



POLITICAL EXORCISM: DEMOCRACY AND ITS DEMONS

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Hernández



Democracy no longer appears in the 21st-century in the guise of the Greek philosophical discussion about the best form of government. If for the Greeks the very possibility of democracy was the result of a long history of "disenchantment" ([Weber](#), [Gauchet](#)), for postmodern man democracy is burdened by a set of historical presuppositions (religious, moral and ideological) from which he can no longer be unlinked.

However, after the ideological overdose of the century of European civil war and the conflict between secular religions, supposedly settled in three crucial episodes (1918-1945-1989), democracy seems to suffer, in the 21st-century, an "abstinence syndrome" that places it in a state of indefiniteness and again disenchantment with post-totalitarian emptiness. This *horror vacui* largely conditions the current state of affairs.

The emergence of democracy in the course of Western history cannot be separated from what the Austrian Hellenist [Fritz Schachermeyr](#) called the Greek "untying" (*Entbindung*). According to this renowned scholar, Eastern cultures reached a state of *Verhaltenheit*, that is, a relatively static or immobile civilization, defined by a rigid setting within a traditional system of rites or beliefs. They are, in short, examples of "stopped civilizations" (Toynbee). The intimate essence of these civilizations is characterized by Schachermeyr with the word *Bindung*, "ties," where everything is fixed by a marked "consciousness" (a key element, as will be seen later) of the natural and necessary character of this characterization.

According to Schachermeyr, the novelty offered by the Greco-Roman civilization is that it begins to "untie" (*entbinden*) the old "ties." Although Schachermeyr does not explain what this dynamic consists of, it cannot but be the progressive desacralization, demanded by critical reason, which enters history to definitively close the phase of the primitive mentality of humanity ([Lévy-Bruhl](#)), at least for a significant portion of said humanity, which will progressively expand with the successive unfoldment of the Greek spirit. By virtue of this new spirit, a new cultural and anthropological atmosphere is inaugurated, in which democracy comes to be engendered.

This *humus* is marked, fundamentally, by the following elements: The autonomy of the individual, the self-government of the city, and philosophy. This substrate projects a mentality sharply tending towards individualism and relativism. As [Jean Gebser explains](#), we move from the impersonality of the *aperspective* world to an awareness of the individual self that defines the *perspectival* world. Now, as

this philosopher of the transformations of consciousness also emphasized, in the progressive evolution of the successive states of consciousness of humanity, the definitive burial of previous states does not take place, but rather their distorted transformation in the current aspect of the human. In other words, the primitive mentality of the tribe (the archaic and original structure) continues to operate in the rational state of individualized humanity. And this is of decisive relevance for understanding the evolution of democracy.

Ever since the Hellenic civilization was imposed, there has been a directionality in history much more marked than before. The principle of *Entbindung* (or, breaking of ties) resurfaces, renewed and reinforced; and, each time, by way of a setback, there is a return to the state of *Bindung*, or ties. It is not strictly a linear version of time, but of cycles which proceed in a spiral ([Vico](#)), with advances and retreats. In any case, in this inherent tendency towards desacralization, from the sacred kingdom of the gods, we pass to the government of heroes, to reach the self-government of men.

The Hellenic phenomenon thus represents an essential fracture in history. Jaspers spoke of the so-called "time-axis" to refer to the period from 600 to 200 BC, in which a series of peoples achieved a new consciousness of spiritual emancipation. However, it was in Greece, to a much greater degree, that the decisive element appears: The self-conscious individual, who creates an autonomous society, governed by rules subject to change. Hence, without direct or indirect Greek influence, outcomes as characteristic of the rational spirit as democracy are not found outside Greece.

What must be understood is that the true breaking point does not occur between democracy and other forms of government, but between a (magical-mythical) mentality closed to the very possibility of politics and a mentality that frees that space to conquer it - for politics. If the political (as essence) is not born from the consequence of that hiatus, it can at least be said that the consciousness of the political is born there. The free interrogation about society and its rules that political thought supposes is impossible in societies founded on myth and rite ([Philippe Nemo](#)). In fact, we do not find in them political theories but "myths of sovereignty."

