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Introduction: sovereignty or submission

by Roger Kimball

On the recent conference held by The New Criterion and the Center for American Greatness in Washington, D.C.

Among1 the epigraphs that preface his recent book The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies, the Polish philosopher Ryszard Legutko features a famous bit from Tocqueville's Democracy in America:

> I think then that the species of oppression by which democratic nations are menaced is unlike anything which ever before existed in the world. . . . I am trying myself to choose an expression which will accurately convey the whole of the idea I have formed of it, but in vain . . . . I seek to trace the novel features under which despotism may appear in the world. The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. . . . Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications, and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent, if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks on the contrary to keep them in perpetual childhood: it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided they think of nothing but rejoicing.

It is interesting to note that the first part of this passage also serves as an epigraph for Jacob Talmon's classic *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, a book that figures below in James Piereson's essay on the evolution of the United States: from a union of states (which is what the Founders had forged) into a nation in the modern sense under Lincoln's guidance, and then, in recent decades, into a nation besieged by the centrifugal forces of multiculturalism and identity politics.

Talmon, writing in the 1950s, makes a critical distinction between liberal and totalitarian democracies. The essential difference between the two, he writes, is in their "different attitudes to politics." The liberal approach "assumes politics to be a matter of trial and error"; it regards political systems as "pragmatic contrivances of human ingenuity and spontaneity." Furthermore, it also recognizes "a variety of levels of personal and collective endeavor, which are altogether outside the sphere of politics."

By contrast, the totalitarian version of democracy is "based upon the assumption of a sole and exclusive truth in politics." Talmon calls this "political Messianism." Readers of Norman Cohn's classic *The Pursuit of the Millennium* will be familiar with the concept (as indeed will readers of Karl Marx). The "messianic" quality can be seen partly in the totalizing aspect of the vision, partly in the presumption that it is both inevitable and morally superior to what came before. "[I]t postulates," Talmon writes, "a preordained, harmonious and perfect scheme of things, to which men are irresistibly driven, and at which they are bound to arrive."

The key is this: Do we take "men as they are" and look to politics to work from there? Or do we insist upon treating men "as they were meant to be, and would be, given the proper conditions"?

Communism was one form of political Messianism. The supposedly "post-historical" liberal consensus that Francis Fukuyama championed in *The End of History* is another, kinder, gentler form of utopian presumption. It is worth noting that Fukuyama's book figures as a cautionary marker in several of the essays that follow. Why? Because it is precisely that overweening liberal consensus—the increasingly bureaucratic and notably *illiberal* liberalism espoused by the administrative state—that we set out to challenge in this conference.

Talmon was onto something deep, I believe, when he identified "the paradox of freedom" as the recognition that freedom is unfree so long as it is wed to "an exclusive pattern of social existence, even if this pattern aims at the maximum of social justice and security." The key is this: Do we take "men as they are" and look to politics to work from there? Or do we insist upon treating men "as they were meant to be, and would be, given the proper conditions"?

The former describes the traditional, genuinely liberal view of freedom. The latter describes what Talmon calls "totalitarian democracy." A classic source for the latter view is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau says that anyone who would "dare to undertake the institution of a government must think himself capable, as it were, of *changing human nature*" (my emphasis).

Contrast that hubristic ambition with James Madison's acknowledgment, in *Federalist* 10, that different men have different and competing interests and that the "first object" of government is to protect those differences and the "diversity in the faculties" whence they arise.

The real battle that has been joined—and it is a battle that is in the process of forging a great political realignment—is not between virtuous progressive knights riding the steeds of liberalism, on the one hand, and the atavistic forces of supposedly untutored darkness represented by "populism," on the other.

No, the real battle is between two views of liberty. One is a parochial view that affirms tradition, local affection, and the subordination of politics to the ordinary business of life. The other is more ambitious but also more abstract. It seeks nothing less than to boost us all up to that plane of enlightenment from which all self-interested actions look petty, if not criminal, and through which mankind as a whole (but not, alas, individual men) may hope for whatever salvation secularism leavened by utilitarianism may provide.

