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The Challenges of Infinite Expectations in a Finite World and the Risks of Sliding into Post-Democracy

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【Abstract】

In light of recent political movements worldwide, questions about the validity and sustainability of democracy have arisen. Movements towards the discrediting of political processes seem to prevail as even the beacon of modern democracy, the United States, is held under scrutiny after the 2016 election. The term "post-democracy" refers to states with the structures of democracy still in place, though only in name - rather as a shell or façade of the liberal framework while being replaced by other forms of rule such as autocracy, an inverted totalitarianism. When analyzing the narrative of democracy, it needs to be viewed against the backdrop of the extensive timeline of humanity (stretching over vast periods) and the shortened timeframe of recent changes in resources and human population. This paper argues that the sustainability of true democracy depends upon the current challenges being successfully met, otherwise societies will run the risk of sliding into a post-democratic system simply to survive.

【Keywords】

Post-Democracy, Democracy, Climate Change, Resource Depletion, Geopolitical Conflict

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1. Introduction

Some in the mass media have announced the end of democracy (for example, the Washington Post of April 19, 2017, '*This is what the beginning of the end of democracy looks like*') due to a variety of reasons such as the election of the 45th president of the United States and fake news (a kind of propaganda), amongst other reasons. A much greater threat to democracy, and whether or not the world is heading towards a post-democratic society, are the stresses of taxing a finite world with infinite expectations.

When referring to democracy, it can be assumed that the reference is to a representative type within the Jeffersonian tradition that grew out of Philadelphia (Fukuyama, 1992). This form of democracy is packaged as 'one person, one vote' and is heavily encouraged as the best form of government in the West (Keane, 2009). However, as the world continues to encounter various crises, there will inevitably be fewer countries governed that way, suggesting a possible shift towards a post-democratic system. The underlying pressures that democracy is facing are severe and global: the end of cheap hydrocarbon energy, food crises and exponential population growth pressures, and other natural resource pressures bringing man-made climate change (Rifkin, 2013; Dyer, 2010).

2. Defining Democracy

The term "post-democracy" is defined by Colin Crouch as a society, "[T]hat continues to have and use all the institutions of democracy, but in which they increasingly become a formal shell"(Crouch, 2005). This restrictive definition means that the trends are moving away from the traditional definition of democracy to something else, which seems to be the case according to Freedom House (Fukuyama, 2011), but defining what exactly democracy is can be a difficult proposition, as within one country there are often major contrasts in the assessments. For example, the nature and quality of Russian democratic institutions is defined quite differently between Freedom House (low quality) and Polity IV (high quality), as exemplified in a Washington Post explanation (Gunitsky, 2015).

3. Challenges to Humanity

While there are any number of challenges facing humanity today, the biggest existential threats are the growth in human population (with ever greater consumption needs) competing for limited resources against the backdrop of further changes in climate. This can be abridged to unlimited expectations of human growth in a finite world. According to recent UN demographic projections, the world's population continues to grow and is expected to level off at between 9 and 11.2 billion people (www.un.org). As of 2017 the official population was revised to 7.6 billion people with growth that continued at 1.1% (www.un.org). While this growth has begun to level off, and is expected to continue to decline naturally, the issues continue - and there is debate as to the accuracy of the projections of demographic leveling (Emmott, 2013). The growth that has the biggest impact on resource consumption and environmental damage is in the middle class consumer societies, which use a far greater amount of resources to sustain that consumption when compared to current rates, with a greater percentage of the population in low or middle income brackets (IBID). This can be illustrated by the fact that the average American consumes ten times more resources than the average

continental African. This will change as the average of the African economies continues to grow (now set at 6%, or doubling every 11 years; and that is expected to continue), therefore even the poorest regions of the world are starting to catch up economically. That can only mean that there will be tremendous pressures on the world's resources. Accordingly, not only is the world getting more populous, but those people are becoming wealthier and thus consuming more resources and contributing to waste and emissions (Klare, 2012). All of this will inevitably lead to dramatic changes in the strengths of governing bodies as the demand for resources grows too large (Bartlett, 1978; Klare, 2012).

