the formation of a democratic order, but also in the exercise of democratic practices it is apparent that we cannot make a difference alone, but only in interaction with others, and the impact that we can make – inter alia in our indirect individual influence on legislation through voting – often seems small or is further hampered by slowly or not appropriately responding institutions. This means that 'as *democratic agents*' (Huber, 2021, p. 732) we always experience relative powerlessness (we cannot bring about our goals alone), but it seems that we often take it for radical powerlessness (we cannot actively contribute to bring them about at all), though we have a say through our right to vote. I agree with Jakob Huber that we need 'democratic hope' – a hope that keeps our commitment to democracy, political participation, and trust in the power of acting in concert alive, 'where the odds of making a difference are dim' (Huber, 2021, p. 727).<sup>7</sup> This hope must be reactivated especially where the possibility to make a difference within democratic frameworks and by means of democratic agency is no longer seen at all ('I/we cannot change things anyway') or where it is replaced by manipulative evocation of hopes, fear and hatred in populism.

Blöser et al. mention an interesting reason why hope is often regarded as disabling in political contexts: Apart from its potential of being misused for manipulation and for keeping the oppressed in their place, it undermines 'the basic democratic intuition that citizens are in control of their own future' (Blöser et al., 2020, p. 3). Instead of a constructive awareness of the limits of control within strong hope, a lack of control is regarded as a threat to democratic citizens. Still, one can also argue that at least a continuous questioning of the democratic intuition that citizens are in control of their future is constitutive for the functioning of democracy. Because of an awareness of the limits of individual power, of the openness of the future, and of the uncertainty which individual desires and political goals can be realized, we must pin our hopes to a system in which we can at least participate in collective efforts to protect individual freedom and take care for the future.

If citizens need hope for a good or better future, for instance for the realization of racial and gender justice and equal opportunities, this means that they do not believe that they can simply bring these goals about through their own agency. This could indeed be disempowering, if it amounts to the idea that the individual and collective goals cannot be brought about anyway. The attitude towards these desires could then no longer be called hope, at least not according to the standard definition that includes the condition of a potential to be realized. A disempowering,

demoralizing effect can also be caused by a low probability assignment, for example to a chance to influence 'those in power' through voting or other political activities. This effect is often misused in populist manipulation. Still, the idea of 'strong democratic hope' suggests that such experiences of powerlessness can be integrated into an empowerment towards agency. Precisely because they are aware of the limits of their own power to achieve a certain goal and of the general uncertainty of controlling the future, democratic citizens place their hope in active participation and joint action.

In her account of collective hope, Katie Stockdale describes how the association of individuals in a solidarity movement or activist collective is often based on a very concrete practical experience of actual despair and powerlessness. One of her examples is the #MeToo movement that was formed basically because the initiator Sarah Jaffe and many of her first followers had lost hope in achieving justice in the court system. Still, through expressing one's own experience of powerlessness and either directly or indirectly also one's hope (a hope against hope) for the possibility of justice in the public sphere it becomes possible to find and recognize each other as allies. These expressions can either be explicit verbal reflections (in the #MeToo example) or collective symbolic acts (Stockdale mentions the Healing Walk in Alberta's tar sands as an expression of solidarity among environmental activists). A collective is formed and in this collective the individuals can experience that 'they themselves can create or restore hope', that hope can be '*produced* by solidarity' (Stockdale, 2021a, p. 6). Such associations of individuals in solidarity can also be considered acts of 'giving in' without 'giving up'. There is an aspect of medio-passive agency in 'leaving yourself to the group' and merging into a shared experience.

According to Stockdale, collective hope is not just an aggregation of individual hopes (for instance for one's own happiness), but the hope – in her examples hope for justice – is shared and enacted 'in a collective action setting' and exchanged 'in an emotional atmosphere' (Stockdale, 2021a, p. 8). A transfer happens from 'I am hoping' to 'we are hoping together' and thereby an 'emotional convergence between individuals' is established (Stockdale, 2021a, p. 12). This is not only the condition for individual psychological empowerment, but also for activating collective political agency and exercising collective power.

That what 'we deem possible but beyond our own power alone to bring about' can be regarded as the core of solidarity, but it can also be regarded as the core idea of collective political power. At the heart of any social contract and of the manifestation of power as acting in concert (power in Arendt's sense) there is a hope to make possible together what one cannot bring about alone (such as perpetual peace or a full realization of justice). As

Stockdale convincingly shows, the experience of solidarity, of joining forces for acting together, can transfer the individual hopes into a collective hope. Even though the original motivation of joining forces may be grounded in shared experiences of despair, there must at least be some degree of strong hope (against all odds) as the necessary attitude of giving in to the experience of the individual limits of control and at the same time in to the 'pouvoir-en-commun'. *Giving in* here means readiness to cooperate and co-create power as a shared power and is not to be confused with *giving up* one's individual power in favour of the sovereignty of the emperor or the Leviathan.

