

Book review

The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It by Yascha Mounk. Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 400.

<https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.38.4>

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Keywords

Democracy; Diversity; Economy; Liberalism; Media; Populism

In *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It*, Yascha Mounk claims that unless there are changes soon, liberal democracy as we know it may not survive much longer. Mounk paints a bleak picture fitting of the alarmist title. He focuses on one particular phenomenon: the rise and consolidation of power of populist movements around the world.

Mounk states that populists are gaining in popularity in various places around the world, with some already ruling and consolidating their power. They are democratic as they are offering what the majority of the people demand though perhaps to the detriment of the rights of others. However, established elites would like to strengthen their position, often while being out of touch with the rest of the people. While fighting for the protection of rights, which allows them to solidify their position, they do not expect an expansion of democracy, which may lead them to lose their position.

These phenomena are the results of Mounk's core claim (20): liberal democracy is de-consolidating into "illiberal democracy" and "undemocratic liberalism". Populism is democratic in that it is catering to the majority, but illiberal because it does not protect the rights of everyone. Meanwhile, established elites are entrenching themselves to strengthen their positions. Thus, they become more undemocratic as the gap between them and the rest of the population widens, but they desire their rights (and position) to be protected, so they defend liberalism. Mounk argues that this de-consolidation is not surprising although most people assume democracy and liberalism naturally go together, there is nothing inherent about such a consolidation.

Mouk discusses that while the strength and source of legitimacy of liberal democracy is its ability to honor freedom and equality at the same time, its dominance has not been because of this legitimacy. Liberal democracy “can fulfill some of the deepest and most universal human aspirations” (130) but actually because “it has delivered such good results” (131), like keeping peace and increasing life standards. Hence, as liberal democracies are no longer as adept at delivering for citizens, populist movements are exploiting the opening to dismantle key elements of the system (131).

Mouk examines the major causes of the de-consolidation of liberal democracy. He argues that there are three “scope conditions” of democracy, that is, three areas in which certain conditions brought about the stability of democracy in the past, but these conditions are no longer in place at present. Firstly, it is the media, as social media “weakened traditional gatekeepers,” whereas before the dominance of mass media limited the distribution of extreme ideas. Secondly, the economy, as in the past most people enjoyed a rapid increase in living standards, but many now fear that they will suffer greater hardship in the future. Finally, nearly all stable democracies were monoethnic nations or had a dominant ethnic group but now this dominance is being challenged in many places (135).

Mouk argues that these three issues need to be quickly addressed for the survival of liberal democracy. He offers several solutions such as defending the rights of everyone in a country and advocating for keeping immigration open, but having control over borders (214); creating a “new sense of pride in a very different kind of mass employment,” so that liberal democracies “retain the ability to shape a future in which an openness to the world does not need to be synonymous with a loss of control” (235-36); and having civic education that features “both the real injustices and the great achievements of liberal democracy” (251).

Although the book spells out the problem of liberal democratic de-consolidation clearly and offers solutions, there are some areas where the book shows weaknesses and feels somewhat incomplete. Among them is that its scope is largely limited to the western world, that is, North America and Europe. Perhaps the rise of populism can be seen as a largely western issue, but the few mentions of non-western nations (though usually only in passing) in the book implies that Mouk believes the issue exists in non-western nations as well. However, there is little mention of such cases, and if they are mentioned, it is done imprecisely. For example, when borrowing the 2016-17 Korean protests against the president as an anecdote, there are mis-spellings of names that could have easily been rectified through a simple Internet search (185). This adds to the sense that cases outside of North America and Europe are an afterthought.

Another issue is that it seems Mouk’s remedies are somewhat limited. If the situation is as dire as Mouk argued, this would require solutions beyond the status quo. As alarmist as the title of

the book and the problem it spells out are, the suggested solutions are quite tame in comparison, perhaps even obvious. And they leave many questions. How do you get people fully on board with the idea of continuing to protect rights in the face of populist movements that say otherwise? How do you create this sense of pride of a different kind of employment? What does a civic education that features “both the real injustices and the great achievements of liberal democracy” even look like?

These issues aside, if it is assumed that Mounk’s book is only meant to raise these concerns and bring it to people’s attention in a comprehensive way, then it is timely and allows for further comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon and is a welcome addition to the discussion. However, there is still a sense of regret in the limited scope of the book and of what could have been.