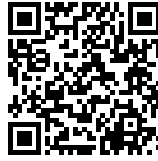




WHAT IS POLITICAL REALISM?

Posted on March 1, 2020 by Arnaud Imatz



Well sourced and documented, but at the same time stripped of all concessions, and freed from all conventionalism, this book boldly departs from the beaten track of the history of political ideas. Its author, [Dalmacio Negro Pavón](#), a renowned political scientist in the Hispanic world, is among those who best embodies the European academic tradition – that of an era when political correctness had not yet taken its toll, and when the majority of academics adhered with conviction – and not by opportunism as happens so often today – to the scientific values of rigor, probity and integrity.

What does this tell us? Let us demonstrate by drawing, largely, upon his analyses, his words, and his formulations.

Historically, the world has had no other form of government than that of the few (the ruling minority); and any government needs public support. There is no political community without hierarchy; no hierarchy without organization, no social organization which cannot materialize without the leadership of a small number. This is called the "[iron law of oligarchy](#)."



Behind all known forms of government (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy - according to the classic classification; democracy and dictatorship - according to modern classification), there is only one minority which dominates the immense majority. The multiple possible variants of government depend on the type of makeover of this minority, and the limits and controls to which this minority submits in the exercise of power.

Oligarchic positions are never disputed by the masses; rather, it is the different factions of the political class which dispute them. The governed do not intervene in this permanent dispute, except as a breeding ground for new contenders for power, as a breeding ground for new elites. The governed are spectators; sometimes animators; rarely referees.

When an oligarchy is discredited, it is invariably replaced by another in search of prestige, that is to say, of exercising legitimacy, ready, if necessary, to use demagoguery. Popular sovereignty is a myth which allows the oligarchs all the abuses and all the scams imaginable. The Utopian who dreams that it is possible to eliminate selfishness in politics and to base a political system on morality alone does not hit the target, any more than the realist who believes that altruism is an illusion and that all political action

is based on selfishness.

Apart from the eternally naïve, political consensus (a collective expression of the loyalty of the political class towards itself) only deceives those who want to deceive themselves, for personal convenience, or to obtain some favors. Political problems cannot be resolved definitively. In politics there is only room for compromise.

What about democracy in Europe? It is less a religion than a superstition, a substitute, a substitute or an appearance of faith, which was born from the religions of politics. It is "an organized hypocrisy," said Schumpeter; it is reduced to the opportunity that the partitocratic oligarchies offer the governed to periodically decide on an option, generally limited, after having carried out a large operation of information or marketing to win public opinion.

That said, and despite everything, it seems that a large part of the people is more and more aware of the existence of the iron law of the oligarchy. On the other hand, and more and more fearful, the oligarchy tightens to the maximum the screws which subject the demos to the singular supermarket that is the State of the political parties. We know the reactions of hostility, contempt and fear that populist movements and popular rebellions like the "[Yellow Vests](#)" (in France) arouse in almost the entire European establishment.

A revolution needs leaders, but statism has infantilized the conscience of Europeans. It has undergone such a contagion that the emergence of real leaders has become almost impossible, and that when it occurs, mistrust prevents people from following them. It is therefore better, once you reach this stage, to trust chance, boredom or humor, all major historical forces, to which we do not pay enough attention because they are hidden behind the screen of progressive enthusiasm.

The analyses, questions and harsh remarks, often even very corrosive, of Negro Pavón are unlikely to make him friends among the small number of those in power, or among their often- servile supporters of the political, economic and media-cultural world. But he does not care. Former professor of the history of political ideas at the [Complutense University](#) of Madrid, currently professor emeritus of political science at the [University San Pablo de Madrid](#), member of the [Royal Academy of Moral Sciences and Politics](#), the [author of over twenty books](#) and several hundred articles, he has nothing left to prove.

A fine connoisseur of classical and modern European political thought, an excellent polyglot, an inveterate reader of all the great European and American authors, Pavón invites us on a remarkable journey through the history of Western politics while at the same time giving us a lucid and penetrating diagnosis of the reality of Europe and the West today.

Pavón is openly attached to the School of Political Realism. It is therefore not useless, before ceding to him the pen, to recall in broad outline why this School of thought is so often the object of misunderstandings, procrastination and caricatures. What do we mean by political realism, or by the [tradition in politics of Machiavellianism](#), which yet does not become Machiavellian?

Before answering, we must mention the usual depreciative arguments of his opponents. Realism would be, according to them, the cult of the epoch, a Manichean, pragmatic, opportunistic, fatalistic and desperate ideology, an ideology of dominants, cantors of conformism, which makes the moment an end in itself, which considers the present to be unsurpassable, which refuses to think about change and the future.

