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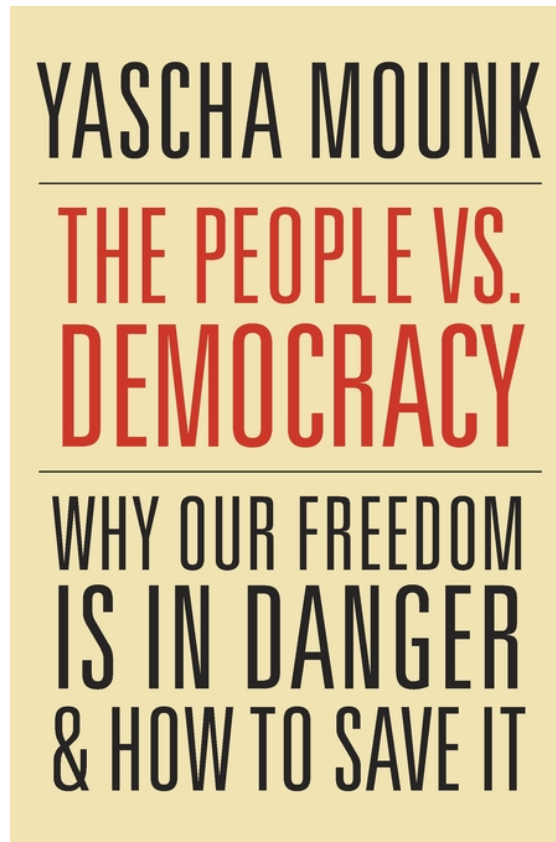
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Reasonableness Without Reasons: Yascha Mounk's "The People vs. Democracy"

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By Jonny Thakkar



JUNE 6, 2018

"THE STAKES OF politics have become existential," writes Yascha Mounk in *The People vs. Democracy*, pitched as a bracing call to arms for all those who fear that the foundations of liberal democracy are being rapidly eroded. "In the years to come, it may take more and more courage to stand up for what we hold dear."

Apocalyptic visions are in vogue, it seems: Mounk's book on contemporary threats to liberal democracy, subtitled "Why Our Freedom Is in Danger & How to Save It," might easily be sold as part of a millenarian package deal with Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's *How Democracies Die*, Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*, and Jonah Goldberg's *Suicide of the West*.

What distinguishes Mounk's contribution to the genre, for good and ill, is what we might call its fundamental *Voxiness* — its currency in the cafe society of liberal Washington. At the level of form, *Voxiness* combines a seemingly insatiable desire to convey the latest social science with a correspondingly steadfast refusal of wide-ranging normative argument. This is what generates its astonishing capacity, at the level of content, to somehow both overturn conventional wisdom *and* affirm the preexisting beliefs of reasonable people.

Scalpel at the ready, Mounk approaches our ailing body politic with a comprehensive vision in three parts: diagnosis, etiology, and therapy. The diagnosis, which forms the longest section in the book, is that liberal democracy has been pulled apart — not only in places like Venezuela or Hungary, but also in Western Europe and the United States — by the forces of populist authoritarianism on the one hand and oligarchic technocracy on the other. The etiology and the therapy are more complicated: among the sources of our woes are stagnating living standards, newfound ethnic pluralism, relentless globalization, changing technology, and growing skepticism about core liberal-democratic values, and the remedies lie in multifarious prescriptions for bolstering productivity, rehabilitating national identity, recovering national sovereignty, taming social media, renewing civic education, and so on. That is a lot to swallow, but in Mounk's opinion a complex problem requires a complex solution.

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One of the most important moves in *The People vs. Democracy* comes right at the beginning, when Mounk insists that a definition of liberal democracy should distinguish its two components so that we can track their fortunes separately. A democracy, he says, is “a set of binding electoral institutions that effectively translates popular views into public policy.” Liberal institutions, meanwhile, are those that “effectively protect the rule of law and guarantee individual rights [...] to all citizens.” It follows that a society counts as a liberal democracy if it combines democratic and liberal institutions. It also follows that some societies might be democratic but not liberal or liberal but not democratic.

Some will object to these definitions. The Ancient Greeks, for example, saw election as an aristocratic mechanism that would inevitably benefit existing elites or produce new ones. And socialists have long claimed that genuine democracy requires the collective shaping of the whole of life, including the economy. But Mounk's approach has the virtue of being uncontroversial relative to standard political discourse while nevertheless pointing to some of the aspirations behind liberalism (protecting or respecting individuals) and democracy (shaping the world together).