As this happens, there are more and more powers competing for fewer resources, or those resources that never change in aggregate, such as water. Climate change also continues to put all sorts of pressures on all resources globally (Dyer, 2011). The potential results are a world that, out of sheer necessity, is heading towards less representative democracy in the Jeffersonian tradition. It should be noted that democracy, as a goal, is a Eurocentric phenomenon and the overall power of the European perspective is being challenged (by countries like China), and there is a possibility of it moving away from the European (Mid-Atlantic) persuasion (Keane, 2009). As this occurs, there will be a further shift away from pressures for a country to 'democratize,' since securing its survival will become more difficult and have greater importance.

4. Challenges and Conditions for Democracy

Democracy can be used as an excuse for the behavior of some actors (such as military intervention in countries such as Iraq or Libya (Forte, 2012)), but if the democracy is not true, and only a façade, then the reality is that it becomes an excuse used by a dominant power player looking for justifications to implement its will. Interventions can also be a combination of military and non-military intervention, such as the recent example of this in the Ukraine with the vote to rejoin Russia and split from the Ukraine (referred to as a 'sham display of democracy' in the *Guardian* (Birrell, 2014)). The traditional tenet that two democracies cannot wage war against each other (which has already been disproven with the Balkans) will mean that the number of wars will likely increase and be resource-based (further threatening the old values). The need, or desire for, war will inevitably have negative effects on the role of democratic institutions.

Long-term stability can lead to great economic change, as seen with South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. Within the framework of those countries' burgeoning middle classes, the decidedly undemocratic rulers were successfully pushed aside; but not until economic growth allowed the framework to be established. So, while economic stability may not, (at first glance) be important to list as a fundamental aspect of democracy, without it every form of ruler from communism to fascism is at risk of falling as rulers lose legitimacy with the institutions (such a military) that keep them in power. This was exemplified with the economic instability leading to the Arab Spring with the high cost of food perhaps the main contributor to the unrest: after oil hit $147 a barrel (Rifkin, 2013).

With 195 countries (according to the UN, more if other factors are considered), the question of the direction of the world's governing system would be (based on trends following WWI) that the future will lead to a bigger majority of true democracies than

at present (what Keene describes as liberal democracies); yet, the trend has in fact shifted to fewer democratic freedoms since the turn of the century (Fukushima, 2011). At first, it may appear to have been counterintuitive when observing the Arab Spring - except until the recent results are observed (the democratic movements turned out to be short-lived). Therefore, the world is going to have to come to terms with the macro issue threats that are currently in place (ever growing human numbers competing for finite resources).

The past century has seen the rise of democracy as a way of governing for numerous countries. When comparing the post-World War II systems of government with those of pre-World War I, the differences are striking (Kagan). This period of worldwide democracy expansion is currently under threat due to mitigating factors that will dictate if there is a future of less democracy, rather than more. Recent geopolitical changes and challenges in the Middle East (recent wars, the Arab Spring) might seem to challenge the notions of democracy, but the reasons for the change away from democratically elected governments can be found at the very base of the majority of these movements: security (Rifkin, 2013).

When considering the 'democratic' and, therefore, the 'post-democratic' historically, it is necessary to consider the long-term narrative of the democratic process. This form of government is only 250 years old, although based on a much older Greek model that had been unused for thousands of years (Keene, 2009). This timeframe coincides with industrialization that gave rise to a greater life expectancy and quality of life. The basis for the prosperity grew out of the harnessing of hydrocarbons, a finite resource. The correlation between the harnessing of hydrocarbon usage and the rise of industrialization is undisputed. Thus, the rise of democracies with the advancement of egalitarian democracies and their structures are linked. The interdependence between the two is clearly correlated and, ergo, the loss of the ability to continue to grow exponentially is a danger as there are threats that the resource production has reached peak production.

5. Peak Oil and Resource Over-Dependence

"Peak oil" is a term that was coined in the 1970s by King Hubbert and it was meant to describe the timeframe when the hydrocarbon output would reach the absolute maximum (Hubbert, 1956, 2006; Bartlett, 1978). The end of hydrocarbons has been delayed, as the actual date would appear to have been pushed further away, with technological advances such as fracking having pushed the timeframe possibly decades into the future (Lynch, 2016). The difficulty in trying to predict the decline in production continues as we get more creative in finding efficiencies: the extraction of oil/gas/coal via deep-water drilling and fracking makes it very difficult in the short term. Technological improvements in consumption, such as hybrid automobiles, means that the Jevons paradox tends to show its truism: the more efficient that we become, the more that we are able and tend to use (Mayumi, Giampietro, & Alcott, 2008). This leads to greater production and greater consumption. These factors have led to an exponential growth in the world's population with the unprecedented population approaching 8 billion, as mentioned earlier.

