The Deconstruction of Democracy

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The following is an excerpt from Chapter 2 of Political Platonism: The Philosophy of Politics, by Alexander Dugin.

The Concept of “Democracy” Is Not Neutral and Not Self-Evident

Democracy today cannot be discussed objectively. It is not a neutral concept: behind “democracy,” as a political regime and corresponding value system, stands the West, Europe and the USA. For them “democracy” is a form of secular cult or a tool of political dogmatics, thus, to be fully accepted into society in the West, it is necessary by default to be “for” democracy. One who calls it into question falls out of the field of political correctness. Marginal opposition is tolerated; but if it is more than marginal, democracy sets its machines of oppression against its alternatives like any regime, any ideology, and any dominant religion. It is not possible to talk about “democracy” impartially. That is why in discussions about democracy we must say at once whether we are completely for or completely against it. I’ll respond with extreme candor: I’m against it, but I’m against it only because the West is for it. I’m not prepared to accept anything thoughtlessly and uncritically on faith, even if everyone believes it, and all the more so if this is accompanied by a concealed (or clear) threat. You suggest that I rely on my own reason, no? I’ll begin with the fact that reason advises me to reject all suggestions [predlozheniy, offers, proposals]. No one can give us freedom. It either is or it is not [we either have it or we don’t]. A slave will convert even freedom into slavery, or at least into swinishness, and a free person will never be a slave even in fetters. From his time enslaved Plato did not become either less Plato or less free, while we still pronounce the name of the tyrant Dionysus with contempt, so which of them is a slave? At any rate, as a popular textbook on technical analysis says, “the majority is always wrong.”

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Only such critical distance in relation to “democracy” provides a field for its conceptual comprehension. We call “democracy” into doubt, into question, and challenge it as a dogma. We thus win the right to distance, but only in that way can we come to a valid and well-founded result. Not to believe in democracy does not mean to be its opponent. It means not to be its captive, not to be under its hypnosis and its suggestion. Starting from such unbelief and doubt, it is entirely possible that we’ll conclude that democracy is something valuable or acceptable, or we might not. We should reason in exactly the same way about all other things. Only that is philosophy. There is no a priorievidence for a philosopher. It is exactly the same for a political philosopher.

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It is worth recalling that democracy is not a self-evident concept. Democracy can be accepted or rejected, established or demolished. There were splendid societies without democracy and detestable ones with democracy, but there was also the opposite. Democracy is a human project, a construction, a plan, not fate. It can be rejected or accepted. That means it needs justification, apologia. If there won’t be apologias for democracy it will lose its meaning. A non-democratic form of rule should not be taken as obviously the worst. The formula “the lesser evil” is a propagandistic ruse. Democracy is not the lesser evil … maybe it isn’t evil at all, or maybe it is evil. Everything demands reconsideration.

Only from these two assumptions can we examine democracy carefully. It isn’t a dogma, its imposition only repels one from it, and it has possible and entirely relevant and effective alternatives.

Elevating it into a dogma and denying its alternatives closes the very possibility of free philosophical discourse.

Demos in “Democracy”: Aristotle’s Etymology

Let us turn to the etymology of the word “demos,” since “democracy” means “the rule of the demos.” This word is most often translated by the word “narod.” However, in Greek there were many synonyms of the word narod: “ethnos,” “laos,” “phule,” etc. “Demos” was one among them and had specific connotations. Initially “demos” described inhabitants, that is, people living in a concrete and entirely definite territory. As cities broadened, these territories began to be carved up inside the city, like today’s regions or old-Russian city-parts [gorodskiye kontsy], so the inhabitants of one or another region were called a “demos.”

In Julius Pokorny’s Indo-European Etymological Dictionary, we see that the Greek “demos” stems from the Indo-European root dā (\*dǝ-) meaning “to divide,” “to separate.” With the formant “mo-” this makes the Greek “demos,” and with the formant “lo-” the German teilin (divide) and Russian delit’.

Thus, in the very etymology of “demos” lies reference to something divided, cut into separate fragments and arranged on a certain territory

Thus, in the very etymology of “demos” lies reference to something divided, cut into separate fragments and arranged on a certain territory. The closest in meaning is the Russian word population [naselenie] but by no means narod, since narodimplies a cultural and linguistic unity, a community of historic being, and the presence of a certain destiny. A population (theoretically) can manage without that. “Population” refers to anyone who has settled or been settled on a given territory, but not one who is connected to that land by roots or the mark of citizenship [i.e. there are three distinct notions here: belonging by roots, belonging by the mere fact of settlement, and belonging through citizenship].

Aristotle, who introduced the concept of “democracy,” regarded it extremely negatively, having in mind precisely this entirely Greek shade of meaning. According to Aristotle, “democracy” is practically identical with “mob rule,” “ochlocracy (rule of the crowd),” since the population of a civic region consists of everyone without distinction. Aristotle opposes “democracy” as the worst form of rule not only compared with monarchy and aristocracy, corresponding to the rule of one or the best, which he regards, by contrast, positively, but also to “politeia” (from the Greek “polis,” “city”). Like “democracy,” “politeia” is the rule of many — not everyone without distinction, but the qualified ones, the rule of conscious citizens, differing from the rest by cultural and genealogical, as well as social and economic, indicators. Politeia is the self-rule of the citizens of the city, relying on traditions and foundations. Democracy is the chaotic agitation of a rebellious mob.

Politeia assumes the presence of cultural unity, a common historico-religious and cultic basis among citizens. Democracy can be established by an arbitrary collection of atomic individuals “distributed” into random sectors.