[René Girard's](#) mimetic theory also allows us to understand that this absence of the political in the magical-mythical universe is not an accidental fact but something deeply embedded in the way of life associated with the structure of "violence and the sacred." The mythical order is a global order, indistinctly cosmic and social, and in it the political does not emerge as an autonomous space but as a subsidiary of the all-encompassing sacred universe.

However, in the field of human behavior and politics, logos interferes from a certain moment, with the spontaneous forces of life, to create new forms, new doctrines and new styles of thought or behavior, new "ties," as it were, replacing those already destroyed by its impact. In other words, the *aperspective* continues to subtly infiltrate the new *perspectival* mentality. The "new ties" cannot really resurrect the old structures of the magical mentality, although they do reflect the nostalgia for unity and order lost as a consequence of the crisis produced by the disorientation and confusion of the relativistic disorder generated by critical reason.

From this point of view, movements such as the Socratic or Platonic reaction are manifestations of this will to reinvent the traditional order with rational schemes. Plato's political pharmacology collects the Egyptian medicinal art ([Jan Assmann](#)), and his claims point to a reactionary nostalgia for sacred unity, although with a foundation consistent with the desacralizing unleashing: Political philosophy, from then on, will be a rational and not mythical medicine. Plato is the first anti-democratic philosopher to propose an ideal rational republic. In it the king is no longer a god but a philosopher. The new "rational tie" thus slows down the tendency of democracy towards dissolution.

The thesis that I here defend is that democracy continues to live today under the influence of a new "tie" created from the ideological sedimentation of some of its own presuppositions, producing a new form of *Verhaltenheit*, which requires a model of rigid framework, which democratic principles (converted into sacred dogmas) must impose. Unlike reactionaries like Plato (or Rousseau), the new tie of our times is not anti-progressive, nor does it pretend to chain itself to a traditional community lost in the original past. On the contrary, its chains point towards a city in the clouds, the only paradise in which democratic man aspires to establish his definitive residence.

Our democracies, in effect, seek to surpass themselves in a purely self-referential framework. Hence, the everlasting call to "deepen" democracy. Every democracy always seems little democracy to the recalcitrant democrat. You can never go any further than democracy. It is the *Plus Ultra* of democratic religion. The problems are solved with more democracy and they are because of the fact that there is not enough democracy. It seems that man is always disappointed when looking in the mirror of the gods.

Today, we live under the splint of a new ideological-religious "tie" that takes different forms, all of which coincide in their essential and common tendency to subjection and mooring: The tyranny of consensus, the religion of human rights, the moralism of the [Empire of the Good](#), the imposition of technocratic

knowledge, political correctness, the Manichean demonization of the political adversary, the End of History. After all, what the Greeks called democracy presupposed accepting the desacralizing heritage of a critical skepticism that freed the political space from the control of the gods.

Today, other gods have appropriated the agora. [Christopher Dawson](#) described in his posthumous book (*The Gods of Revolution*) the process of the expulsion of Christianity by the culture generated by Christianity, and its replacement by a humanistic and rationalistic idolatry. "The archaic would always be here, haunting us. Behind the reign of the individual, behind secularism, the pre-eminence of the economy, democracy, the spirit of free examination, the monsters would only be waiting for the opportunity to dominate men again and to be worshiped by them" (Pierre Pachet, "[D'un archaïsme tout à fait contemporain](#)", *Les cahiers de l'Est*, 1, 1991).

Vilfredo Pareto's [sociology](#), with its well-known theory of residues and derivations, did not stop insisting on the necessary analysis of that archaic background of the human psyche, always ready to continue connecting with an irrational universe of gods and myths. For Pareto, this imaginary space operated in modernity with presumably rational entities that in practice violated the most elementary rules of logic, behaving like the deities fighting for or against the Greeks in the Iliad. Among these entities (in addition to abstract ideas, such as, freedom or equality) was also democracy, alienated in its theoretical structure by the presence of a mythological drive born in democracy's own bosom and thus difficult to eradicate.

