

# TECH-AFFLUENT DEMOCRACIES

## CAN WE ESCAPE FROM DEMOCRACY'S DEAD END?

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Let us suppose for the sake of argument that democracy - the democratic principles of equality - is a viable and desirable polity that we should strive to implement. This premise is rather insubstantial, because the term democracy, in spite of the markedly positive overtone of the word, is too vague to define a polity. History, philosophers, political theorists and scientists have highlighted the complexities hidden in this hazy ideal.

Of this I am aware, but the limited scope of this paper makes the premise meaningful. Therefore, of all the possible democracies that can be conceived, I will consider here only that very specific strain of indirect democracy that we, in the West, live in and whose pitfalls I will try to explore and address.

I am afraid that Arend Lijphart, Bingham Powell and many other political scientists would object that even the members of this subset present substantial differences, while experts in social choice theory will argue that each country aggregates individual preferences in various ways, each one defining, in practice or theory, a different type of democracy.

And yet, I believe that, notwithstanding the elaborate classifications of the political theorists and comparativists, all these governments can be clustered on the basis of a more significant characteristic, their dependence on three elements: the central role of political parties, an unconstrained market economy and a public opinion strongly conditioned by the mass media. I also believe that this dependence is the result of two independent factors - affluence and technology - that compound into a powerful mixture that makes the classic normative and descriptive issues rather irrelevant. For convenience, I will brand the members of this category, tech-affluent democracies.

Of course, even two hundred years ago, wealth, markets and technology existed, but I think that a democracy mutates into a tech-affluent regime only when affluence and enfranchisement reach

the vast majority of the population, markets become the essence of the social contract and technology allows a massive diffusion of invasive media, like television and cheap press.

The thesis of this article is that tech-affluent democracies are formally similar to the specific models that they are supposed to implement, but that, under the lens of empirical analysis, they reveal an undemocratic reality. And whatever model they follow – Professor Albert Weale in one classification mentions 5 categories of democracy – the diversity is irrelevant. As irrelevant is a broader distinction between liberal democracies, illiberal democracies and authoritarian regimes (Hague and Harrop, *Comparative Government and Politics*). Of course, differences in rules, practices, institutional typology and constitutions, affect the stability of governments and their morality, influence the economy and make the life of citizens more or less pleasant. The irrelevance that I refer to is with respect to the essence of democracy - the relationship between public policy and public opinion. And goes without saying that this relationship should imply a public opinion that has the means to be liberally formed, can access the appropriate information and is able to shape public policy. In my opinion, the empirical observation shows that such relationship is lost in tech-affluent democracies, apart from any prejudiced stance against democracy.

Suggestive arguments against democracy have been put forward by Plato, Hobbes and many others. Plato, in particular, explains very well how *in a democracy those who are expert at winning elections, and nothing else, will eventually dominate democratic politics*. And even if this seems a perfect description of what is happening in most free countries, tech-affluence has a complexity that cannot be reduced to Plato's logic. Consequently, tyranny, the inevitable degeneration of democracy predicted by Plato, is not the most likely outcome. And anyway, whatever are the reasons of Plato and his followers, I have to stick to the preamble: democracy is good and should be pursued.

Having put aside any objection to the belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance, the only issue to consider is that of performing an unbiased health check of our democracies and then suggesting a treatment for the ailments that may be found.

Coherently with the limited scope that I pursue, the normative reasoning about the limits of political authority, consent, theoretical accountability, forms of governments, pluralism, elitism and related issues will be largely ignored. Rather, I shall concentrate on the normative essence of the democratic principles, as any other consideration would put far too elaborate a face on matters.

Actually, to my mind, all these refined theoretical issues, while intellectually fascinating, obscure the comprehension of the political reality of tech-affluent democracies whose main characteristic can be found in the aphony of its citizens. And, in the few cases when their voice is heard, it rarely makes much sense, because it comes from the most vocal and less sensible groups. Formally, there are few restrictions on freedom of speech and of the press. Moreover, whatever electoral system is used, politicians are rendered accountable by reasonably fair elections. Of this, our democratic societies praise themselves, apparently so convinced of their merits that can't help spreading the gospel.