Underpinning all of the challenges to the expected status-quo is the issue of global climate change and the implications of an unstable environment that is the inevitable result of rapid changes to the environment. This can and most likely is leading to

changes in sea level, increased storms, and changes in the environment for growing food, which has the potential for changing all factors and exacerbating and magnifying the effects of unmitigated growth, thereby further undermining democracy throughout the world (Dyer, 2011).

For many, there are assumptions that there will be minimal effect on the food sources from depleted natural resources and that any climate change effects will be minimal (Ridley, 2011). There are also a large number of deniers such as the 45th president of the United States, Mr Trump. These assumptions seem to point to the numerous examples of "wrong" predictions of resource failures in the past: from Malthus to the Club of Rome to, some might argue, most recently Peak Oil (McMahon, 2013). However, in each of these the ideas were not necessarily disproven (nor, proven), but overcome in the short term. By short term, the human existence must be contextualized and that is a 100,000 year history of cognitive existence (rather than the 2.4 million years of biological existence). When the aggregate of human existence is compared to the issues that it is facing, and the challenges are examined, it is clear that these are very recent and an existential threat to the democratic process. Without an economic base for which a population can be secure and growing, chaos is likely to erupt, as expressed on planetizen.com as, "Malthus delayed is not necessarily Malthus denied."

At the center of these pressures against the continued growth of liberal democracy is the end of cheap hydrocarbon energy. Since first fueling the growth of human expansion, the non-renewable resources have continued to be burned up at a faster and faster pace, until (the most refined of the energies) was being used at 94 million barrels a day (Nikolewski, 2015). In the backdrop, this energy consumption fueled the lifestyle of the planet where we now live in an age that has been termed "hydrocarbon man" by Daniel Yergin (2009), fueling economies. China is an example of economic growth that continues and is expected to grow into the future. With an 8% increase in the demand for oil, it recently surpassed the United States as the number one importer of oil, and the amount of that energy China imports is set to double within a decade (Rifkin, 2013).

While there have been numerous finds of additional oil and a large number of finds of natural gas, the era of cheap oil is at an end. Despite the recent optimistic forecasts found in such periodicals as the *Atlantic* and the *New York Times*, they both neglect to discuss the high price of energy in their analyses: ignoring the effects of, "[O]il at almost $100 a barrel in a world that was designed to run on $20 oil" (Kunstler, 2011). Food is always at the risk of becoming far more expensive as it is forced to be subjected to travel further and further between field and table (Kunstler calls this "the 3000-mile Caesar salad"). Having no seasonal food becomes the norm as the distributions get further and further stretched, with the same produce always available.

It is the use of hydrocarbons that is critically important in facilitating staples in humanity, food and water to name two. While our total reliance on hydrocarbons to get a cheap, steady supply of food calories to the consumer has worked recently, it is no guarantee for future continued success. In fact, the successful models seem to have bred complacency that is only interrupted when there are shocks to the system. If, in fact, oil were to stop suddenly, it has been estimated that the planet's population would drop by 90 percent (back to the pre-industrial level). While this is a dramatic, perhaps histrionic, example it clearly articulates the importance of oil. There is nothing in the modern world that is not touched by hydrocarbons, and one only need look around their own life

to see the implications.

Industrially processed and packaged food has continued to grow, and this has led to food prices falling until the food calorie has become the norm: ubiquitous food that is fast, and cheap (Schlosser, 2001). Meanwhile, healthy food has become extremely expensive and resource heavy (Rayner, 2013) with the result that there are bigger and bigger conglomerates which are continuing to lobby governments for the lessening of regulations and greater subsidies for industry (Schlosser, 2001) with great damage to the entire democratic process (Wolin, 2010) as the lobbyists use the process to further put pressures on the WTO and other actors from the wealthy nations. Food consumption (growth) also continues, albeit slightly differently (industrial food), particularly with rising middle classes worldwide (Emmott, 2013; McMahon, 2013). An example is the shift in China from a primarily vegetable-based diet, to one increasingly filled with meat and diverse fish. Similarly, the spread of the popularity of the luxury food, Japanese *sushi* worldwide has continued to deplete fish stocks.

