

The Last Gatekeepers of the Western Republics.

by Tobías Belgrano.

In recent years, Western democracies have suffered a process where their institutions have been put into question. Riots, polarization and political radicalization have become the new normal. Technology has given birth to new instances of horizontal democracy that lacks proper checks and balances, and has become an open field for manipulation. Many of the answers to postmodern issues might be found at the basis of our political systems.

There was a period of great decay in Greek democracy. In the last days of one of the greatest political experiments in the ancient world, lived an intellectual called Polybius. He was a distinguished military leader, politician, and one of the first historians to reveal the secrets of Greek history for future generations.

During one of the many Roman invasions, Polybius was enslaved and bought by privileged families with the purpose of educating their children. This was an opportunity for him to have an insight of the political dynamics in the rising empire, learning from the innovation he found in Roman institutions and looking back on the mistakes of the Greeks. Through this immersive experience, the Hellenistic author reached several conclusions. First, one of the biggest flaws of the Greek institutional layout was the recurring application of pure forms of government: democracy, aristocracy and monarchy. Secondly, the obsession with the number of rulers a society should have. During Polybius' period, there was a constant debate as to whether there should be one (monarchy), few (aristocracy) or many (democracy).

Polybius discovered a cycle of degeneration in pure forms which he named 'Anacyclosis'; a circular pattern where initially virtuous monarchs became brutal tyrants, and who would later fall, giving birth to an aristocracy of moral leadership. Subsequently, new generations, only interested in a life of privilege rather than public affairs, would turn the best of elites into a sick oligarchy. With everyone disgusted by them, the regime would finally become a plural democracy; the rule of the people by the people. However, unscrupulous leaders of the masses would mold it into a tribal form of populism called 'Ochlocracy'. By the end, the cycle would start all over again.

In his work *The Histories*, Polybius established that the improvements of the Roman institutions laid on the overlapping elements of democracy, aristocracy and monarchy. The combination balanced the power of pure forms neutralizing their flaws, and building a stable, robust and durable regime.

The political prosperity Polybius once saw in the Roman archetype of democracy is what we call today *democratic republics*; the model chosen by the west. However, their virtuous cycle seems to be ending.

By definition, a republic is a representative form of government, where a small number of rulers are elected democratically to administer public affairs in the name of the people. A republic differs from pure democracies because of the aristocratic element implied in representation, while in contrast, full democracy needs to involve the entire citizenry in the decision making.

The Postmodern Polybian Tragedy.

By the end of the 1990, there was a process of political fragmentation which started with the rise of globalization. Along with those changes, came the birth of newly powerful non-state actors, who sometimes helped reinforce the defects of democracy. Their existence challenged the representatives of the people, who struggled against them on an unequal level, and saw their legitimacy being called into question.

One example of this phenomenon was the case of the European Union against Meta. After weak attempts from Brussels to impose social media regulations, the multinational tech giant suggested that if those norms were implemented, [Facebook and Instagram could become unavailable for European citizens](#). German public officials answered the company's warnings by affirming: ["We will be fine without Facebook;"](#) a reaction which forced Meta to take back his words and assured them they would not leave Europe. This kind of soft extortion, where the companies endeavor to restrain laws that do not hold their interests, is not new.

According to [Statista](#), there are almost 303 million Facebook users in the Old World. This gives the young entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley a unique power to lobby Western nations. Their good will of not shutting the most popular apps in the market gives them the possibility of eroding the political capital of any democratic administration whenever they dare to confront their interests.

In the US, big tech companies' demonstration of power over politics was seen when Twitter banned President [Trump's account](#), after a riot entered congress violently threatening elected officials. The incident was [organized using social media](#). However, none of the great minds in Silicon Valley did anything to prevent it.

During the early 2000s, social media companies acted by giving voice to people. An act that resembled the first assemblies in the city of Athens, where the purity of human nature was exhibited with all its perfection and imperfections. Yet, due to the destructive cycle in purely democratic digital platforms, a public space of freedom was gradually reshaped into an open field for political [manipulation of all kinds](#).

A conflict so complex is not related at any level with freedom of speech. Censorship is not tolerable for any Western society. The debate lies on who has to guard users personal data and has legitimacy to enforce regulations in the content we are exposed to. A dispute that lies between democratic states or private companies.

All these problems are nesting inside the Western democratic system. Whenever politicians intend to defend themselves, they are accused by their own voters of attacking their freedom through anti-establishment campaigns enforced via social media. Political bigotry and anger are rewarded in an environment where fully horizontal “democratic” masses of [users are running against the elites](#). In spite of their many flaws, they are an essential piece of the republican framework. These gladiators are fighting a battle in an arena that is far from the voting stations. Because of these internal strains, the system is deteriorating and stimulating a sense of anxiousness and unease in society. [Especially in younger generations](#), who feel that they are not being able to find the genuine causes for the problems they are suffering.

Democratic and Autocratic Forms of Control:

The European Union intended to regain control on the matter in april 2022, when the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS), in an effort to enforce digital sovereignty, launched the public pilot phase of two social media platforms: [EU Voice and EU Video](#). The apps allow citizens to avoid unwanted practices like radicalization, fake news and misinformation; young exposure to body shaming, or further harmful activities. Moreover, as the networks rely on the authorities of the EU, [Europeans are able to democratically influence the policies of social media privacy, and content protection through state institutions](#).

In Asian countries, autocratic and democratic, [there is much more restriction on social media](#), with the state having a strong stance in the matter. In some cases like in South Korea, the level of restraint in the internet is close to censorship with massive regulation over pornography, and pro-North Korean posts. In 2002, the government of South Korea passed the Telecommunications Business Act, creating with it the [Internet Communications Ethics Committee \(ICEC\)](#). The latter monitors the web and makes recommendations for content to be removed. In spite of not being a desirable solution for the issues of the West, the case illustrates how they can enforce regulations over the internet, if democratic states allow it. No one can seriously accuse the South Korean government of totalitarianism.

On the autocratic side, the Chinese Communist Party has decided to exercise protectionist close market policies for its big tech giants: Tencent, Alibaba and China Mobile. Even though private businessmen own many of these companies, the state has shown its strength regarding enforcing regulations. [In august 2021, the government announced new rules to limit the gaming time under the age of 18](#). It was a massive regulatory intervention

designed to tackle addiction. “The rest of the world should pay attention,” affirmed research scholar at Stanford University’s Cyber Policy Center, Graham Webster. “In some areas, China’s government has moved more quickly than other major markets in developing and putting into effect regulations.”

Where do we Stand?

The power to influence societies who elect their rulers is the key of modern ochlocracy and populism. When it lies outside democratic institutions, they become empty shells which are used to fulfill external interests. However, the West should not be afraid of enforcing democratic and digital sovereignty over the technological sphere. Laws against body shaming, grooming and content protection should be voted by the representatives of the people in the legislatures. They should also be imposed by states that desperately require the technical capacities to establish regulation on the internet.

Republics are the conjunction of shared values enforced by common laws; not submissive institutions to be bullied around. Giving Republican democracies a chance to have an impact on the internet, will help to restore faith in their institutions. Citizens will see the effect on voting and participating in the public debate, because the decisions of their representatives will comply with the complexity of our postmodern life.