But this indictment, now so widespread, is after all just one more illustration of the misdeeds of ideological fog. It is reminiscent of the enlightened (or benighted) Anti-Machiavelli despot, Frederick II, who wrote in order to seduce and abuse the Europe of philosophers. As the ad to the fiction films of my youth said: "any resemblance to real situations existing or having existed is only a coincidence." As we will see, political realism is, on the contrary, a method of analysis and of complete, intense and radical criticism of all constituted power.

Strictly speaking, political realism is neither a homogeneous school nor a unitary intellectual family. It is only a *habitus*, a disposition of mind, a point of view of study or research which seeks to clarify the rules that policy follows. It is not the defense of the status quo, the defense of the established order, or the doctrine which justifies the position of men in power, as its adversaries claim falsely.

Political realism starts from the facts, but it does not go before them. It is not disinterested in the final ends and is distinguished in this from the cynical type of pseudo-realism which reduces politics to the will to power, to the reign and to the worship of force in its purest form. The authentic political realist is a man with principles, morals, and a deep awareness of the duties and responsibilities of political action. Prudence, wisdom, balance, a sense of responsibility and firmness of character are the keys to his thinking.

The precursors of this realistic school of thought are, for example: [Thucydides](#), [Aristotle](#), [Ibn Khaldoun](#), [Machiavelli](#), [Gabriel Naudé](#), [Hobbes](#), [Tocqueville](#), and many others.

Among the contemporaries and the moderns we may cite: [Moisey Ostrogorski](#), [Vilfredo Pareto](#), [Robert Michels](#), [Gaetano Mosca](#), [Carl Schmitt](#), [Max Weber](#), [Simone Weil](#), [Raymond Aron](#), [Gaston Bouthoul](#), [James Burnham](#), [Benedetto Croce](#), [Maurice Duverger](#), [Gonzalo Fernández de la Mora](#), [Julien Freund](#), [Bertrand de Jouvenel](#), [Halford Mackinder](#), [Harold Laski](#), [Gianfranco Miglio](#), [Jules Monnerot](#), [Michael Oakeshott](#), [Giovanni Sartori](#), [Eric Voegelin](#), [Jerónimo Molina Cano](#), [Alessandro Campi](#), and many others, with often very different convictions (conservatives, liberals, socialists, etc.).

The authentic realist affirms that the finality proper to politics is the common good. But he recognizes the vital necessity of non-political ends (happiness and justice). According to him, politics is at the service of man.

The mission of politics is not to change man or make him better (which is the path of totalitarianism), but to organize the conditions of human coexistence, to shape the community, to ensure internal harmony and external security. That is why, in his view, conflicts must be channeled, regulated, institutionalized and, as far as possible, resolved without violence.

Dalmacio Negro Pavón rigorously addresses each of the ideas of political realism. The two main ones are found in the titles of the first two essays of his book, *The Iron Law of the Oligarchy*, namely, "Law Immanent in Politics," and "Demystifying Democracy."

He then completes these two essays with a shorter essay, "On the Dominant Political Theology," which deals with the theological-political question; or, if one prefers – on the existential and spiritual causes of the current situation, especially on the importance of the influence of theological heresies on modern political thought and attitudes.

Thus, we may classify all of the ideas in his book in the following order:

First idea: The inevitability of oligarchy, and the governing–governed division. This is the famous law of bronze, the bronze or iron of oligarchy, formulated by [Robert Michels](#). Depending on the regimes and the societies, as we have said, the circulation of elites may be more or less large, but in the last resort, it

is always the small number, the minority that rules.

Second idea: Ideal democracy is unattainable and democratic symbols are fictions. The complexity of the problems, and above all the size of societies, constitute as many obstacles to self-government. In general, politicians know this, but everyone also knows the importance of speech-magic.

On the other hand, real democracies always tend to become oligarchies. The more democracy gets organized, the more it tends to decline. The more it is organized, the more the possibilities of coercion and manipulation of the masses increase. "Democracy, government of the people, by the people and for the people," according to Lincoln's famous phrase, is Utopian or religious. Democracy is a method. It cannot be an end, an absolute ideal, a moral imperative. Democratic ideology, democratic faith, is rhetoric. It only serves to evade responsibility and crush opposition in the name of the people.

Third idea: Politics cannot avoid a vision of man. The political realist may think that man is historic, or that there is a human nature. But in both cases, he considers that human impulses largely explain the unstable nature of political institutions and the conflictual nature of politics.

