

## Has democracy outlived its promise?

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Like oil painting or Olympic spirit, democracy exists in large part as a function of its announced demise. We know that there are artists happily wielding palettes, and committed amateur high-jumpers out there, and so there must likewise be unconflicted democrats, eager servants of the popular will.

But you wouldn't know it from the reigning political discourse, which throbs with dire warnings about parliamentary puppetry, centralized power in staff offices, and election campaigns run entirely on spin and prevarication, nowadays known by the bland euphemism of "media lines."

Like any sane political theorist observing the passing scene, I have issued such warnings myself. South of the border, the U.S. Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, which equates money with political speech, seemed to most critics a crowning dunce cap on a broken system. Presidential elections are now nearly continuous circuses of irrelevant bickering fronting for backroom financial interests.

In that spirit, the best insight current Republican front-runner Donald Trump has so far delivered is that, in the spirit of the current arrangement, he, too, is a speechifying mannequin backed by a self-interested billionaire. In his case, though, the candidate and the bag-man are the same person.

In Canada, which we must now call, courtesy of Scott Walker and *Game of Thrones*, the Land Beyond the Wall, the most glaring offence to democratic ideals is not actually a bumptious PMO or magic e-mails written in invisible ink. It is, instead, the antiquated first-past-the-post electoral scheme that forever dooms us to non-representative government. It's bad enough that MPs are subject to party discipline that melts all backbones; it's worse that those MPs might represent only a third of the voters in their ridings. The King Beyond the Wall rules because he can.

All of this is standard stuff, repeated and ignored in routine cycles. But there are new voices in the chorus of democratic lament, and their message is different.

Not many people outside of Silicon Valley circles knew the name Peter Thiel before he and other members of the so-called PayPal Mafia came to media prominence in the wake of 2008's Great Recession. Still less well known than fellow space-travel advocate Elon Musk or face-of-Facebook Mark Zuckerberg, Mr. Thiel is the philosopher of the group. He studied the subject in college, as he likes to remind people, and his success in startups has given him an oracular confidence denied lesser mortals.

In college and on Wall Street, he said, there was an emergent digital-economy hierarchy. The higher-IQ conservatives, surveying the shambles of contemporary America, escaped into “heroic drinking,” but the highest-IQ libertarians “had fewer hangups about positive law and escaped not only to alcohol but beyond it.” Liberals and social democrats, drunk or otherwise, do not figure in the pecking order.

These new libertarians, reflecting on their massive brains and the works of Ayn Rand, offered a new critique of the democratic experiment. “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible,” Mr. Thiel wrote in a 2009 “personal statement” for the conservative Cato Institute. “Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women – two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians – have rendered the notion of ‘capitalist democracy’ into an oxymoron.”

To Mr. Thiel’s dismay, his positive proposals – interplanetary emigration, undersea development and paying people to quit college – were overshadowed by denunciations of his views on giving welfare recipients and women the vote. Fools! They will be crushed by the forces of freedom! A clearer flavour of Mr. Thiel’s philosophy is sounded in his favourite quotation, cribbed from Knute Rockne or maybe Vince Lombardi: “Show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser.”

There is a curious overlap between the postdemocratic dreams of this new breed of libertarians and the established anti-capitalist left. They both agree that capitalism and democracy are incompatible. But whereas the latter see human freedom curtailed by the relentless consumption imperatives of market-based logic in all things, including elections, the former see government, maybe the state itself, as an impediment to brilliance, innovation and the awesome power of true individual liberty.

In both cases, democracy, at least in the form of electoral politics, has outlived its always tenuous promise. We can imagine here a near-future scenario like something from Neal Stephenson’s dystopian novel *Snow Crash* (1991), where popular elections have been abandoned and the federal government is just one corporation among many, and not a very powerful one at that.

Yet, the makers-versus-takers rhetoric of Silicon Valley is oddly enbubbled, operating on a willful blindness about the very same markets they would see run free. First, there is no such thing as an unregulated market, just markets that are more or less regulated in one’s favour. Second, there are no makers without takers. The owners of platforms are free to despise the consumers of content as sad flocks of sheeple, but without that consumer base, they are innovators of pure imagination – in other words, academics.

This has always been the endgame of Randian politics. Unless the goal is an off-grid genius kibbutz where towering figures read Aristotle and design buildings for the express purpose of blowing them up, at some point you have to deal with other people. Taking your jobs off-world is just a post-Romney twist on the self-defeating threat to take your jobs offshore. You’d think the purveyors of PayPal, which is, after all, a transaction machine that generates a friction microrent, would realize this.

Tech lords can abandon democracy, in other words, but it won't abandon them. Northrop Frye was fond of repeating this piece of wisdom about human existence: "We belong to something before we are anything, and the individual grows out of the group, not the other way around." Those welfare bums and damn women, with their stupid votes, are limits on freedom. But they are also the enabling conditions of freedom.

That paradox is also the enduring meaning of democracy, a delicate idea that is nevertheless more resilient than all the depredations, indifference and perfidy the world of politics has managed to generate. We may sleep, but it lives!