Keeping liberalism and democracy apart from a conceptual perspective allows Mounk to make his signature claim, which is that the two have begun to come apart empirically as well. In some areas, he says, we are seeing democracy without rights; in others, we are seeing

rights without democracy. This is a neat idea, perfectly formed for an op-ed or a book jacket or an elevator speech, but it turns out to fit awkwardly with the messy phenomena that Mounk wants to uncover in connection with the rise of populism.

The essence of populism, he says, is a propensity to offer “glib, facile solutions” to complex problems:

Voters do not like to think that the world is complicated. They certainly do not like to be told that there is no immediate answer to their problems. Faced with politicians who seem to be less and less able to govern an increasingly complex world, many are increasingly willing to vote for anybody who promises a simple solution.

Once a simple solution has been formulated (“Build a wall!”) the slippery slope to illiberalism begins. For if the answer is so obvious, the question becomes why it hasn’t been implemented already, and the answer to that must lie in a conspiracy to thwart the will of the people — that is, a conspiracy by enemies of the people, whether corrupt politicians (“Lock her up!”) or foreign interests (“Obama is the founder of ISIS!”). The only remedy is to empower an honest leader (“He tells it like it is!”) to shake things up (“Drain the swamp!”) and thereby allow the authentic demos (“real America”) to take back control of the state (“America First!”). Once in power, however, the people’s spokesman (“I am your voice!”) gets frustrated by the institutional roadblocks of a liberal society, from the media to the judiciary to the civil service, and therefore begins to delegitimize those roadblocks (“fake news,” “the deep state,” et cetera) and undermine them wherever possible (“I expect loyalty”). And so it comes to pass that democracy becomes severed from liberalism.

There is certainly a thrill in coming to recognize this pattern, especially given Mounk’s enviable ability to assemble examples from Italy, Spain, Greece, France, Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, India, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Venezuela, South Korea, and Switzerland. Conceptually speaking, however, there is an obvious problem with the notion of “illiberal democracy”: those who undermine liberal institutions tend to also undermine democratic ones. Mounk claims that while the typical *effect* of populism is to threaten democracy, its fundamental *nature* is democratic, inasmuch as it expresses the will to restore power to the people. But as Jan-Werner Mueller has argued, the strategy of characterizing rival political parties as enemies of the people already signifies contempt for the democratic project of discovering the real will of the people.

The brittleness of Mounk’s conceptual framework is even more apparent when we turn to his examination of “undemocratic liberalism.” He provides a compelling argument that technocracy is on the rise in liberal democracies, pointing especially to growing numbers of civil servants, bureaucratic rules, trade treaties, independent central banks, and judicial review procedures, all of which involve entrusting a professional elite with decisions that might otherwise be the subject of political contestation. [1] Few will need persuading that liberal democracies are becoming increasingly oligarchic, but Mounk does an excellent job of

pressing home the point. In the United States, he observes, the amount of money spent lobbying politicians doubled from \$1.5 billion in 2000 to \$3.2 billion in 2015; and in 2013 it was revealed that members of Congress (whose median net worth is over 10 times as high as that of an average American) are urged to spend around half their working hours seeking campaign contributions. [2] The situation is less dramatic in Europe, but even there politicians have grown more and more insulated from their constituents, with working-class backgrounds a rarity among representatives.

When the trend toward technocracy is combined with the trend toward oligarchy, the influence of ordinary voters starts to seem marginal at best: either an issue is taken out of the democratic arena altogether, to be handled by allegedly neutral experts drawn almost exclusively from the upper middle class, or it is debated by those who have a structural incentive to please the super-rich.

Mouk is surely right that the mixture of oligarchy and technocracy provides fertile ground for populism — it is precisely because the people really have lost their voice that the populist can claim to restore it to them. But what this has to do with “undemocratic liberalism” or “rights without democracy” is unclear. Neither oligarchy nor technocracy is naturally understood as resulting from any kind of emphasis on citizens’ rights; technocracy subordinates the individual’s right to self-determination to the expert’s decision regarding her best interests, while oligarchy privileges the rights of the few as against those of the many.

