The Myth of Democracy at Stake:

The Process of Deconsolidating Democracy in Three Moments

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Estoril, June 2018

Democracy is a myth. Terms such as "myth" and "legend" are beginning to appear in political literature with an empirical bent (e.g., Mounk, Bartels, Achen). To state this is not to be *against* democracy, but is rather an attempt to *understan*d it in its ontological nature. Myth is not synonymous with lies, myth is a structure that organizes one's perception of the world, its past, present and future, and ultimately gives meaning to the constant flux of elements that constitute reality. Democracy is a political – not cosmogonic or eschatological – myth, although in its more radical and utopian forms, democracy bears within itself an eschatological gist whereby the "people" will at last enjoy the full harmony of goods and their production, of affections, of ideas, of institutions, of territories.

To perceive democracy's mythic character is also essential to perceive its weaknesses, contingencies and eventual dissolution on the horizon. Yes, democracy may come to an end someday. Like all myths, it may lose its power to agglutinate meaning in its relationship with the facts of reality. The empirical world may indeed prove that democracy is mythical and will eventually become a mere topic in the psychology of myths, in the history of religions or even in esotericism.

Like every myth, democracy expresses *its own* nature as detached from empirical facts, even while leveraging them with its centripetal force. Facts, however, have a centrifugal bias, that is, when scrutinized they seem to dissolve the belief in democracy's "scientific" status.

Terms such as "myth" or "legend" appear in specialized literature as evidence of democracy's inconsistency as a stable and consolidated reality. *Being a myth* means that democracy exists in the minds of people and in political science books only because we depict its recent history as a self-evident political fact. One of the clearest ongoing myths in democracy is that it is a system of government "created for the people" and that the democratic condition is sustained by this people's sovereign will, accomplished

through the anointment of universal vote. And *being as legend* means operating according to narratives of the behavior of voters (the "people") – narratives that, indeed, are shown not to be real when surveyed more systematically.

In the 1940s, Ernst Cassirer already pointed out the mythic dimension of the State (referring to the emergence of the Nazi, fascist and Soviet systems). Since then, awareness of the mythic element in modern and contemporary political life has become increasingly prevalent.

One of the most common storylines in the myth of democracy is that the "founding fathers" of American democracy wanted a government "for the people." However, they also did not want a government "from the people." To be sure, their concern was how to keep the "people" under control, reasonably satisfied and indirectly represented in their interests (hence the "collegiate" democracy). Another common storyline is that the British House of Commons was likewise created "for the people." Not at all; it was established to represent the interests of the upper bourgeoisie in the face of an incompetent aristocratic government entirely detached from actual public issues on account of its economic decay. From the viewpoint of this upper bourgeoisie, only those who build public life should manage it. The advent of universal male suffrage derived from the pressures of a "middle class" that was getting ahead in life and becoming urbanized in the 19th century. Seen in retrospect, it would seem everything was done to "represent the people," when in reality the whole process was just another way of dealing with the undesirable destabilizing character that the "people" have over social and political order.

Yet, who are the "people"? A mere numerical entity that best materializes in crowds or statistics, if not in number of votes. There is no assurance of the ability of the "people" to decide wisely on managing a society. The "founding fathers" feared that if the "people" got their hands on public management, it would bring about the absolute disorganization of the newly founded American society, due to their sheer ignorance of the techniques for "human management."

The myth of democracy seems to be experiencing a certain agony in recent times. Viewed more structurally, we may say there are three great dimensions that need to function tolerably well for the myth of democracy to operate within functional limits. The first is a reasonable control of the flow of information by the gatekeepers in order to

ensure, at the very least, that violent flows of opinions do not impact the expectations of an overwhelming numerical majority. Social media has largely destroyed the validity of these gatekeepers. The second is economic growth without undue inequality. This is also a thing of the past. The third is a tenable ethnic and cultural homogeneity among the largest contingent of the population that exercises sovereignty (as proven by the history of the last hundred years, especially in Europe, the US and Brazil). This is declining as well, due to the rapid growth of immigration, the entry of economic players from previously excluded social classes, and the precipitous decline in fertility among Western secular women. This is the space where we find today's leading democracies. These three steps may jeopardize the ongoing and future consolidation of democracies, and in doing so, impact the consistency of the myth.

More specifically, we would point out three internal aspects of the "legend of popular sovereignty" (the very core of "the folk theory of democracy") that point to a process of deconsolidation of the myth of democracy.

The first aspect is the growing effort to mitigate the impact of "voter opinion" on a country's economic and legal affairs. (This is the current trend among so-called "independent agencies," such as the European Central Bank and Supreme Federal Courts.) If we conceive democracy as a regime in which popular vote must convert into public policies through government action, the European community today is an accomplished example of the process of deflating – if not belittling – popular sovereignty (as seen in the recent case of Greece, among many others). The complexity of economic management requires experts, not the opinions of people who know next to nothing about economic management. Another example along the same line is the growing interference of Supreme Courts in a country's political and social life (as can be seen in Brazil's Operation Car Wash). Not being a representative power in themselves, Supreme Courts are nevertheless increasingly deciding to change laws that impact national customs and traditions. In other words, they are transforming moral life, as well as determining who goes or does not go to jail (with potentially profound effects on the electoral process).

The second aspect is the vacuous belief that there exists something called "political consciousness" among voters. Empirical research in the US has clearly shown two things. 1) Voters do not probe or inquire who they vote for, because they lack time to do so, whether because of marriage, separation, work, children, lack of money, illness

or myriad other issues. Thus, the vast majority of people lie about how they "choose" their representatives. Those who research before voting do so because they are politicians, media professionals, academics or are driven by ideological bias and wish to reinforce their own bias. 2) People with better academic backgrounds do not make better choices when voting on issues pertaining to their institutional setting, as evidenced by the many stupid decisions that Ivy League university students in the US have made on the management of everyday problems in their schools.

In the specific case of Brazil, the fierce attachment of an overwhelming majority of the academic community to the narratives engendered by the Workers' Party and its partisans about the country's latest political events – not to mention their unwillingness to open themselves up to a minimal degree of debate about those narratives – is incontestable confirmation of the studies about the "stupidity" of scholars. On the other hand, the "selective" way that Brazilian voters seem to view many candidates under investigation or already convicted in recent years seems to reinforce the same findings of American researchers regarding their "method" of choosing candidates.

The third aspect is the populist menace. Social media – with its populist vocation (a consequence of its "direct," gatekeeper-less character) – reinforces the fear that the people's will may not be entirely reliable in its choices and biases. (One needs only to remember the second aspect mentioned above.) The manner by which social media exerts pressure on representative institutions, empowering popular sovereignty against their "sluggishness," can easily disarray democracy's system of checks and balances. The consequence of this would be the inevitable growth of the first aspect pointed out above, meaning that at some moment democracy will have to enhance its forms of defense against popular sovereignty itself, causing irrevocable damage to the myth that it is a political regime of the people and for the people.