

**CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER**

**No. 20 / 01**

*April 2020*

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**“THE PEOPLE” VERSUS DEMOCRACY:**

**A NEW DILEMMA**

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Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 20/01

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# “The People” Versus Democracy:

## A New Dilemma

Larry Alan Busk

From left to right and from technocrat to ideologue, political commentators are declaring that democracy as we know it is under siege. As regimes with authoritarian overtones ascend to power across the world, so it is said, the unanimity of the democratic form is facing its first serious challenge in decades. The peculiar thing about this development, however, is that the governments in question are not, strictly speaking, antidemocratic. Neither Bolsonaro nor Erdoğan and neither Duterte nor Trump seized power in a military coup, and none of the leaders typically identified as turning the tide against democracy has yet declared himself emperor for life. *They were all elected.*

This raises a difficult political and philosophical question: can we speak of “antidemocratic” tendencies and the necessity of reviving and revitalizing democracy *when the antidemocratic forces at work are a product of the democratic process itself?*

Someone reticent to do the intellectual labor necessary to approach this question will be quick to point out that Duterte only got a 38% plurality of voter support, or that Trump lost the popular vote and relied on voter suppression (or Russian hacking). These objections are facile: would the problem disappear if Duterte and Trump received 50.1% of their respective votes, and/or if the voting process followed the ethically rigorous deliberation procedures designed by philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas or John Rawls? Or do we have such optimistic confidence in the wisdom

of the majority that we believe it would never choose these quasi-authoritarian representatives when given the opportunity and the right conditions? If the answer to both of these questions is no, then the problem remains a problem.

It's a quandary that leads to book titles like Yascha Mounk's *The People vs. Democracy*. How can the people be against democracy, when democracy means the power (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*)? If a king is against monarchy, and it is his will to resign, then it is consistent with the monarchy to end the monarchy. So likewise, if the people deign to elect authoritarian rulers who will undermine democratic values, then, paradoxically, the weakening of democracy is at the same time the enactment of the democratic will. It is the apparent unacceptability of this conclusion that motivates commentators like Mounk, as well as academics who resolve to differentiate "democracy" from "populism" (e.g., Jan-Werner Müller's *What is Populism?*).

The problem of a "bad majority" is not new. In fact, it has haunted democratic politics since its beginning. The people want to have power, but what if the people's power leads to something terrible? Plato argued that a caste of "philosopher kings" should manage a *demos* unfit to govern itself; John Stuart Mill advocated a "plural voting" system, where an individual's number of votes would be determined by their social position; later, social scientists like Gustave Le Bon warned about the dangers of democratic politics when "the masses" are inherently irrational, ignorant, and prone to violence. Today, a new generation of democracy skeptics (Ilya Somin, Bryan Caplan, and especially Jason Brennan) argue along similar lines: the average voter, they observe, is too misinformed and too prejudicial to be entrusted with political responsibility.

For Plato, Mill, and Le Bon, the worry was that the *demos* would threaten the prerogatives of elites—especially the institution of private property. If the masses are given too much power, the argument goes, they are likely to overwhelm the strictures of a "good" (i.e., hierarchical) society through sheer numbers. For Somin, Caplan, and Brennan, all economic libertarians, the story is not fundamentally different. What is distinctive about the reaction to Trump et al. is that the new authoritarian wave is presented not as a threat to some other political value (like elite power or the free market), but to *democracy itself*. If this is going to make any sense, we need to account

for how political movements like Poland's Law and Justice Party can simultaneously win elections *and* signal the deterioration of democracy.

What is really at stake here is exactly what we mean by the word "democracy." In my own work, I suggest that this splitting between the demonstrable will of the *empirical* people (represented by the mass popular support of politicians like Trump), on the one hand, and the ascribed values of *real* democratic power, on the other, indicates the limits of "democracy" as a coherent and meaningful political category. In my book *Democracy in Spite of the Demos*, I refer to this simultaneous exaltation and condemnation of the people as "the elitist-populist ambivalence."

Reading Mounk, for example, it is clear that by democracy he essentially means *liberalism*, i.e., the constitutional protection of civil liberties, a cosmopolitan worldview, and religious, ethnic, and cultural pluralism. But why should liberalism be identified with democracy if and when the *demos* expresses an emphatic rejection of liberal values? Shouldn't his book instead be called *The People vs. Liberalism?*

Marxist theorists often do the same thing. The opening sentence of Jerry Harris's *Global Capitalism and the Power of Democracy* reads: "Can the power of democracy overcome the power of global capitalism?" Certainly not if actually existing popular majorities have no interest in overcoming capitalism. But here again, Harris is taking for granted a difference between the self-declared interests of the empirical *demos* and his estimation of its real interests (socialism). I side with Harris politically, but can I coherently identify my Leftist politics with democracy once I perceive this chasm between where the people are and where I would like them to be?

The "democracy under siege" narrative depends on these equivocations. It is perhaps most obvious in the democracy/populism distinction. Bolsonaro, Orbán, and the rest are *populists*, we are told, not *democratic* leaders. This distinction, however, merely swaps the Ancient Greek word for "people" with the Latin word for the same thing (*populus*). This bait-and-switch shows that what really matters is the political *content* of mass movements, not the extent to which they *are* mass movements. When the people get behind the politics we endorse, we praise this

development as an achievement of “democracy”; when they mobilize in favor of other political goals, we denounce the rise of “populism.”

In whatever sense it is understood—representative or direct, deliberative or “radical,” global or local—democracy is a *formal* concept. It means that the will of the people is sovereign. The will of the people, however, is contingent and itinerant. A majority (or an insurgent popular minority) might will Fascism, communism, liberal cosmopolitan pluralism, religious fundamentalism, or authoritarianism. Therefore, to be against or in favor of any of these “isms” might mean, depending on the way the wind is blowing, to be against democracy, at least on a temporary or ad-hoc basis.

In the era of widespread popular climate skepticism, the question of whether or not the empirical *demos* should have sovereignty takes on a new and more pressing urgency. Do we really want the people to have power even if they spectacularly fail to recognize an existential threat to organized human life? Because of the ubiquity and overwhelming ideological power of the term “democracy,” this is not a question many scholars or political commentators are willing to ask.

The solution is an intellectual and rhetorical magic trick that identifies democracy with a particular political ideal and then, when the will of the people does not correspond to this ideal, announces that the people are behaving antidemocratically.

Like all magic tricks, this one fails to impress once we understand how it works. The *demos* is not turning against democracy (that would be an oxymoron). With the rise of religious fundamentalism, xenophobia and racial hatred, and naked plutocracy, however, the people *are* turning against social justice. That is what is under siege, and that is what we should be defending—not democracy.



The ideas presented here are developed more fully in my book, *Democracy in Spite of the Demos: from Arendt to the Frankfurt School*

[https://www.rowmaninternational.com/book/democracy\\_in\\_spite\\_of\\_the\\_demos/3-156-573a65af-6d79-45ab-b094-4fed888b230a](https://www.rowmaninternational.com/book/democracy_in_spite_of_the_demos/3-156-573a65af-6d79-45ab-b094-4fed888b230a)

They are elaborated further in a forthcoming article in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, titled “Schmitt’s Democratic Dialectic: on the Limits of Democracy as a Value.”

This piece mentions or alludes to the following works:

Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy*

Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*

Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?*

Plato, “Republic”

John Stuart Mill, *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform*

Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*

Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance*

Bryan Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*

Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy*

Jerry Harris, *Global Capitalism and the Power of Democracy*

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