So there is nothing particularly *liberal* about “undemocratic liberalism.” Nor is it necessarily *undemocratic*, at least in its technocratic dimension, since as Mouk himself points out, democratic decisions need to be carried out by public bodies and hence by officials who inevitably have some degree of autonomy. In the end, then, Mouk’s diagnosis seems faulty: liberal democracy may well be under strain, and perhaps even under threat, but the categories of illiberal democracy and undemocratic liberalism mostly serve to obscure the phenomena at hand.

This is not simply pedantry, for if we picture the threats to liberal democracy as in some way symmetrical and hence on a par, we may fail to see that populist authoritarianism is typically a *reaction* to oligarchy and technocracy. And if we fail to see that, we may end up treating the symptoms rather than the disease.

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For a book that is in large part a reflection on the election of Donald Trump, *The People vs. Democracy* is strangely silent about Bernie Sanders, who receives no mention at all. This bespeaks a more general refusal to consider left-populism as a phenomenon distinct, both analytically and normatively, from the populism of the far right. Mouk claims all forms of populism offer simple solutions to complex problems and then asserts that anyone resisting those solutions must be an enemy of the people. It follows that left-populism is distinguished from right-populism only by its choice of simple solution and cartoon villain: the people are

pictured as needing to wrest power from a wealthy elite as opposed to a cosmopolitan one, basically. From Mounk's perspective the appropriate response to left-populism and right-populism is therefore the same: reasonable people need to insist that our problems are too complex to be addressed by panaceas and then advocate more nuanced policy proposals.

There is therefore a sense in which the whole book can be summed up by the following passage: "There are no easy solutions. And yet, a principled compromise is possible." The posture is that of the adult in the room, the millennial who despairs of his own generation's flirtation with populism (there is a section entitled "The Young Won't Save Us") but hopes to exhort them toward mature reasonableness. It's easy to poke fun at this stance, especially given Mounk's awkward prose — an electronic search yields 76 entries for the "And yet," formula at the start of sentences — but in the era of Twitter politics there is something refreshing about Mounk's refusal to paint himself as more radical than he actually is.

Taken by themselves, Mounk's proposals for bolstering liberal democracy seem perfectly sensible. Citizens should vote against populists, stick together to protest populist authoritarianism, not get distracted by the personal foibles of an authoritarian leader, and, above all, remind one another of the merits of liberal democracy. Politicians should speak the idiom of ordinary people, have a positive message, respect institutional norms, promote an inclusive form of national identity, and avoid the political extremes without appearing wedded to the status quo. Policymakers should desegregate schools, raise taxes on the well off, restore welfare-state provisions while decoupling benefits from employment, invest in infrastructure, research, education, and health care, make transnational individuals and corporations pay taxes domestically, increase the housing supply, fund continuing education, find ways to give gig workers a sense of professional pride, encourage social media companies to nudge their users in responsible ways, diminish the influence of lobbyists by increasing budgets for parliamentary staffers, and improve civic education in both schools and universities.

This certainly qualifies as a complex package of proposals. But if Mounk were to ask himself why the various policies that he suggests have not already been implemented, the answer would most often seem decidedly simple: our political systems have grown increasingly oligarchic over the last few decades and turkeys don't vote for Christmas. For Mounk's proposals to pass, the balance of power in society would have to alter first. And since this cannot be achieved simply by appealing to the conscience of existing elites, it will require large-scale mobilization of the rest of the population — or, to put it another way, left-populism.

The same conclusion can be reached if we focus on Mounk's recommendation that citizens remind one another of the merits of liberal democracy. Why would people do this if the system is as unresponsive to their interests as Mounk suggests? In an egregious passage, Mounk vocalizes the kind of thing that a citizen from a group whose life prospects have stagnated over the last few decades — that is, most of the population, since the average American household is no richer now than it was 30 years ago — might have said to

themselves during the last election: “I’ve worked hard all my life [...] and I don’t have much to show for it. My kids are probably going to have it worse. So let’s throw some shit against the wall and see what sticks.” If we can get past the Clintonite cyborg aspect of this exercise in sympathetic imagination, the point that Mounk is making is that oligarchic regimes are unlikely to inspire true loyalty. For ordinary citizens to want to protect liberal democracy, in other words, they must be given a genuine stake in it. And that is precisely what left-populism proposes to give them.

Mounk is not some kind of crypto-neoliberal. If anything, he seems to be a European-style social democrat, which puts him way to the left of most American Democrats. The point is just that his desire to defend the complexity of the reasonable center against the simplicity of the crazy extremes blinds him to the logic of his own argument. No doubt it would be a mistake, both practically and theoretically, to assume that curtailing oligarchy will solve all our problems. But it does seem plausible that the interests of ordinary citizens are unlikely to be served by a political system in which you basically have to be rich to get elected — including at the local level — and even then you have to spend half your time sucking up to other rich people.