But what does the reality really look like? Before knowing what is right, one must know what is wrong and there is no need of sophisticated surveys to observe a few facts. As an effect of disenchantment with representation voter turnout is dwindling away in most developed countries, reaching ridiculously low levels in US, while protest votes are increasing. Representation and financial means, in theory unconnected, are strictly related. Rampant lobbies, from evil corporations to ecocentric extremists, have transformed democracy in a polyarchy far less benign than Dahl's utopian pluralism. Independently from the various models of representative government – e.g. a representational or Westminster conception – the quality of representation is quite shoddy.

And a few paradoxes are worth noting. The poor, in whom one would expect a craving for change, whatever it may be, do not vote. In spite of the claimed accountability, most representatives spend their lives in politics, no matter how many elections they have lost and how many scandals they have been through. Legislation and the public opinion appear widely disconnected on key issues, for instance the unchecked profits and expedients of big finance. Even more puzzling is the indulgence with tax loopholes and offshore practices that is very hard to imagine supported by whatever majority of voters, considering that their value is confined to corporations or outright crime. All this being so, the position of our democracy doesn't appear to rest on solid ground! The reason, as Rousseau noticed in the 18th century, is that there is a huge difference between making the laws and electing representatives to do so. Even more so in tech-affluent democracies that have only the semblance of a democracy, but they are something else.

A sort of Truman show where common citizens are ignorant players in a game whose applied rules are not the ones that are declared and the playground is governed by a hidden master control room. A meta-game where agents fight among them by affecting another

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competition that is taking place at a lower level - ours. A distinguished sociologist, Joseph Schumpeter, wrote in the '40's that:

*democracy can be defined as that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by the means of competitive struggle for the people's vote.*

Is this specific vision the key to understanding the plot of the fiction of democracy? A game between elites where the scores are the democratic votes? Maybe, if we read between the lines. Certainly, there is a struggle between elites, but the plot is more complicated than that. As in all good plots, nothing is as it appears to be and the elites that struggle are not those that acquire the real power to decide. In general, this is not a new observation, as it is not new for the butler to be the murderer in a thriller, but this aspect has not received the attention that it deserves in the academic circles. Few matters have been subject to more relentless study than democracy, but however disguised or evaded, today, is this the issue that stands out to the pragmatic mind: the real nature of representation, or the lack thereof.

And yet representation, numerically, is on a growth trend – Europe, for instance, has added a thousand reps to those of its member nations. But representation is one thing that stands for another, not simply a head count. H.F. Pitkin has delved into the concept of representation to the point of writing a book where the subject has been dissected in punctilious detail. There, she has identified no less than five different senses of representation. This number could be argued, but there is another less traveled course of thought that is more substantive to pursue, if not in theory, definitely in real world polity: that of identifying the identity and nature of the principals in the principal-agent representation relationship.

In tech-affluent democracies, if with notable exceptions, the agents have three principals: themselves, the political party and the voter. The order is intentional and can be explained. The representatives' first priority will be their personal immediate gain, material or immaterial, because human nature value quick gains more than future rewards. Outright bribes are certainly a possibility, but the concept extends much further into the grey area of the independent mature judgment of Edmund Burke. This principal is certainly a nuisance to democracy, but of minor scope and significance. Next in the priority line comes the party, the real master of their fortunes, or misfortunes. Last, and least, is the voter, notwithstanding the ultimate power that democracy grants him. It can be objected that representatives are accountable to their constituents through the ballot box and that this should

swap the priorities that we have set. To some extent this happens in some countries, but only in exceptional cases does accountability goes beyond their supporting lobbies or local affairs. In general, the representatives are accountable to the party, their real employer. To talk against the parties is a commonplace, but here remains the crux of the problem.

This has not always been the case. Parties originally developed as coalitions between representatives to push certain bills and flirting with log-rolling (to trade reciprocal concessions on legislation). Only after some time they expanded their scope outside the elitist environment of legislature to coalesce around broader visions that could mobilize support for candidates. Eventually, they have become corporations with their balance sheet, overt and covert financing, direct and indirect employees, these latter usually paid by the state as representatives, or as staff in some government agency. And corporations have their own agenda, with their own survival as its perennial first item. There is no novelty in considering politics a trade. Sieyès, as far back as 1789, claimed that it is in the common interest to make government a special profession. And, together with Madison in the same period, he considered the representative government superior to democracy. Of course, Madison and Sieyès had in mind a transparent elite of good men whose wisdom had to mediate the emotions of the people, in the interest of the nation, prosperity and justice.