Food production has grown at the heart of the hydrocarbon use, but at a heavy cost in terms of the health and well-being of the population. This has had a variety of consequences, not the least of which is the very question of its sustainability. Food security and water security are at the heart of any number of issues that lead directly towards or away from democracy, particularly at the developing world level of food and nutrition, (Emmott ,2013), but can quickly lead to social breakdown at any level of economic development (as seen with the chaos and lawlessness that resulted after the 2005 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana). While food security and attempts at democratization are seen in the light of the Arab Spring, India, the world's largest democracy, faces challenges that are endemic throughout the world and might lead to problems that will be difficult to overcome as it continues to grapple with overpopulation and threats to food and water supplies.

6. Realist diplomacy as a reaction to economic and social challenges

In this light, *realist diplomacy* will tend to reign supreme and will overshadow any other form of international relations. While the idea of interconnected relationships should placate the actors, pressures of the future will likely force governments to be reacting quickly in ways that will ensure that there will be little room for slow-moving democratic governments to effectively deal with the crises as they arise. Because, within the confines of population pressures and resource competition, little fertile ground for traditional democratic structures would remain. With existential crises, those in power who are weaker domestic players will be replaced by faster moving leaders, or chaotic failed states emerge.

According to Fukuyama (2011), of the number of countries in the world, less than half are classified as "democratic," hence the actual aggregate number of democratic countries is quite small to start with, and therefore there is little chance of expansion of those numbers. In fact, those in power are seemingly trying to hold onto their power base with everything that they can.

Imposing democracy (the act of a change of leadership through outside force) leads to issues of its own, as can be seen in three recent examples: Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya (Bremer, 2006; Forte, 2012; Chandrasekar, 2006). They were all subjected to direct intervention which toppled their non-democratically-elected governments which were then replaced with democracy. All, it could be argued, were facing severe and

strenuous challenges that threatened the very legitimacy of the democratic governments that they were to represent. Iraq continues to grapple with sectarian violence as the struggle between the two sects of Islam tends toward war within the country. This level of violence has had a detrimental effect on the legitimacy of the government in power. Similar issues are prevalent in Afghanistan and Libya. Recent Taliban and ISIS insurgents have all but paralyzed the democratic process in Afghanistan (Flynn & Ledeen, 2016). Within such a framework, democracy will have difficulty surviving as the modes and methods of dealing with this change require hard decisions for each nation-state to deal with the fast-moving change.

Governing by mob rule seemed to have started to work at first, bringing democracy closer during the Arab Spring to the half-dozen affected regimes that were challenged. This idea that democracy has broken out is being disputed more and more as despotic regimes are continuing and those that were elected only partly free, with Tunisia the only free democracy, according to Freedom House (2017). The underlying circumstances that led to the dissatisfaction of the protestors can be summarized in the rise in the price of food. After all a hungry person will be the most dissatisfied (Gurr, 2012). The causes of rising food prices are several, the easiest and simplest can be deduced in the following: a rise in demand combined with a rise in the production and distribution costs led to the issues that exploded across the Middle East. While these protests led to some significant changes, the changes were largely (micro) economically driven and they had the backing of a large percentage of the population due to the food price increases that were being felt by a large part of the population. The protests and revolutions that led to change were not driven by democratic wants on the part of the population. Libya is an example of a 'failed state' that has not changed towards democracy, rather moved into the tribal regions (Forte, 2012).

Globally there is a constant drive for growth: the need for expansion. For example, the Chinese government has recently relaxed the one child policy in order to avoid this type of demographic conundrum - after all, there is a labor shortage when viewed through the growth prism (or, growth pyramid) (Klare 2012). Yet referring to the growth triangle, without a base there can be no secure government and with no secure rule of law there can be no democracy. After all, democracy has a series of requirements: one of the six most important facets for development (Ferguson, 2010). Without security, it will become more and more difficult if not impossible for more countries to become democratic and also for countries to remain within the rubric of democracy.