As a result, it also seems plausible to say that in the United States, at least, wresting back popular control of political institutions is a *sine qua non* of stabilizing liberal democracy. So if a politician such as Sanders were to make that the guiding thread of a campaign, that need not imply any simple-mindedness — only a sense of where the most pressing problems really lie.

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The rhetoric of left-populism will of course involve an exclusionary definition of “the people” as against “elites” or some such construction. But as Carl Schmitt famously insisted, some kind of friend-enemy distinction seems essential to real politics: even liberalism needs to construe “the people” in such a way as to exclude the “unreasonable” or “intolerant.”

The problem comes when rhetoric turns to action. Once the battle lines have been drawn between ordinary citizens and elites, Mounk reminds us, we can easily head down the slippery slope to authoritarianism. Every check and balance can be framed as a ruse by which elites resist change, so that the obvious solution is to place more power in the hands of an honest leader. And since power corrupts, we can quickly find ourselves in the hands of a tyrant. But left-populism doesn’t always end in a strongman imprisoning opponents and making seven-hour speeches on national TV — sometimes it ends with the creation of a national healthcare system or the provision of free education.

Put it this way: For all the talk about the failure of Karl Marx’s predictions concerning the future of capitalism, Friedrich Hayek’s predictions about the future of democratic socialism were no better. The left-populist moment in postwar Britain did not bring about a new

serfdom at all. If we accept that some kind of left-populism is necessary, the difficulty is working out how it can remain democratic rather than sliding into authoritarianism.

The answer implied by Mounk's account — even if his failure to seriously consider left-populism renders him incapable of drawing the moral — would be that liberal-democratic left-populism is committed to respecting individual protections such as the right to free speech and democratic norms such as accepting rival parties as legitimate and abiding by election results. Such notions are sometimes decried as mere window-dressing for the oligarchic status quo, but Mounk is surely right that they remain vital safeguards against the corruption and cruelty that can beset any regime, no matter how noble in origin or aspiration. The question is not whether they are valuable but rather how to balance their importance against the need for structural change.

The People vs. Democracy almost raises this question, but doesn't quite follow it all the way through. "If we want to preserve both peace and prosperity, both popular rule and individual rights," writes Mounk in the introduction, "we need to recognize that these are no ordinary times — and go to extraordinary lengths to defend our values." But what are these lengths? In the conclusion, Mounk glosses the "courage to stand up for what we hold dear" as involving a readiness to attend public protests, to remind fellow citizens of "the virtues of both freedom and self-government," and to push political parties to bolster liberal democracy in the ways already described. But this seems a remarkably irenic response to the apocalypse that is allegedly upon us, not least given that Mounk himself says that in "extraordinary times, when the basic contours of politics and society are being renegotiated" the existential stakes of politics seem to justify departures from the rules of the game. Might we not need to bend or break the rules of liberal democracy in order to defend it for the long term, as Lincoln famously did when he suspended habeas corpus during the American Civil War? This is what the authoritarian left-populist will claim.

To provide a compelling answer to this challenge, Mounk would have to show why people should care about liberal-democratic institutions in the first place — why the rule of law is valuable, why individual rights should be considered inviolable in certain respects, why norms of civility are important, why popular views should be translated into public policy, and so on — and then make the case that these reasons do not collapse with the onset of oligarchy. That would be a different book, of course, but it would be one that treated those attracted by populism as susceptible to rational argument. Without that, all we are given is reasonableness without reasons.

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[1] The most impressive statistic may be that in 2007 the US Congress passed 138 public laws while federal agencies issued 2,926 rules. Others include the following: in Great Britain, the number of civil servants rose from around 100,000 in 1930 to around 400,000 in 2015, while the population rose by about a third; during the 1990s, 54 countries moved to increase the independence of their central bank from political pressures; and from 1951 to 2011, the number of countries giving constitutional courts the power to strike down legislation rose from 38 percent to 83 percent.

[2] A leaked Powerpoint presentation given by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee to newly elected representatives in 2013 advised that each member of Congress spend four hours per day on “call time,” otherwise known as fundraising; a retired member commented that the committee were probably “low-balling the figure so as not to scare the new members too much.”
