

Liberal democracy and its discontents book review:

Yascha Mounk (2018), *The People vs. Democracy. Why our Freedom Is in Danger & How to Save It*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 272 pages

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Yascha Mounk is a wunderkind of international political science. His stellar career brought him from Germany, where he was born to Polish parents in 1982, via 'directing' at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, to lecturing at Harvard and Johns Hopkins universities. His track record includes also regular publications in top international newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, or *Die Zeit*, as well as three books.

The latest volume – "The People vs. Democracy. Why our Freedom Is in Danger & How to Save It" – has been translated into 10 languages and enjoys a global-wide regard as one of the best books of 2018. It has been also certainly one of the best and most comprehensive analyses of the current populist wave.

The book is dense with knowledge, quotes, and observations. At the end, reader has a problem with deciding what the major takes are, as almost every single page brings some new interesting insight. I will try to offer the summary of major concepts, taking the book's title for my azimuth.

"People vs. Democracy" sounds provocative, doesn't it? In the end, everyone knows that democracy is the rule of the people, so theoretically there is no evident opposition here that "vs." seems to stand for. Yascha Mounk shows that there actually is. Following Cas Mudde, a major theorist of populism in this century, "the people" is one of the three major concepts of populism (along with the elite and the general will) (Mudde 2017: p 9). However, for populists "the people" constitute, first, a very narrow category – populist leaders define the people exclusively as "us" against illegitimate others, be it widely-understood elites, political opponents (from within and without – like "Brussels"), minorities, or, for instance, refugees.

Second, despite the populist narrative of returning power to the people, when in charge populists do just the opposite. Mounk outlines how illiberal democracy – the democracy without rights" – cannot remain a true democracy in the long run. It is so, because populism "both seeks to express the frustrations of the people and to undermine liberal institutions"

by weakening the separation of powers and limiting freedom of the media and the third sector. Therefore, "these liberal institutions are, in the long run, needed for democracy to survive" (Mounk 2018: p. 35), as without them it can slide into a dictatorship.

To offer an example, one of the major institutions of liberalism is the free press. Why is it important? As it tells the people how the world works, so that they can make informed choices at the ballot box. Today, in all too many countries, also of the West, media are either owned by ideology-agnostic businesses that feed people with most divisive content, because it sells. The ascent of internet and social media has made the conventional outlets – TV, radio, and press – even more pungent as now they compete with unrestrained freedom of speech online. Clicks rule the world. But behind them there's money¹.

The second threat of the media is the opposite – it consists of taking over the media and online outlets to use them as propaganda tools. It has happened in Poland with the public media (Raport... 2017), in Hungary where also private media were taken over by Viktor Orban's cronies (Magyar 2016), as well as with buying content and creating troll farms and bots generating news online (Gorwa 2017). Abraham Lincoln famously said: "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time", but... without freedom of the media fooling us persistently becomes possible. Plus, the "attacks on the free press are but the first step. In the next step, the war on independent institutions frequently targets foundations, trade unions, think tanks, religious associations, and other nongovernmental associations" (Mounk 2018: p. 45).

The second part of the title "People vs. Democracy", i.e. "the democracy" is important in the book not only because the author wants it to stay, along with its liberal companion, as it is the system that protects the rights and freedom of everyone. But also, because Mounk perceives that populism has its very strong democratic trait: "It is impossible to understand [populists'] nature without acknowledging the democratic energy that is driving them" (Mounk 2018: p. 52). However, populist understanding of democracy – as one with limited rights and freedoms for just a limited group of "us" – works against that very democratic aspect.

So, our liberal democracy is in danger, as the title follows. After thoroughly analysing the troubles, Mounk enumerates a long and in-depth list of varied remedies that can be summarised as follows: we have to protest in the streets to demonstrate populists don't speak on our behalf, but alongside, systemically, we should "ensure that liberal democracy once again lives up to the expectations of its citizens". Then he offers the ABC of how to achieve that: we need to domesticate nationalism, fix the economy, and renew the civic faith. Easier said than done but the author really provides a rich catalogue of tangible solutions.

The most important one is his original ideology of "inclusive patriotism". In Mounk's view, in order to ensure liberal democracy to stay, we need to create wise ideology that can safeguard it. Having realised that people are much more attached to their na-

¹ In 2017, 89% of Facebook revenue came from digital advertisement, "primarily from targeted advertising and user data" – article by Rakesh Sharma (2019).

tional identities than he wanted to believe and having understood that is the reason why "Supranational ideals appear to be in retreat" (Mounk 2018: p.197), he came up with a compromise offer that respects both this national attachment and the tenets of liberal democracy. He proposes the above mentioned "inclusive patriotism" (Mounk 2018: p. 208)², which would truly protect the (equal) rights of all individuals, including immigrants – not only the narrow group accepted as "the people". To make this system work, he advises, the leaders "should take concern about the rapid pace of migration seriously and acknowledge that the nation is a geographically bounded community that can only persist, when it has control over its borders" (Mounk 2018: p. 214).

"Inclusive patriotism" and "inclusive nationalism" can be used interchangeably. But... nationalism, really? When we realise that due to persisting attachment to the nation the current nationalisms have backlashed, it – as all other advices from Mounk – seems an obvious step to take. "Nationalism is like a half-wild, half-domesticated animal. As long as it remains under our control, it can be of tremendous use".

Yascha Mounk's book is a repository of good and simple solutions on how to tackle the problems that liberal democracy today faces. They are certainly a no-brainer, but they probably also cannot fix the whole system. Also, the inclusive nationalism or patriotism that he comes up with can be considered a great idea for open-minded liberals. However, I doubt it will pose an interesting proposal to nationalist, xenophobic, ultra-conservative organizers of independence marches organised in Poland, and the like-minded ultra-conservative nativists in other countries. Therefore, implementing Mounk's ideas is possible only when populists are out of power, because populism is not the synonym of rationality.

However, whenever the adherents to liberal democracy are in power – meaning still in most countries of Europe – they should read "The People vs. Democracy" closely, especially the "Remedies" chapters. At the same time, opposition politicians, activists and thinkers in countries, where populists are in power, should better brace themselves to use their time, when they take over effectively. Maybe the system they will bring about will be different from an "inclusive nationalism", but when they ensure prosperity, equality, civic education in schools and free of the media – according to Mounk's textbook or our own way, maybe the nationalist foundation of this ideational system will not be necessary anymore.

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² After the book, Mounk came up with the notion of "inclusive nationalism", which goes hand in hand with inclusive patriotism. Here he outlines the concept himself: Mounk (03.03.2018).

migracyjnych. Jest także doktorantką na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim oraz stypendystką programu European Marie Curie Research Fellowship w dziedzinie nauk politycznych.

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