On the other hand, part of the problem evidently lies in knowing whether people can live for a long time in what [Claude Lefort called](#) "democratic indeterminacy," resulting from the new scenario established by the reality of the "place empty of power" (*lieu vide du pouvoir*) – that is, if a political community can subsist without projecting outside of this reality, deifying it as a sacred incarnation of itself in the form of unitary sovereignty – or, without exhibiting and conjuring up a phantasmagoric incarnation of the other or of evil in the form of a scapegoat ([Poliakov's](#) diabolical causality).

The political carries, as a founding genetic stain, the weight of this beneficent/malefic ambivalence that reappears under different guises in the course of the "rational" history of humanity (thus, for example, with sacred monarchy in feudal society). The progress of politics (and, particularly, of democracy) is based on the substitution of competition for war; or, if you prefer, sacrifice for envy. "Bullets or ballots" the Americans used to say. Bertrand Russell affirmed with force that "envy is the basis of democracy." And he added: "The democratic movement in the Greek states must have been inspired almost entirely

by this passion. And the same can be said of modern democracy." In any case, as with the pharmacy, everything is a question of dosage; and politics disappears when the unit or the division becomes absolute.

We no longer live "in" democracy but "under" *democratism* ([Freund](#)), a "political myth" (in the sense of [Raoul Girardet](#)), born of moral and religious dogmas hardly compatible with the onto-theopolitical emptiness operated by the Greek revolution. The place empty of power has been occupied by a new religion. Is democratism the hidden enemy of democracy?

Understanding democratism requires summarizing the history of democracy in its historical and sociological aspects. Thus, it is the history of democratization, or democratic imperialism, that is, the extension of the democratic-egalitarian ethos outside its natural political space. By going out of its habitat, like any empire, democracy weakens in its own terrain. By assuming a social profile ([Tocqueville's](#) democratic condition), moral or religious, democracy is depoliticized. On the other hand, the state political form, in turn expansive by definition as a consequence of war ([Jouvenel's](#) law of political concurrence), ended up merging with democracy in an apparently predictable embrace. In effect, the state tends to dissolve hierarchies and to standardize from above by a power apparatus that ends up escaping the control of the monarchs.

The relationship of the state with the political is equivocal. In its attempt to neutralize politics, the state ends up politicizing everything (totalitarianism). This is undoubtedly one of the causes of democratic imperialism or democratism. The modern state promotes, after 1789, the democratic politicization of all subpolitical and prepolitical spaces. By politicizing life that is not strictly political, the state depoliticizes directly political life. Hence, the current dissolution of the boundaries between the public and the private. By neutralizing conflicts, the state deactivates political initiatives and the vigor of civic virtues in public life, devitalizing democratic life in its popular or community aspect.

By conquering the moral mantle of religious legitimacy, democracy becomes hyper-legitimate and naturally tends towards Manichaeism, thus fueling its own mythology of sovereign unity ([Rousseau's](#) general will). [J.L. Talmon](#) had demonstrated the constitutive duality of the modern democratic concept in his penetrating study of the origins of totalitarian democracy. In this way, mythological democracy threatens with its own weapons the axiological pluralism that presumably grounds it.

The democratic historical fruit thus contaminates the root of the democratic philosophical tree. On the

other hand, the ideological sanctification that accompanies democratism erodes the agonistic-conflictive dimension of political democracy. If democracy does not guarantee peaceful concurrence ([Aron](#)) within it, political concurrence will occur outside of democracy. In order to save the purity of ideological orthodoxy - through recourse to Manichaeism that transforms the political adversary into absolute evil - democracy abdicates its popular legitimacy to expel the people into outer darkness.