Still, there are differences between the connections between hope and solidarity described by Stockdale and the idea of strong democratic hope. Activist solidarity movements are an important corrective within democratic orders where injustices or inequalities are not (yet) seen or appropriately addressed or where power structures suppress the voices of individuals and their right to be heard, or where accessibility of knowledge hampers participation. It is yet questionable whether the motivation towards collective agency, building on emotional convergence and deep solidarity among smaller activist groups is transferable to the larger sphere of a democratic system. A strong emotional convergence can pop up in collective experiences of empowerment and realized hopes – for instance in the wake of the German Reunion. Solidarity, a sense of togetherness, and belonging to a democratic community – sharing hopes for a well-functioning and just democratic order – can be fostered by symbolic acts or festivities for instance at the ceremony to inaugurate a newly elected parliament or during yearly celebrations of the Day of German Unity. Still, what seems important here is the possibility of also critically distancing oneself from emotional and symbolic assertions of (national) unity and critically reflecting on the functioning and distribution of democratic power. In that sense strong democratic hope ought to be 'hope in a minor key' (Millner, 2017) that is not automatically assuming that grand visions are shared by all. Though a joint commitment for democracy can build on collective feelings, it also needs the work of argumentative persuasion in a pluralist discourse.

Democracy is a system that ideally aims to protect every individual and every minority against experiences of radical powerlessness by giving each individual the rights and the freedom to actively participate in shared power – at least through the possibility to vote and thereby represent their voice, also through making use of rights to demonstrate, freedom of expression, engagement in citizens' initiatives and activist groups. Establishing a law that is speaking for all also means to let everyone have a say. What is characteristic of democratic power is that it is reflectively routed in the plurality of individual voices (translated into votes), which also allows for a plurality of different hopes. It aims to establish a convergence and cohesion between individuals which still allows for controversy and includes the

opportunity to 'agree to disagree'. Ideally, this should certainly also apply within activist movements, but here cohesion is paramount in order to realize a concrete shared hope of combating a specific phenomenon of injustice or inequality. While within such a group the empowerment to political agency is decisive, strong democratic hope puts more emphasis on the insight into the limitations and balances of power and into the 'emptiness' at the core of democratic power. Political hope to bring about desired outcomes in a democratic framework ought to be aware of the constitutive experience of powerlessness that lies at its heart. Historically, this experience can be an experience of oppression or domination. More fundamentally, it is the experience that collective democratic power only exists if it is exercised through participation. And individuals only make use of their right to participate if they have at least some hope that their voice makes a difference.

If it is a core goal of democracy – and thereby a core element of democratic hope – to protect all citizens against experiences of radical powerlessness in relation to the agency of others, it must at the same time integrate a fundamental insight into the limitations of power and control at the heart of every power. Only shared and limited power can secure this goal. At the same time, democratic hope includes awareness of the potentials of democratic empowerment and of the decisive difference between what is absolutely beyond our individual and collective control because of the limitations of the human condition, and what lies within the scope of what we can change for the better: 'If we can do more and don't, then it isn't chance or necessity, it is us, and its name is injustice' (Nussbaum, 2009, p. 221). Strong democratic hope – supplemented by McGeer's idea of a hope of care as described above – implies taking each citizen seriously as a political agent who can set themselves ends and contribute to the *pouvoir-en-commun*. If all these agents are aware that they cannot fully control the future, they can still hope to make a difference and be motivated to also protect the hope and the freedom of others to make a difference.

To make sure that the power constituted collectively is democratic power and the relation of the individual towards this power is a relation of participation and not merely of obedience (or domination), an important difference is to be made in the translation of the constitutive powerlessness at the core of hope from the individual psychological level and the group level to the level of a political system: while the *pre-reflective* experience of powerlessness can be integrated into strong hope seamlessly on the individual level and it can contribute to hopeful emotional convergence on the group level, it *must become reflective* in democracy as a political system. Here it is important to foster constant awareness of the dialectics between powerlessness and empowerment (which can also happen through symbolic reminders) and critical reflection about the relation between powerlessness and power. This is to

make sure that the unification of individual hopes in collective hopes does not lead to giving in to any kind of collective power or of giving up one's individual power in favour of a dominant leader, just to make sure that the contents of specific shared hopes are realized. A functioning democratic order needs constant awareness of the limitations of control and the powerlessness at the heart of democratic power and it needs democratic hope: hope for the opportunity of making a difference and participating in power without seizing all power or forcing everyone to share one's own specific political hopes. In particular in times where democracy is in crisis and the odds of making a difference are dim, democratic hope needs to be a strong hope that is not confusing relative with radical powerlessness but allowing for experiencing giving in to shared power as empowering everyone to participate.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the power of hope – more specifically its motivating force and potential for empowering agency – is situated on the margins between the uncertain (but possible) and the impossible and that hope is a constitutive element in transitions from passivity to activity and powerlessness to empowerment. It has been shown how Han-Pile's conception of hope as constitutively including an experience of powerlessness that is at the same time empowering can be (partly) translated onto the political level and helps us to understand the dialectics between powerlessness and power in democracy. As hope includes an insight into the limits of one's individual power to bring about agency alone, this can motivate us to join forces and co-create democratic power through acting in concert.