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We are still in the opening sallies of the Great Realignment. Many old alliances are being broken, many new ones formed. I expect a lot of heat, and even more smoke. I hope that there will also be at least occasional flashes of light.

It was to encourage such flashes, while also attempting to dissipate some of the attendant heat and smoke, that The New Criterion joined with the Center for American Greatness to ponder the question "Sovereignty or Submission?" We took our title from John Fonte's 2011 book, Sovereignty or Submission: Will Americans Rule Themselves or Be Ruled by Others? In his essay below, Fonte expands his purview to consider how such progressive entities as Freedom House and the National Endowment for Democracy have, in their efforts to "promote democracy" across the globe, promoted instead exactly the sort of administrative, top-down, essentially illiberal form of governance that writers like Tocqueville and Talmon warned about.

"Transnational progressivism" is Fonte's brilliant coinage to describe this anti-nationalist impulse that seeks to transfer political power and decision-making "from democratic nations to supranational authorities and institutions" such as the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and kindred organizations ("judges from the European Court of Human Rights and the International Criminal Court; career officials in the U.S. State Department, the British Foreign Office, and the German Foreign Ministry; American ceos of major global corporations; ngos such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Greenpeace;" etc., etc.). The true political ends of such elite enterprises are generally swaddled in emollient rhetoric about freedom and democracy. But Fonte uncovered some revelatory gems that speak candidly about what's really at stake. For example, Robert Kagan of the Brookings Institution put it with all possible clarity when he declared in 2008 that the "United States . . . should not oppose, but welcome a world of pooled and diminished national sovereignty." At least we know where we stand.

The question of sovereignty—of who governs—is at the center of all contemporary populist initiatives and has been posed with increasing urgency as the bureaucratic burden of what has been called variously the "deep state" or administrative state has weighed more and more forcefully upon the political and social life of Western democracies.

The phenomenon is often identified with the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. But the political, moral, and social realities for which Trump was a symbol and a conduit both predated his candidacy and achieved independent reality in countries as disparate as the United Kingdom, Hungary, Italy, and Brazil.

The question of sovereignty was perhaps most dramatically posed in the United Kingdom. In June 2016, more Brits voted to leave the European Union and return sovereignty to Parliament than had ever voted for any initiative in the long history of Great Britain. Some seventeen million voted to leave the European Union and regain local responsibility for their own lives. The fact that three years have passed without Brexit having been accomplished is a melancholy reminder of how entrenched alternatives to national sovereignty have become. Prime Minister Boris Johnson promised he would, deal or no deal, get Brexit done by the end of October 2019. He was stymied, as much by the established elites of his own party as by Labour. By the time you read this, we will know whether he survived the hastily called general election in December. I shall go out on a limb and predict that he will. Whether he will then manage to get Brexit passed—and on what terms—is still imponderable.

President Trump has often spoken about the issue of sovereignty. In his first speech to the United Nations's General Assembly in September 2017, he said to a startled roomful of diplomats that "we are renewing this founding principle of sovereignty."

> Our government's first duty is to its people, to our citizens—to serve their needs, to ensure their safety, to preserve their rights, and to defend their values. As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries will always, and should always, put your countries first. All responsible leaders have an obligation to serve their own citizens, and the nation-state remains the best vehicle for elevating the human condition.