Also, at this point, democracy chooses to "tie itself" to its ideological descendants, forgetting that it was born because of an "untying" from its magical ancestors. There is in ideology a dark form of regression to the necromancer's sleight of hand. Like the sorcerer, the ideologue aspires to ontologically extirpate evil. Hence his obsession with closing the era of politics in the name of secular messianism. Unlike the hygienic puritanism of the ideological discourse, political realism understands that it is always necessary to coexist and (if necessary) to make a pact with evil in the search for a compromise that guarantees external security and internal harmony (the purpose of politics as Julien Freund recalled).

Politics, the art of the possible to avoid the worst, ends up yielding today to the dreamlike universe of idealistic utopias that populate ideological discourses. And the withdrawal from politics is also the withdrawal of democracy as a form of government.

To the depoliticizing panorama that emerged as a consequence of the hegemony of ideological discourse (certainly presented in its postmodern version of "weak thinking") is added the concomitant factor of globalization. The unification of the world is a historical fact in principle alien to democracy as such, but it has not hesitated to accept it, first as a "fellow-traveler" and later as an inseparable friend (democracy allied to the universalism of human rights). Politics is said to make strange bedfellows; but the assertion is valid as a description of the unspeakably opportunistic wiles of professional politicians, though not at all applicable to theoretical principles that are difficult to reconcile.

As the unsuspecting Emmanuel Todd recently put it with a provocative aphorism of his own making, "if a lot of xenophobia destroys democracy, a little xenophobia can bring it back." In the idea of democracy, the historian and demographer added, there is always an element of "founding xenophobia." By forgetting that man is a "dependent rational animal" ([Alasdair MacIntyre](#)), the atomistic angelism of postmodern mysticism destroys the roots ([Simone Weil](#)) that define the human condition.

In this way, by dissolving the ties of belonging to national political communities, the instances of collective action associated with the democratic ethos are weakened, thus facilitating the task of the

new global power occupied by the globalist elites that lead supranational instances. By submitting to these vagrant elites, the national political class discredits the popular legitimacy on which the democratic mandate of political representation continues to be based. The foreign friends of democracy prostitute democracy. Maybe democracy should look for new friends.

The last aspect of democratism, as the enemy of democracy, can be found in the cultural field. Here, too, a new idol has been erected, although in reality it may be an unwanted child of Christianity, as Chesterton [suggested](#). Political correctness has, despite its deceptive appearance, very little of politics. However, the consequences for political democracy are very dire. In its ideological defense of victims, political correctness promotes the censorship and demonization of the adversary. In this way, it sponsors denunciation, ideological exile, and silences any form of dissent through the imposition of a taboo strictly controlled by the new well-thought-out courts of the "Empire of the Good" ([Philippe Muray](#)). Automatically, the irreverence that nurtures the democratic moral disposition (the *anaideia* of the cynics) ends up being ruined in front of the new censors of soft totalitarianism.

Soft McCarthyism does not, for the moment, build new concentration camps for dissidents, but it justifies civil death and thought police, by way of the educational Big Mother and the multicultural Big Other. Victimist ideologies (third wave feminism, anti-racism, animalism, etc.) represent the vanguard of this new liberticidal witch-hunt led by the latest version of the "Revolution of the Saints" ([Michael Walzer](#)). The porno-calvinist ideocracy seems, in the long run, little compatible with political democracy.

In sum, the monism of postmodern democratic ideology seems difficult to reconcile with the pluralism inherent in democracy as a form of government. The disappearance of political otherness as a consequence of the fall of communism has increased the polarization of this opposition. It is still striking that liberal democracy adopts the eschatological dress of its main enemy up till then (Marxism) and dresses in the messianic cloak of the end of History (Fukuyama). The mystique of democratism, however, is gradually extinguished by the absence of its enemies.

Hence the efforts of neo-puritan ideologues to imagine spectral representations of evil encoding and recoding reality through mass media. Democratic theology voluntarily adopts the Manichaeism of Islamist fundamentalism (Axes of Good and Evil). Its deleterious effects are manifested in the internal dynamics of democracy as a pluralistic form of government. As Chantal Mouffe has [written](#), "agonistic" democracy (democracy as pacification of political conflict) has been replaced by democracy of

consensus and extreme antagonism (democracy as moral and religious ideology).

