

Disenfranchised People, enfranchised Elites

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In 1956, C.W. Mills suggested that the fate of *ordinary* citizens was in the hands of a triumvirat of elites which, because of shared interests and aligned objectives, were working together as one to rule the masses (Mills, 1956). Those elites, namely the military, political and corporate would deprive ordinary citizens from *substantial* exercise of power and reduce power delegation, the cornerstone of indirect (liberal) democracy, to a *formal* cosmetic arrangement.

The current context of distrust and seemingly widening divide between elites and the broader citizenry makes such an argument hard to dismiss. Yet the complexities of today's world require a form of indirect democracy, which only thrives if the constituents trust their representatives or, in a more general way, if the masses trust the elites. Breaking this link is putting democracy at risk. Failing to restore it is sentencing it to a messy death.

A tale of lost credibility and failed institutions

Examples of alleged collusion between political and corporate interests abound. The Petrobras corruption scandal in Brazil and the 'establishment stigma' from which Hillary Clinton suffers are two cases in point. The first illustrates how occasional misdeeds on the part of an intertwined political and corporate elite undermines the trust that their constituents place in them and the institutions they represent; the second shows that *Elite for the people* has become an oxymoron.

To be sure, we know since K. Marx that the Elite's action has always been guided, at least partially, by its desire to retain power; be it, if necessary, by manipulating the information available to the constituency (Hochschild, 2010). There seemed to be no alternative to this status quo until Democracy progressively spread in the nineteenth century, after the Elite of Western Powers **extended the franchise for fear of Revolution**. This decision acted as a commitment to abide by principles it would not have adopted otherwise, e.g. extensive redistribution programs. For example, the Gini coefficient for income inequality in England and Wales had risen from 0.400 in 1823 to 0.627 in 1871, but fell to 0.443 in 1901 (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000).

Nowadays, the Elite seems to have found new ways to twist the rules of the game in its favour again; aided in that by at least two institutional failures of democratic institutions. The first one is the astonishing increase in the monetization of political campaigning and working of democratic institutions. Money has entered the corridors of Houses and landed on the floors of their plenary sessions; it has thereby biased policies in favour of the wealthiest, corrupting the *raison d'être* of democracy, the search of the Common Good.

The second is a collective failure to take actions to prevent these developments, a symptom of the lack of citizen engagement in public/political debate. To survive, Democracies need to keep their Elite in check. This requires citizen vigilance and a regular renewal of the social contract.

These developments are particularly worrying as they endanger the foundations of indirect liberal democracies. Yet, such form of political organisation has been one of the most successful models of post-WWII History. It allowed for the free expression and discussion of ideas, setting in motion a powerful dynamic of intellectual and technological (r)evolution; it worked as a safeguard of minority interests; and, in most parts of the world, it bolstered peaceful co-existence of nations. No other political system can claim to have struck the same delicate balance.

For all these reasons, liberal democracy and its institutions must be preserved. But if those who ought to [make Democracy work](#), as U.S. Justice Stephen Breyer puts it, constantly thwart citizens' *will*, their claim to be "on the people's side" will lose all credibility and one will soon come to question their legitimacy.

Indispensable Elite

But if the Elite is the problem, why did we have it in the first place? The primary function of the (political) Elite is to be the steward of the social contract (Rousseau, 1762); that by the rules of which all members of the constituency abide. By delegating their power, citizens have entrusted it with the responsibility to prevent its violation. Seen from this perspective, its mandate is very clear: it shall execute no deed with the potential to undermine the social contract and only engage in those coercive actions that aim at protecting it. The Elite should thus be confined to a relatively passive role.

If it turns out that the Elite itself is violating and corrupting the social contract, why not simply take it down? In other words, could we think of another form of organisation that would protect the social contract while coping with today's world complexities? Michels (1968) provides a negative answer to that question. He claims that no organisation, however democratic at the outset, can sustain itself without gradually taking the traits of an oligarchy. As it grows in size and complexity, delegation of power and abandonment of direct democracy becomes inevitable, which *de facto*

strengthens the relevance – and power – of the Elite. He coined this dynamic as *the iron law of oligarchy*. This is the root of the existential tension that characterises Democracies: inasmuch as Elites are part of the problem, they are indispensable. Since taking them down is a non-starter, we are left with the task of realigning their incentives with the majority's interest. How?

Realigning incentives

First, a recognition that the current narrative has failed for the majority is long overdue. The majority *feels* that it does not benefit them and the Elite should stop defending it on the grounds that it *knows better*. Full blown globalisation is not a model that benefits everyone – at least not without safeguards [and a better management of the process](#). It benefits a narrow category of essentially young and highly educated *global citizens* whose skills are transferable across countries and production processes. Not everyone falls into that category.

Second, this must be accompanied an acknowledgement of the value of local, perhaps less complex and hence more understandable, structures. The rules of the global game must be rearranged to allow for local spaces. This would create space for those who, by choice or fate, do not belong to the Global Village, yet are perfectly able citizens craving for a role at a local level. [Small is, after all, beautiful](#).

But this balance won't be found without stronger individual engagement. Former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, upset by individuals' failure to acknowledge their own role in shaping 'society', once said that "there is no such thing as society". She was indeed right: without citizens' input, society is an empty shell. Thoroughly discussing new ideas and strengthening their foundations is the best way to ensure a regular update of the social contract by which the Elite will abide and be held accountable. In the absence of such debate we end up in an ideological and moral vacuum, which frees the Elite from any moral and ethical value-system.

This needs to be coupled with a revision of citizens' understanding of the *purpose* of their own democratic participation. In countries where the average level of education is high, citizens tend to feel more knowledgeable and hence are more suspicious of expert knowledge. Yet, it is important to understand that a higher level of "general education" does not make one an "expert" in *any* matter. Hence, citizens should not seek to substitute their knowledge for that of a potentially more knowledgeable Elite but direct their energy at revisions of social and institutional mechanisms that enhance the Elites' *accountability*. As Jean Pisany-Ferry [has recently argued](#), we need more critical, not more suspicious citizens.

Eventually, space needs to be made for *public failure*. In other words, Elites need to be allowed to fail. If one deprives a group from the possibility to fail, it simultaneously strengthens the incen-

tive to sweep the dirt under the rug. A much more sustainable approach for democracy would be to recognise that, sometimes, not even the most knowledgeable can cut through the complexity of today's reality.

The current rejection of Elites is as much an expression of dismay at their reckless behaviour as of the complexities of the reality that they represent. But citizens are the first custodians of their political system. Only their engagement can lead to improved accountability mechanisms, which will ensure that the Elite faces the right incentives. Disciplined behaviour and trust will then (re)emerge as natural by-products of the political game.

References

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