Clearly, the idea that a system based on representation is neither a democracy, nor it is intended to be, has been around for some time. Today, a government based on representation is called indirect democracy. Tech-affluent democracies are exceedingly good at selling this ambiguity that better legitimates their existence. But the fact is that these strange political entities are ruled by corporate-parties, not by the citizens. This has long been an accepted feature, even if corporations have their compelling requirements. And even if companies are not very democratic and often, when the shares are widely distributed, a few minority shareholders wield effective control, frequently with the complicity of a well rewarded management. Tech-affluent democracies are the perfect environment to nurture this anti-democratic drift. However, given the supply side deficit of sound political parties, their governments are voted on a lesser evil basis.

But, to create a democratic alternative or fight a revolution requires an energy and initiative that the easy complacency of affluence denies. How can somebody risk his iPhone, his vacation in the sun and his trendy clothes for an ideal of justice and fairness? Wouldn't it be too much to expect from a citizen a time consuming act of rebellion when he can rather ride home in his car to watch an entertaining soap opera or a sport event? The gap between the fortunate and the masses is larger than ever, but those so needful to have nothing to loose, and much to fight for, have been nearly eliminated by affluence. In the West, automation, GM food and industrial farming, mechanized production of goods and efficient logistics offer a decent basic life to everybody. This being so, democracy is a merchandise that can be easily traded for the latest TV screen. On this weakness of human nature, on this strength of its benumbing power, tech-democracies thrive.

But, as noted before, beside the political parties and the affluence, something else is needed to establish a tech-affluent democracy.

A democracy, to be a democracy, needs the appropriate political scenery of elections, voters, debates, candidates and what else is required for the show. And there is nothing easy about this course of action, because the materialization in the performance of a party really democratic, or of an independent strong candidate, would easily spoil the fiction. That should be absolutely avoided. Therefore, this is a task of no small delicacy, but in tech-affluent democracies the media machine is well oiled and tested on thousands of advertising campaigns. And, coherently with a social contract based on the market, it is ready to serve whoever has the money and the will to pay for its services. In essence, elites, by their financial strength, control the political parties that control the representatives and, all together, control the media that manipulate the public opinion that, in a mildly circular fashion, in turn influence the media and the elites with their consumer power.

This process, involving competing elites, un-loyal actors and some feedback is rather turbulent, but what is certain is that, within it common citizens have little say. To make the matter worse, not surprisingly, the legislation has granted itself - the representatives and the parties - nontrivial privileges. The wealth and power is not without its advantages and the case to the contrary has never proved widely persuasive. Therefore, in a kind of reverse selection, politics mainly attracts and choose people that excel in the art of deception, necessary to win their customer-voter. They are salesmen for the parties, rather than competent representatives, and among them the voters must choose. Voters that are mostly ill-informed by biased media and by their lack of time. Tech-affluent polity is not very democratic, but extremely stable. It is nearly impossible to change, unless there is some external threat or the controlling economic forces become victim of reckless mistakes, or uncontrolled greed. This latter case being a distinct possibility, these days.

### **SEMINAL REFLECTIONS ON RANDOMIZED REPRESENTATION**

Is there a remedy to the un-democracy of tech-affluent democracies? I believe that, should the crisis become so severe to disrupt the easy life of the affluent society, enough energy could be released to spark some change. On my side, I will argue against the facile assumption that all other systems are worse than representative democracy and that only some improvement would be required. I would rather opt for a drastic change: drafting citizens as representatives. Today, in a tech-affluent society, this lottery alternative would be the only way to assure a decent level of democracy to the government. It would solve many problems at once. It will eliminate the predicament of the selection among the worst - the choice among candidates just tempted by the privilege of the position. It will change the nature of the parties and disrupt the influence of the financial elites, thus denying their indirect legislative power. It will also reduce the prevalent ignorance, because the citizens empowered to decide will have the means, in time and sources, to better check the reality of the facts rather than relying only on the artifacts of the mass media.

