Abstract: Pierre GUERLAIN

Democracy inc. and radical criticism in the US

In the US, current thinking about the political process has moved beyond ideas of a democracy "impaired" by lobbies and special interests to the idea that democracy itself was becoming extinct or mere rhetoric (that is propaganda) for the so-called business elites running the country without taking into account the needs or political views of the population. Congress has never had such low approval ratings (8%) and the polarization that characterizes its votes and debates bears no relation to the ideas and preferences of Americans. In other words, one key characteristic of democracy, government by the people, is missing; plutocracy a concept with a tangled history, or oligarchy are better descriptions of the US system. Sheldon Wolin speaks of Democracy Incorporated or "managed democracy" an oxymoron which signals the agony of democracy.¹

This paper proposes to track down the various aspects in which democracy may be managed by what is usually called special interests. The power of money in choosing the candidates before major elections ("hidden primaries"), the 2010 Citizens United Supreme Court decision granting corporations the right to spend as much as they can and the setting up of so-called "super PACs", mainstream media conglomerates tailoring their news programs or to the wishes of the military-industrial complex, these are some of the signs showing that democracy is in the hands of the business class. The public sphere where democratic debate and decision-making ought to take place has shrunk to the point where politics is no longer about the affairs of the polis but a game with predetermined outcomes which must be sold to a largely irrelevant public.

Although the attacks on democracy documented by Wolin, whose book title is Democracy Incorporated, have accelerated with the rise of neo-liberalism and the emergence of leaders such as Reagan, democracy itself has always been contested. The framers of the US constitution feared what they called "pure democracy" and, like Plato, preferred a Republic run by an elite. Walter Lippmann in the 1920s shared this fear and argued in favor of "manufacturing consent" rather than democratic deliberation. In the 50s C. Wright Mills deconstructed what he called The Power Elite. A long view of history (longue durée) no doubt indicates that the current situation of "managed democracy" is far from unprecedented and could therefore invite analysts to consider that there is nothing new under the sun. Yet after the gains of the New Deal and of the 1960s, democracy has been contained, contested and is being rolled back. The rhetoric of democracy however is triumphant. Democracy inc. (sometimes called "kabuki democracy", Eric Alterman) is make-believe democracy, in which government is not run by the people, for the people.

Even elections — in which only half or even a third of the people vote — which remain the visible remnant of Incorporated Democracy are marred by machinations to exclude large parts of the population. Democracy thus becomes a game played by PACs and super-PACs financed by billionaires who are the real power controlling the political class. In this account voter apathy or "democracy fatigue" should also be explained especially as this phenomenon contrasts so vividly with other regions of the world. As Wolin writes: “Every apathetic citizen is a silent enlistee in the cause of inverted totalitarianism.” A critique of some radical critics of democracy will therefore prove necessary.

This presentation proposes to track down the agony of representative democracy in the US. It will argue that there is indeed a "specter of inverted totalitarianism" threatening the US. It is driven by what Wolin calls "superpower" that is the military-industrial complex. Yet criticism is often stuck in aporias.

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