Aristotle, it is true, also knows other forms of unjust rule besides democracy: tyranny (rule of a usurper) and oligarchy (rule of a closed group of rich and corrupt scoundrels). All negative forms of rule are interconnected: tyrants often depend on precisely “democracy,” just as “democracies” often appeal to oligarchy. Integrity, so important to Aristotle, is on the side of monarchy, aristocracy, and politeia. Division, fragmentation, partition into atoms, is on the side of tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy.

The Metaphysical Foundations of Democracy: The Hypotheses of the

Parmenides

Let us turn to the metaphysical foundations of democracy. For this we will draw on the Platonic dialogue Parmenides. It is customary to distinguish two theses and eight hypotheses in it. The first thesis affirms the One. Four hypotheses follow (true, the Neo-Platonists added a fifth, but right now that’s not crucial). The first thesis about the One and the four hypothesis following from it can be applied to the description of a republic [gosudarstvo, the word used to translate the dialogue by Plato called Republic in English; gosudarstvo can sometimes mean state in the narrow sense or, as in Plato, regime in the broad sense] based on hierarchy, stemming from the idea, the higher principle. The world built on affirmation of the One is built from top to bottom, from the One to the many. The same is true also of the republic, which reproduces the structure of the universe. At the head of such a republic are the monarch and priests, as servants of the One. Such a holy monarchy is simultaneously a model of the cosmos and a basis for the arrangement of the republic [gosudarstvennogo ustroystva]. The thesis about the One, and the hypotheses that follow from it, describe for us the spectrum of political models of traditional society, where the principle of integrity, the authority and sacral nature of power, and divine law predominated.

Sociologist Louis Dumont called such an approach based on the first thesis and four hypotheses “methodological holism,” since the understanding of society is based on conviction in its organic, integral nature.

The second thesis in the Parmenides, and the second four hypotheses, stems from affirmation of the Many, other than the One. Here, at the basis of the perspective on the world, lies not unity, but plurality, atomism, and the play of fragments. Such a perspective leads to an atomistic perspective on the cosmos (the theory of Democritus) and to the justification of political regimes of precisely a “democratic” type, i.e. built not downwards from above, but upwards from below, not on the basis of the transition of the One into the many, but, on the contrary, in the opposite direction. Plato himself regarded the atomism of Leucippus and Democritus as a “heretical” teaching, and according to some sources, even encouraged the burning of their books in his Academy. In the Platonic understanding of the world, the society built on the principle of the Many (non-One) can similarly be regarded as a “political heresy.”

Precisely this second thesis of the Parmenides, and the four hypotheses following from it, interest us now. Taking into account the first four, which relate to the monarchic cosmos, it is customary to call these the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th hypotheses of the Parmenides. If we consider them carefully, we will get four types of democracy, which are easy to discover in theory or practice in our surrounding world.

…

Political Platonism

The Platonic hypotheses help us understand the code of contemporary political philosophy. In the final analysis, all eight hypotheses can be regarded as fully rational models of the world and society and if we remove ourselves from the hypnotic suggestions of progress, we can fully make a conscious choice in favor of any of these hypotheses.

Thus, in the very etymology of “demos” lies reference to something divided, cut into separate fragments and arranged on a certain territory

This means that we can select democracy, and any version of democracy, taking the position of the second thesis, or we can choose non-democracy, taking the position of the first thesis and acknowledge the One. What is interesting is that this choice can be made not only today, for it also stood before the people of Ancient Greece, who chose between Atlantis and Athens (the Platonic dialogue Critias), Athens and Sparta (the Peloponnesian War, praised by Thucydides), and the philosophy of the monarchists Plato and Aristotle and the liberal-atomists Democritus and Epicurus. While man remains man, he carries in himself, even if vaguely and distantly, a capacity for philosophy. That means that he carries in himself freedom of choice. Man can choose democracy, and one of its forms, or he can reject it.

At the same time, if we take the position of Plato and Platonism, then on the basis of the juxtaposition of democracy and the theses of the Parmenides we come to the conclusion that we live in a cosmos that cannot be: in a society built on an absolutely false dogma. Everyone today is regarded by default as a supporter of democracy. It would not be bad for those “by default” persons to become aware of the philosophical principles to which they are automatically (i.e. without being asked) ascribed.

On the other hand, all opponents of democracy are instantly enlisted in the class of persons professing an ideology the very name of which has long since become a curse-word and an insult, and unscrupulous hypnotists use this technique more and more. Instead of this word, grown hateful and made senseless, which I do not even wish to pronounce in this essay, it is better to call us “Platonists.” Yes, we are bearers of political Platonism. We build our conception of the world and society starting from the first thesis of the Parmenides and the first four hypotheses. Others builds theirs starting from the second thesis and second four hypotheses. For heaven’s sake — would it be so bad to know about this allegiance beforehand?

Being philosophers, that is free beings, we can full well say “yes” to the metaphysical status quo, consisting in the dogmatization of the second [thesis] of the Parmenides (i.e. democracy), but we can also say “no.”

I say “no” to methodological individualism and the second thesis of the Platonic Parmenides and thereby clearly determine a place in the ranks, in the army of the supporters of Plato.

Plato burned the books of Democritus. Democrats, and in particular, Soros’s spiritual guru Popper, in his catechism The Open Society and its Enemies, call to burn the books of Plato. Popper says directly: either enemies of the open society, liberal democracy, the second thesis of the Parmenides, or friends. This is a true war of hypotheses, a battle of epistemologies, a struggle of gnoseological paradigms, a fight of ideas.

Thus, for us, Platonists, democracy is a false doctrine; it is built on a world that doesn’t exist and a society that cannot exist.

If that is so, the Platonist comes to a choice: democracy, by its false pretensions, conceals beneath itself something else, but something in any case very bad, unjust, and unhealthy, for instance a secret oligarchy or disguised tyranny, but that is a topic for another essay.