Fourth idea: Recognition of the inherently conflicting nature of politics. Life will always be the theater of conflicts and differences. Politics, in the traditional sense, is the great "neutralizer" of conflicts. This is why systematic and blind resistance to any form of power (the belief that "power is evil") is an excellent method to accelerate the corruption of power and lead to its substitution by other forms of power, which are often much more problematic and more despotic.

Just because a people lose the strength or the will to survive or to assert themselves in the political sphere – does not mean that politics will disappear from the world. History is not tender – Woe to the strong who become weak!

Fifth idea: Skepticism about forms of government. It is impossible to scientifically make a categorical judgment on the suitability of any of the regimes in place. There is no optimal or perfect regime. Each political regime is a contingent and unique solution, a transitory response to the eternal problem of politics. All regimes are also subject to wear and tear and corruption.

Sixth idea: The rejection of all mono-causal interpretation of politics as biased and arbitrary. Mono-

causal explanations "in the last instance" by economics, by politics, by culture, by morals, etc. are reductionist and make no sense.

The study of political parties and unions, carried out by Robert Michels at the beginning of the 20th-century, reveals particularly well the fundamental characteristic of societies: The tendency to oligarchy. A political party is no more and no less than a group of people who unite to conquer and retain power. Everything else (even the ideology) is secondary.

The parties are born as elitist groups and become organizations of notables; then, with universal suffrage, they are most often transformed into mass parties. But when they organize themselves strongly, they always obey the iron law of the oligarchy. The analysis of "mass parties" has laid bare some general principles which can be stated as follows.

- The bulk of the population is struck with a kind of political incapacity. When they lose their leaders, they withdraw and abandon the political field.
- Oligarchy is a social necessity. The principle of organization is an absolutely essential condition for political struggle.
- It is the minorities and not the masses who vie for power. The leaders of all the camps present themselves as the spokespersons of the people – but, in reality, it is always the struggle between the old minority, which defends its hegemony, and the new ambitious minority which intends to conquer power.
- Leadership is tendentially autocratic. Leaders do not just want to last, they always want more power. The alienation of the masses, the professionalization, the intellectual and cultural level of the leaders, the tendency to seek renewal by cooption, even nepotism, are powerful elements which contribute to the isolation of the leaders. Base rebellions have very little chance of success.
- The party is an instrument of domination. Contrary to what they claim, the parties are organizations that want elected officials to dominate voters and are agents of dominating constituents.
- The oligarchic tendency is consubstantial with the parties. Only a minority participate in party decisions, and often this minority is ridiculously small.

Conclusion: Real democracy is an oligarchy elected by the people. It excludes the use of physical violence but not moral violence (unfair, fraudulent or restricted competition). Two conditions may allow the reform in depth of current political democracy for the benefit of the people.

First, the represented should be able to regain the freedom to directly control the representatives or elected officials which ability has been improperly taken away from them. This would require the establishment of a majority electoral system with an imperative mandate. Representatives would thus be obliged to respect the imperative mandate of their respective voters.

Finally, for the people to be able, if not to direct and govern, then at least to integrate and participate durably in political life, the principle of direct democracy should be widely accepted, via the Popular Initiative Referendum (PIR), or the Citizen Initiated Referendum(CIR).

However, one can be a skeptic or a lucid pessimist but refuse to despair. We cannot eliminate oligarchies. So be it! But, as Dalmacio Negro Pavón tells us, there are political regimes that are more or less capable of mitigating and controlling their effects.

The crux of the matter is to prevent those in power from being mere conveyors of the interests, desires and feelings of the political, social, economic and cultural oligarchy. Men always fear the power to which they are subjected. But the power which makes them submit also fears the community over which it reigns. And there is an essential condition for political democracy to be possible and for its corruption to become much more difficult, if not impossible, as Dalmacio Negro Pavón further emphasizes.

Attitudes towards government must always be wary, even when it comes to friends or people for whom we voted. Bertrand de Jouvenel rightly said in this connection: "the government of friends is the barbaric way of governing."

This extract constitutes the "Introduction" by Arnaud Imatz to [*La loi de fer de l'oligarchie. Pourquoi le gouvernement du peuple, par le peuple, pour le peuple est un leurre*](#) (*The Iron Law of Oligarchy. Why Government of the People, by the People, for the People is a Decoy*), by Dalmacio Negro Pavón (2019).

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Translated from the French by N. Dass.

The image shows, "The Contenance of Scipio," by Nicolas Poussin, painted in 1640.