Today neither bullets nor ballots serve to revive dying democracy. By moralizing itself, democracy is depoliticized. The exacerbation of this conflict can end democracy, and can eliminate it also. Montesquieu seems to have seen it clearly: "Beware of a city where the noise of any conflict is not heard because tyranny will not be far behind." Tocqueville's prophecies pointed in the same direction. The two bodies of the king ([Kantorowicz](#)) are expressed today as two bodies of democracy: The mystical body (democratic ideology) and the physical body (political democracy). Political democracy also seems to die by the same cry as monarchs: Democracy is dead! Long live democracy!

The place is not empty of power today. In place of the totalitarian Egocrat, we have the democratic ideocrat-technocrat. The two entrances to the democratic castle seem impenetrable to criticism. The ideocrat is also a holy monarch. To this is added the validity (increasingly threatened by its frank lack of realism) of statism, that is, of depoliticizing politicization. The political neutralization caused by the state necessarily generates a form of *impolitical* democracy.

Transformed into pure and simple administration from the cradle to the grave, the antipolitical democratic-state holds presumed citizens in the position of simple subjects (when not suspects), reduced by multiple mechanisms (the control of education, culture, taxation) to an infantilism incompatible with the presumed coming of age of democratic life and the civic virtues necessary to nurture it. Thinkers like [Sloterdijk](#), with his proposal for voluntary taxation as a banner of civic responsibility, have drawn attention to this paradox.

On the other hand, the so-called "democratization" (or Tocquevillian democratic condition) has accelerated the process of standardization and leveling in the spiritual field, impoverishing the pluralism that political democracy feeds on. In this sociological undifferentiation (driven by technology, mainstream culture, spiritual Americanization and globalism) ideocracy also finds its anthropological basis.

To this must be added the growing distance between globalized political elites and the people they claim to represent democratically. It is known that democracy does not escape the iron law of the oligarchy ([Michels](#)) but its application in the democratic context (illusion of identity between representatives and the represented) implies a much higher cost for its legitimacy than in the case of other forms of government. "Universal suffrage does not pretend that the interests of the majority

triumph, but rather that the majority believe it," wrote the Colombian, [Nicolas Gómez Dávila](#).

The problem today is that most have stopped believing it. And the masks also fall on the other side of the costume ball. The political elite no longer hide their contempt for the people, their traditions and identity, which are hardly comparable with the emancipatory rhythm of the alleged progress that they intend to promote. That the popular acquires a pejorative meaning (populism) in a democratic context is an unequivocal indication of the identity crisis of the democracies of the 21st-century. Populism is today, above all, a symptom of the degenerative disease of undemocratic democracy. By clinging to ideological legitimacy, democracy disregards its popular legitimacy.

In short, today the rebellion of the masses ([Ortega y Gasset](#)) and the rebellion of the elites ([Lasch](#)) converge. But 1945 and 1989 represent two fateful dates for the ideological substratum of "political illusion" ([Ellul](#)). With them "religious democracy" has lost its flock even though it retains its clergy. Other ideologies of substitution (feminism, environmentalism, multiculturalism, animalism, transhumanism) aspire to fill this void and articulate their proposals with the same totalitarian grammar of the maternal state. The democracy that has come to us has already traveled through religious space, depoliticizing itself along the way - but today it is a dead faith. By becoming the demiurge of the life of the people, it has devitalized their natural and community sources.

Real suicide (the leading cause of unnatural death in the West) and demographic suicide represent the two faces of silenced death in the democratic paradise. The parallels with the world of real socialism begin to be disturbing and remind us of certain authors who have already proclaimed that socialism failed in the East because it triumphed in the West ([Augusto Del Noce](#)). However, the dreams of reason produce monsters; and socialism only wins in the tricky world built by the fallacies that inhabit the nirvana of postmodern ideologues. There is no more opium from the intellectuals (Aron), but the ambitions of the new well-thought-out clerics continue to nurture democratic hyper-legitimacy.