Trump's slogan "America First" instantly became an object of contempt, ridicule, and hatred to the Left, the NeverTrump Right, and the entrenched bureaucracy of the administrative state. But Angelo M. Codevilla is correct that, before the progressive movement that began with Woodrow Wilson, "labeling any proposal or point of view as 'America First' would have been meaningless" because it would have been redundant. What else would an American administration promulgate? From George Washington through Teddy Roosevelt, an assumption of "America first" was simply taken for granted. Indeed, the phrase,

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Codevilla notes, "may be the most succinct description of George Washington's statecraft." By telling his fellow citizens that "the name of American, which belongs to you, in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of Patriotism, more than any appellation," Washington was presaging Trump's slogan *avant la lettre.*

A second key question, and one related to the issue of sovereignty, concerns what Lincoln called "public sentiment": the widespread, almost taken-for-granted yet nonetheless palpable affirmation by a people of their national identity. The erosion of national sovereignty to which populism is a response has been accompanied by an erosion of the shared national consensus that, traditionally, has nourished the particulars of public sentiment.

Increasingly, the pillars of that consensus—the binding realities of family, religion, civic duty, and patriotic filiation—have faltered before the blandishments of the globalist juggernaut. I think that the English philosopher Roger Scruton was correct when he observed, "Democracies owe their existence to national loyalties—the loyalties that are supposedly shared by government and opposition." One pressing question we face—one raised in several of the essays that follow—is whether we can any longer count on that supervening loyalty to unite us. For most of the contributors, I'd say, the prognosis is, while not despairing, decidedly gloomy.

One reason for the gloominess is what some observers have called the "criminalization of policy differences." Consider the extent to which the term "populism" has been weaponized as a negative epithet by the self-appointed elites. As I have noted elsewhere, if you are able to charge someone with populist sympathies you get, free and for nothing, both the imputation of demagoguery and what was famously derided as a "deplorable" and "irredeemable" cohort. "Populism," that is to say, is wielded less as a descriptive than as a *delegitimizing* term. The element of existential depreciation is almost palpable.

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So is the element of condescension. Inseparable from the diagnosis of populism is the implication not just of incompetence but also of a crudity that is partly aesthetic and partly moral. Hence the curiously visceral distaste expressed by elite opinion for signs of populist sympathy. When Hillary Clinton charged that half of Donald Trump's supporters were an "irredeemable" "basket of deplorables," when Barack Obama castigated small-town Republican voters as "bitter" folk who "cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment," what they expressed was not disagreement but condescending revulsion.

The debate over the location of sovereignty—is it with the people affected or with unaccountable elites?—has played a large role in the rise of the phenomenon we describe as "populism" in the United States as well as in Europe. For one thing, the question of sovereignty

stands behind the rebellion against the political correctness and moral meddlesomeness that are such conspicuous and disfiguring features of our increasingly bureaucratic society. The smothering, Tocquevillian blanket of regulatory excess has had a wide range of practical and economic effects, stifling entrepreneurship and making any sort of productive innovation difficult.

The issue of sovereignty also stands behind the debate over immigration. Indeed, no issue is more central to the question "Who governs?" than the question of a nation's borders and who gets to decide how a country defines its first-person plural: the "We" that makes us who we are as a people.

Throughout his 2016 campaign, Donald Trump promised to enforce America's immigration laws, to end so-called "sanctuary cities," which advertise themselves as safe havens for illegal aliens (though of course politicians in those cities do not call them "illegal aliens"), and to sharpen vetting procedures for people wishing to immigrate to America from countries known as sponsors of terrorism.

Behind the reaction to Trump's efforts at immigration reform are two very different concepts of the nation-state and world order. One view sees the world as a collection of independent sovereign countries that, although interacting with one another, regard the care, safety, and prosperity of their own citizens as their first obligation. This is the traditional view of the nation-state. It is also Donald Trump's view. It is what licenses his talk of putting "America First," a concept that, *pace* the anti-Trump media, has nothing to do with Charles Lindbergh's isolationist movement of the late 1930s and everything to do with fostering a healthy sense of national identity and purpose.

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The alternative view regards the nation-state with suspicion as an atavistic form of political and social organization. The nation-state might still be a practical necessity, but, the argument goes, it is a regrettable necessity inasmuch as it retards mankind's emancipation from the parochial bonds of place and local allegiance. Ideally, according to this view, we are "citizens of the world," not particular countries, and our fundamental obligation is to all mankind. This of course is the progressive view, and it would be hard to overstate its influence.