Not to be utopian, a system must be easily implementable from an empirical point of view and the lot can certainly satisfy this requirement. In fact, it can be introduced gracefully, replacing little by little the existing representation of any existing democratic system, with no trauma or revolution. Dahl, O'Leary and Manin, among others, have

played with the concept of the lot and discussed its history as well as some possible approaches for the future. Manin has also tried to understand why such early solution, well practiced in the Athenian democracy, has vanished afterwards from the political panorama. Certainly, today, the society is different and far more complex. Whatever the Athenians did then, it would not be directly applicable to our society. Many normative criticisms have been formulated against the lot, especially from the point of view of accountability and authorization, but the empirical strength of the arguments appears to me rather weak. Not to mention that, even in the lottery, a certain degree of accountability can be introduced. Lot has been also criticized on the basis of competence, but looking at the curricula of many representatives of our democracies lot could not do worse! And, anyway, don't we sentence to death or life imprisonment on the judgment of juries?

There is little doubt that the lot, wisely tempered by supportive measures, could be engineered into a political system to produce a far better democracy than the ones that we now see in many Western countries. On the contrary, sad to say, in over a century of practice, our governments have only lowered the original standard of democracy. Moreover, the lot could also be a reasonable way of introducing democracy in non-democratic countries where corruption and violence make free elections nearly impossible. Affluence is the success of today's democracy, but it may not be so in future. Then, the quest for equality and justice may find the right answer in the lot, the democracy of the past, the democracy of the future.

## **BEYOND DEMOCRACY**

### **SEMINAL REFLECTIONS ON A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT**

But let us suppose for the sake of argument that democracy - the democratic principles of equality - is a polity neither viable nor fair. Of course, equality with respect to race, gender and birth is not under question here. This premise implies that a decent substitute must be found, while all the alternatives have, so far, failed on empirical or normative grounds. Undoubtedly, this has been the real strength of democracy and may be so in the years to come. But what if we apply some lateral thinking and we approach the issue from an unconventional angle? Democracy, in the past, has never been successful for many years and, today, works well for two reasons. Being embellished by egalitarian cosmetics, it is ethically more appealing than other alternatives; the progress of technology, in the developed world, has provided enough wealth to make its inefficiency tolerable and its injustice annoying, but not life threatening. The first reason is the subject of these few paragraphs, the second could soon be denied when the billions of people left behind will pretend to share our affluence.

The first alternative that comes to mind is a benign dictatorship with the interests and dignity of her people at heart. Simple and effective, but chancy, because this option doesn't embody a first choice criterion. Even less it provides a self regulatory mechanism to prevent a malevolent slide. But, let's start from the flaw of democracy. The widely spoken theoretical imperfection of democracy is that the ignorant will rule the smart. The empirical flaw is that this never happens – the smartest are always in control, but in a concealed

way, thus unchecked. This is the case of today's democracy. Equality is not consistent with either human nature or the character and motivation of people. This fact cannot be denied and must be the starting point of any new benign social contract. Any other approach will generate large empirical disparities under the cover of normative equality. The concept of inequality is not easily spoken about, but the reality is that most of the population live far beyond their natural means. They don't have the congenital competence, the intelligence - for what it means- , the determination, the curiosity and the many other characteristics that have pushed our civilization this far, thus letting them enjoy a better life.

## **A new social contract and a new polity should be founded on inequality, not equality!**

Originally, when the world was scarcely populated, these differences did not matter much. Life was short and there was little time to learn. To survive, physical endurance was more important than anything else. Society played a little role. Over the past ten thousands years many things have changed. Today, no matter how poor you are, even if you are at the lowest level of the social scale, you are blessed by the work of smarter men, past and present, that have done what you would never had been capable of doing. And society, with all its defects, is what it is because philosophers, political thinkers, and even good kings, have had a broader vision than the rest of the population. Everything that we enjoy is only possible because men of unusual capacity constitute the engines that, in varying degrees, move our society.

Of course, without fuel an engine is nothing, but an engine can adapt to the fuel while the fuel cannot build an engine. There is no possible way that these engines can accept to be ruled by the fuel, the masses. If forced to bow, they can only pretend. And this ambiguity leaves society at the mercy of all kind of cunning people, strong in selfishness rather than smartness and good will. A new social contract and a new polity should be founded on inequality, not equality! This contract, in a context of solid human rights and mutual respect, with rewards based on fulfillment rather than exhibited social pride and unlimited enrichment, could be human and fair. Easier said than done, but these are only seminal reflections.....

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