Plato's observation is still valid: Democracy is an irresistible force of change that tends to instability. His *Eros* leads to his *Thanatos*. Democracy can survive as long as the agony of the conflict continues - but its overcoming in consensus-mode represents its death certificate. The perpetual peace promised by ideologies is disguised in the messianic garb of final reconciliation. Although our liberal democracies may boast, in the face of bloodthirsty totalitarianisms, that they have not fulfilled these promises in the death camps, they cannot deny that their aspirations lead politics directly to the graveyard.

Democratic disease requires, in the pharmacological vision linked to politics as medicinal knowledge, a remedy. Faced with the civilizing crisis caused by the utopian and futuristic politics of ideologies, there is only room for the skeptical response of political realism. It is what the Italian sociologist Carlo Gambescia calls "[sad liberalism](#)."

Political democracy can only survive by returning to its first desecration root that today demands the proclamation of ideological atheism. A deeply religious spirit like Simone Weil's had [no qualms](#) about speaking of "purifying atheism." Oakeshott also [contrasted](#) the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism. To regain effective political will, it is necessary to promote a re-secularization of European public life.

[Pierre Bayle](#) claimed that demons prefer idolatry to atheism. "If it is merely a question of organizing an earthly paradise, there are plenty of priests. The devil is enough," wrote Gómez Dávila. "[Demons squat on our adaodoned altars](#)," said [Ernst Jünger](#). Democratic soteriology has ended up directing politics from the world of men to the heaven of the gods. This Promethean impulse of the "Black Mass" ([John Gray](#)), a political demonology, supported by the legitimizing mantle of a mystical discourse ([Saint-Simon](#)'s "new Christianity", [Pierre Lerroux's](#) "religious democracy"), nests in the "myth of the new man" studied by [Dalmacio Negro](#).

Cultivated by philosophical modernity and disputed in a regime of mimetic rivalry (Girard) by modern ideologies that promote collective intramundane self-salvation, this myth removes democracy from the land that men tread on, to elevate them to the false condition of angels. "*Qui fait l'ange fait la bête*," ("He who becomes an angel becomes a beast"), Pascal said. Democratic theology is an anthropotheism that bestializes man in the name of his divinization.

The remnants of secularist criticism (actually a confused symbiosis of moralism and materialism) preach the pressing need for a definitive expulsion of the merchants who pollute the public space. Necessary but not a sufficient measure. The reconquest of the agora requires above all the recovery of the public virtue of irreverence in the face of "democratic fundamentalism" ([Gustavo Bueno](#)).

Only the moral and intellectual force of sacrilegious skepticism will work the necessary miracle of the banishment of "the faith of demons" (Hadjad). Unable to "tie" to heaven by way of the desacralization generated by "Christian subversion" (Ellul), the spiritual forces of demons are chained to "principalities and powers" (Ephesians 6:12). In this sense, the fight against the political religions of the princes of this

world is inevitable. Democracy against demonocracy. There is more than a play on words in this opposition. Perhaps it contains the dramatic historical dilemma that is presented to the future of Western political societies.

There is no other medicine that cures the sick: Only wicked exorcists will save democracy from itself.

*Domingo González Hernández holds a PhD in political philosophy from the Complutense University of Madrid. He is a professor at the University of Murcia. His recent book is **René Girard, maestro cristiano de la sospecha** (René Girard, Christian Teacher of Suspicion) He is also the Director of the podcast "La Caverna de Platón" for the newspaper La Razón. He has explored the political possibilities of Girardian mimetic theory in more than twenty studies and academic papers. His latest publication is "La monarquía sagrada y el origen de lo político: una hipótesis farmacológica" ("Sacred monarchy and the origin of politics: a pharmacological hypothesis"), Xiphias Gladius, 2020.*

*The **image** shows **The Parthenon**, a watercolor by Frederic Edwin Church, painted 1871.*

Translated from the Spanish by N. Dass

