

The Illusion of Democracy

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Democracy simply put is rule by the majority either by direct participation or by representation. Today an inversion has taken place, rule by the minority. Nevertheless, the majority is able to restore democracy at will but the will is lacking so democracy/ the people have failed themselves.



From people's rule to a broken social contract

It is ironic, considering democracy's pitiful state worldwide that, in accordance to its etymology, it literally means "common people's rule" or, more simply, "people's power." The English term democracy and the 14th-century French word *democratie* come from the Greek *demokratia* via the Latin *democratia*. The Greek radical *demos* means "common people," and *kratos* means "rule, or power." How did we manage to pervert such a laudable notion of power to the people and diametrically turn it into a global system of rule at large under the principles of oligarchy and plutocracy? Everywhere we look, from east to west and north to south, plutocrats and oligarchs are firmly in charge: puppet masters of the political class. They have transformed democracy into a parody of itself and a toxic form of government. The social contract implied in a democratic form of governance is broken.

At the start of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, written in 1762 and one of the inspirations for the French revolution 27 years later, the Enlightenment philosopher wrote: "Men are born free, yet everywhere are in chain." The key argument of *The Social Contract* is that only those governments that function with the express "consent of the governed" have a legitimate right to exist. Further, Rousseau introduced the fundamental and revolutionary notion of sovereignty of the people, as opposed to sovereignty of the state or the rulers. For Rousseau, the only legitimate form of political authority is the one agreed upon by all the people in a social contract with full respect of everyone's natural birthrights to equality, freedom and individual liberty.

The electoral process is an essential part of "the consent of the governed" defined by Rousseau. In almost all of the so-called democratic countries, however, the important act of voting to elect the people's representatives has become an exercise in futility. Today politicians, who still have the audacity to call themselves public servants, are the obedient executors of the trans-national global corporate elite. These politicians are actors who are cast to perform in opaque screenplays written

by top corporate power brokers and marketed to the public like products. In this sad state of affairs that passes for democracy, citizens have become blind consumers of products, which are political figureheads working for global corporate interests. For any organism to remain healthy, it must be able to excrete. The same applies to our collective social body, but instead of regularly eliminating our political residue and flushing it away, we recycle it.

Neoliberal corporate imperialism: a global one-party system

Mark Twain wrote: "If voting made any difference, they wouldn't let us do it." This quote from the gilded age has never been more accurate than it is today. A vote implies real choice, and we have none. From France to Brazil, the United Kingdom, Germany, India and of course the United States -- all of which pass for great democracies -- political choices have become largely reduced to two electable political parties with different names to accommodate the local cultural flavors. This comforting idea of an option between left and right that spices up democracies' voting menus is a farce. For example, in France, the so-called socialist Francois Hollande and his right-wing predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy are both docile servants of neoliberal and imperial policies dictated from elsewhere. Both, Sarkozy and Hollande, are proponents of austerity measures imposed by financial institutions (IMF, World Bank, etc.), and also imperialist actions such as rejoining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

The United Kingdom offers the example of the phony difference between Labor, the party of warmonger in Iraq and Afghanistan, Tony Blair, and Tory, the party of warmonger in Libya, Afghanistan and Syria, David Cameron. This observation extends, of course, to the fake choice between Democrats and Republicans in the United States: the names change periodically, but the neoliberal imperialist policies remain the same. In reality, the pseudo two-party system accommodates a one-party power structure that is financed and ruled by the same people everywhere and serves identical interests. This fake two-party system maintains the appearance of democracy by giving people the impression that voting matters. If voting makes no difference, then what can be done?

Power to the people: challenging unelected global-governance institutions

Although there is rampant dissatisfaction with politicians globally, few people are willing to admit that democracy is broken or take direct action to create a new system. According to an October 2014 poll, only six percent of US voters think that their Congress is doing a good job, and 65 percent rate its performance as being poor or very poor. Even more telling of the popular sense of an assumed general political corruption, 63 percent of US voters think that most members of Congress are willing to sell their votes for either cash or campaign contributions. In France, President Hollande's approval rating has crashed to 13 percent: the lowest for any president since the early 1960s. Despite France's revolutionary history, the country's constitution gives its president the power to remain in office until the full term of his five-year mandate and, if necessary, to rule by decree.

In our current supra-national world order, however, to focus popular dissatisfaction on interchangeable figureheads such as Francois Hollande, Barack Obama, David Cameron, Narendra Modi, Dilma Rousseff, Angela Merkel, etc., is a largely counterproductive undertaking. All are expendable. Instead, the global public opinion should contest the legitimacy of unelected global-governance institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, United Nations, World Trade Organization (WTO), and other powerful non-governmental organizations, think tanks, and consortia like the World Economic Forum. These institutions dictate global policies, draft secret treaties such as the trans-pacific partnership agreement (TPP) concerning billions of

people, and largely constitute the global elite. Such global institutions would have to be elected by the world citizenry for global governance to be viewed as being remotely democratic.

All revolutions need revolution

"Protest beyond the law is not a departure from democracy; it is absolutely essential to it" wrote Howard Zinn. People worldwide are fed up with their politicians, and they are protesting. Yet, as if most are suffering from a collective Stockholm syndrome, they are not sufficiently pro-active to rid themselves of their abusers by all means necessary. Voting was meant to be a sacrosanct civic duty in a democracy, but it has become the unconscious action of sleepwalkers.

In 1789, toppling the monarchy was a tall order in France. The intellectual inspiration for this revolution came from the works of Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot and Montesquieu, who can be viewed as the founding fathers of modern democracy. If the veneer of the Enlightenment philosophers' discourse has survived time, the spirit of it has been gutted out. The elite of corporate global governance have trampled the social contract. People who had gained their freedom during 200 years are everywhere back in chains. Although an increasing number of people realize that a drastic systemic change is imperative, few are willing to admit that nothing short of a global revolution can challenge the entrenched plutocratic world order.

In the aftermath of such a revolution, or ideally before it, we must redefine the parameters of what should guarantee representative governance in real democracy with common people's rule. Real democracy works best on a small scale. In ancient Greece, for example, democracy worked because its scale was limited to small communities in which citizens personally knew their politicians. Today, pushes for autonomy in regions such as Catalonia and Scotland represent the aspirations of people for smaller governance and their reactions against globalization and the threat to their cultural identities. On the other hand, global problems such as pollution, the squandering of limited resources, climate change and the current mass extinction, must be dealt with globally to have any impact. Therefore a type of direct democracy is also needed to deal with global issues; this could consist, for example, of global referendums on critical issues. The current systems of supposed democratic governance are corrupt and decayed; after we demolish them and reconstruct democracy for our times, it might finally, for us, become true to its name.

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