Conceiving of democratic hopes as 'strong hopes' that can integrate an experience of powerlessness in a productive and empowering way helps understanding how hope can avoid the undermining effects of demoralization, caused by the specific way in which a democratic order confronts us with the limitations of individual agency. An understanding of democratic agency as medio-passive agency, raising responsiveness to changing circumstances and an insight into the limitations of one's individual power that are at the same time not disempowering, can guard against the manipulative effects of misusing the power of hope in stabilizing regimes of oppression and ideological narrowness. In the political realm the potentially pre-reflective experience of powerlessness within hope ought to be made reflective. Practices of sharing collective imaginaries and emotional cohesion through hope and solidarity must go hand in hand with room for a plurality of different hopes and practices of critique of specific political hopes – hopes to achieve a specific political goal for a specific group – as well as of how democratic power is exercised.

In contrast to more narrow hopes to realize specific political goals, strong democratic hope should be a broad and general hope for justice and humanness despite the complex challenge of bringing about a just order and defending it against the permanent possibility of injustice and atrocities. It is closely related to what could be called a strong ethical hope for our capacity to re-interpret and re-establish ideals of a better future together and keep up the motivation towards agency that can make a difference, despite uncertainty within the stability and reliability of present and future normative frameworks.

Seeing the limits of control, agency and power also means being able to determine what is possible within these limits – a decisive exercise within ‘politics as the art of the possible’ – but it can at the same time be integrated into a strong hope that is able to activate solidarity and collective efforts to try to extend these limits in a constant struggle for peace and justice, in the exercise of mutual respect towards each other as equals and as capable democratic agents, and in opening possibilities of a good and meaningful life for all.

If we hope for the opportunity of a good life for each individual in a just and peaceful political context, we also need a radical openness for the project of constantly re-orienting ourselves towards this actually very uncertain aim in our actions. This includes the awareness that we have no absolute certainty of how precisely the standards of a good life and the order of a just and liveable society can be realized under future conditions that are only partly under our control. It needs a strong but patient hope to constantly negotiate and work out this project anew with each other.

## Notes

1. While the standard account is not undisputed it is nevertheless very often taken as the starting point for developing a more comprehensive account of hope. Katie Stockdale, for instance, adds the conditions of ‘(3) seeing or perceiving in a favorable light the possibility that the desired outcome obtains, and (4) an explicit or implicit recognition of the limitations of one’s own agency in bringing about the hoped-for end’ (Stockdale, 2021b, p. 19). I will discuss Han-Pile’s argument about the standard definition in more detail below.
2. McGeer’s example of ‘a life devoid of hope’ is Elie Wiesel’s account of his experiences of being deprived of humanness in a Nazi concentration camp (McGeer, 2004, p. 101).
3. For a more differentiated analysis of hope during the COVID-19 crisis see Bauer (2020).
4. At the same time, the narcissist is the perfect example of McGeer’s ‘willful hoper’ who ‘invest all their energy in the achievement of their ends, however, having little understanding of the self-aggrandizing passions that often drive them to those ends’, not shying away from using others as means to their ends (McGeer, 2004, p. 115f.).

5. In 1941 Ethiopia was liberated from the fascist Italian occupation by the British army and Ethiopian resistance fighters. Haile Selassie returned. Though he has clearly modernized his country, for instance by the abolition of slavery and the introduction of a written constitution, feudal structures were preserved and he remained an autocratic emperor.
6. It must be noted that Han-Pile's account of strong hope has close connections to a tradition of mystic and religious experience where letting go and giving in to passivity means opening 'ourselves to the divine' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 197). However, she points out that non-religious hope against hope can also have a similar structure of 'trust in the openness of the future' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 188). This attitude of openness is at least partly a passive hope. This also has an impact on the examples that Han-Pile gives for concrete cases of strong hope: 'praying, loving, creating' (Han-Pile, 2017, p. 196). Understood in the framework of an individual attitude of letting go of control, the activities of praying, loving, creating, that are mentioned as examples, seem to be associated with inwardness, devotion, spirituality, passion, personal and interpersonal experiences, rather than political agency. They imply activities of contemplation, communication, fabrication (poiesis). Still, if exercised and communicated collectively and/or in the public realm, these activities as such can also have a political dimension (a joint prayer during a peace demonstration; public statements expressing love of nature during a debate on the environmental crisis; arts performances with a clear activist agenda). Such activities can also be related to successful practices of passive resistance that could very accurately be described as forms of medio-passive agency. However, when these activities of strong hoppers and of medio-passive agency are to be exercised as political action, this, at least to a certain degree, asks for a reflected decision and coordination of activities with others, and thereby implies a reinstatement of control and a transition from rather passive to clearly active hope.
7. Huber introduces a more sophisticated Kantian framework of this idea.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the participants of the conference "The Political Philosophy of Hope" for the inspiring discussion and helpful comments on a first draft of this paper. Special thanks to the editor of this special issue, Jakob Huber, for his patience and for the invitation to revisit my earlier reflections about hope in times of crisis in a more fundamental way.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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