It would also be hard to overstate its incoherence. A "citizen" (from *civis*) is by definition a person whose affiliation is with a *particular* place, a "*civitas*." A "world-citizen" is an oxymoron—which does not, alas, mean that it is without effect. As Victor Davis Hanson argues below, the "erosion of the citizen" is accelerating as the mere fact of residence is increasingly taken to be synonymous with "legal citizenship." Consequently, "those who happen to live within the borders of the United States (legally or not) increasingly enjoy almost all the same rights as those Americans who were born here or were naturalized."

Hanson underscores the curious double standard that is at work in the breakdown of citizenship and elevation of "mere residence" to the status of legal immunity. "The rationale of the sanctuary city," he notes "is not politically neutral or apparently applicable to issues other than illegal immigration."

> No sanctuary entity, for example, would support similar nullifications of federal law by conservatives should they declare particular red counties exempt from the federal Endangered Species Act, or their citizens not subject to federal handgun background checks.

Progressives argue that a globalist supra-national world—a world without borders—is a necessary condition for free trade. But the spirit of local control tempers the cosmopolitan project of a borderless world with a recognition that the nation-state has been the best guarantor not only of sovereignty but also of broadly shared prosperity. What we might call the ideology of free trade—the globalist aspiration to transcend the impediments of national identity and control—is an abstraction that principally benefits its architects. As President Trump has observed, trade that is not fair is not free.

In the end, what the political philosopher James Burnham anatomized as the "managerial revolution" is part of a larger progressive project. The aim of this project is partly to emancipate mankind from such traditional sources of self-definition as national identity, religious affiliation, and specific cultural rootedness. Burnham castigates this hypertrophied form of liberalism (again, the phrase "illiberal liberalism" seems apt) as "an ideology of suicide" that has insinuated itself into the center of Western culture. In his view, the primary function of such liberalism was to "permit Western civilization to be reconciled to dissolution," to view weakness, failure, even collapse not as a defeat but "as the transition to a new and higher order in which Mankind as a whole joins in a universal civilization that has risen above the parochial distinctions, divisions, and discriminations of the past."

In other words, the operation of the administrative state is not only an effort to extend a certain vision of the world, it is also an effort to consolidate political power.

That is part of the story. Burnham also notes the extent to which the progressive, managerial revolution seeks to perpetuate and aggrandize the apparatus that oversees the dissolution he diagnoses. In other words, the operation of the administrative state is not only an effort to extend a certain vision of the world, it is also an effort to consolidate political power. That is one reason its opposition to populist and nationalist initiatives is so ferocious.

The globalist alternative dangled before us is a version of utopia. But like The Wizard of Oz, it is all show and no substance. Or rather, the substance is an erosion of traditional sources of strength and identity together with an assault on the middle class and its "deplorable" values as an impediment to the realization of beatitude. Increasingly, as Hanson notes below (and as Joel

Kotkin examines at length in his forthcoming book, The New Feudalism), Western societies are reverting to a species of bifurcated society in which a tiny group of elites rule over a docile but imperfectly contented mass. What happens when the engines of prosperity falter is anyone's guess. John O'Sullivan speaks below of the advent of "sacrificial utopia." Only someone innocent of the writings of Orwell, and the machinations of Communist despotism, will think that an ironical designation.

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1 "Sovereignty or submission: Restoring national identity in the spirit of liberty," a symposium organized by *The New Criterion* and the Center for American Greatness, took place on October 16, 2019, in Washington, D.C. Participants were Michael Anton, David Azerrad, Chris Buskirk, Tucker Carlson, Angelo M. Codevilla, John Fonte, Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, Victor Davis Hanson, Roger Kimball, Daniel McCarthy, Balázs Orbán, John O'Sullivan, James Piereson, and Kiron Skinner. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the essays presented in this special section.

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from* The New Criterion *at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

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