Tied in with the growth policies are individual non-state players who have worked against the democratic process as they have pushed their own agendas. This situation has become what Sheldon Wolin (2010) has termed, "[T]he inverted totalitarian state." Within this situation, corporate interests have ensured their agendas and have maintained their commercial interests. Hegemony by the most powerful and influential elites is nothing new, as the Opium Wars of the 1840's ensured the East India Corp. maintained its comparative advantage after the state intervened on the company's behalf (Welsh, 1990). Whilst these were overt actions that denied nation-state autonomy, when individual stakeholders are involved in an interconnected world such as today, the effects tend to be stifling for true democratic movements. Non-state actors working on the international stage, referred to as a "Cosmocracy" by Keane (2002) inevitably tend to erode democratically elected governments' democratic processes through the process of lobbying, and international actors tend to get swept aside during national crises.

Rule of law, as it pertains to the top of the pyramid requires a strong constitution and individual rights that can be respected by the state allowing participation in the process. However, with corporate, state and other groups involved, this becomes a very difficult process, as is illustrated in emerging democracies. Iran, as an example is disallowing any female candidate, through the influence of the church (in this case, the Islamic Shia Clerks). With approximately 50% of the voters being disallowed the opportunity to be represented as a candidate, this can hardly be considered 'democratic'. These examples are repeated time and time again.

As world growth continues (economic and demographically), it will have the effect of creating several severe problems within the near future: oil prices/demand, food, and water unless technology and positive changes take place quickly. While the fear of a drop in growth (as seen with recent headlines, 'China's growth rate to fall to below 10%') is a common fear, the very fact that the implicit and explicit growth expectations ensure a continued amount of pressure on the world's resources. The two economically largest democratic economies show this time and time again as seen with the election of the latest president, Mr Trump - largely on the slogan, 'Make America Great Again.'

Within America, constant interventions by the former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank, Ben Bernanke has shown that the vested political and business interests continue to influence the governmental reactions in the marketplace with the expectation for larger and continued growth. This is mirrored by the Bank of Japan and the attempt by the various governments, with the Abe government just being the most recent. Coined *Abenomics* (FT), the interventions mirror those of the American governments over the past numerous administrations, Keynesian interventions in attempts to ensure growth.

As mentioned, China, now the second largest economy in the world has felt the need to relax the one-child policy that has been the cornerstone of its family planning policy since Mao Tse Tung brought it in during the 1970s. This policy has the current government worried that there will be a shortage of workers and a demographic problem as there are "only" 1.35 billion people in the country as it continues its growth unabated. Thus, the most populous country in the world has felt the need to ensure that there is continued economic growth at any cost.

After all, democratically elected governments are often accused of paying lip service and making promises to constituents in order to get elected. These promises are often at the expense of the public purse as stability, peace and prosperity are the goals to be maintained. From the poorest democracies to the richest (America), these promises are the same in nature: to keep the majority satisfied and happy. While noble and commendable in a world of competing resources with the growth model as the metrics which democratic governments are elected, it is a flawed model that could slide towards post-democracy.

7. Conclusion

The biggest challenge for democracy will be the continued pressures exerted through exponential population growth in conjunction with the continuing processes of industrial development and economic expansion taking place. The existential challenges created as these pressures combine to absorb more and more finite resources can force regimes to shift into self-preservation mode, creating hazards that can destabilize established governments and regimes or make democratization more difficult.

Peter Drucker stated that: "Trying to predict the future is like trying to drive down a country road at night with no lights while looking out the back window (Drucker quotation)." Therefore trying to see if the world is going into a period of post-democracy requires a lot of surmising and looking into the past with assumptions that there will not be dramatic shifts sociologically and technologically. However, as Robert Kagan (2015) put it: *"Human beings, after all, do not yearn only for freedom, autonomy, and recognition. Especially in times of difficulty, they yearn also for comfort, security, order, and importantly, a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, something that submerges autonomy and individuality – all of which autocracies can sometimes provide, or at least appear to provide, better than democracies."* So, much of the future of democratic institutions is dependent upon successfully overcoming the challenges that humanity is currently facing.

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