Extra-constitutional Leadership: The Problem of Parties

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I propose here to pursue a line of investigation relating to demagoguery that is unconventional, even novel; whether or not it is likely to prove particularly productive is less clear, but I hope the effort is at least worth making. My broad beginning point can be stated as follows. Demagoguery is indeed a trans-historical problem, with common features that span both modern times and the experience of the ancient and early modern republics. At the same time, we need to pay careful attention to key historical differences between these eras as they affect the behavior of demagogues. Perhaps the fundamental difference is the greater degree of institutionalization in states of the modern world. Demagoguery emerged as a central problem of politics in ancient Greece, after all, in large part because state institutions were so rudimentary—because, as Plato and Aristotle so clearly understood, the default mode of the classical polis was the rule of men, not the rule of law. In modern republics, by contrast, the rule of men was to be disguised if not simply effaced by the novel device of a constitution that created political space for the growth of settled legal orders as well as the impersonal bureaucratic structures that would come to

characterize the modern state generally. In the now classic terminology of the sociologist Max Weber, the "traditional" and "charismatic" modes of governance that together may be said to have dominated the pre-modern era would be supplanted by the "rational-legal" mode of governance pioneered by the European states of modern times.

From Weber's perspective, be in noted, the eclipse in his own day of charismatic leadership—encompassing classical demagoguery as well as the religiously inspired sorts of leadership that suggested the name—was not an altogether welcome development. Indeed, Weber attempted to develop a concept of what has come to be called "plebiscitary" leadership in order to compensate for the administrative immobilism and political stagnation that he believed inexorably flow from the institutionalization of politics in the modern liberal or constitutional state. It is easy enough to dismiss Weber as insufficiently sensitive to the continuing possibilities of demagoguery in the late modern era (he failed after all to foresee the imminent rise of Hitler), and as irrelevant in any case to the Anglo-American experience of what one might call non-bureaucratic liberal constitutionalism. In fact, however, there is a surprising congruence between Weber's views and those of Woodrow Wilson and the American "progressive" tradition of the twentieth century.

In language that continues to resonate in our own politics, Wilson lamented the immobilism of the American political system established under the Constitution of 1787, and sought ways to circumvent the separated and balanced powers of the Constitution in order to order to invigorate the political process through enlightened leadership. Wilson looked in the first instance to the British example. Under the influence of Walter Bagehot's interpretation of the "English Constitution" as a "fusion" of powers cemented by a system of cabinet or party government, Wilson toyed with various schemes designed to enhance executive-congressional collaboration and to strengthen parties as a mechanism for ensuring such collaboration. It is not accidental that Wilson's preeminent intellectual hero was none other than Edmund Burke, the British parliamentarian and political thinker of the 18th century who—though this is virtually forgotten today—was the first to make a sustained argument for the legitimacy of party government within the framework of modern constitutional democracy. Over the last half-century, prominent political scientists have continued to carry forward this neo-Wilsonian banner, arguing that the health of American democracy requires what might be called a rationalization of our party system on these quasi-parliamentary lines.

What I want to focus on in this discussion, then, is what I call the "extra-constitutional" dimension of political leadership in the modern world. This means above all the role of political parties, as just indicated. Yet something larger is also involved here. Most obviously, there is the role of political executives themselves. Woodrow Wilson is a key figure also in the reinvention of the American presidency in terms of a kind of leadership no longer firmly anchored in the constitutional system but deriving its legitimacy rather from a visionary intuition of the progressive Zeitgeist. As Jeffrey Tulis in particular has convincingly demonstrated, the emergence of "the rhetorical presidency" in the thought and practice of Wilson represents a sharp break with the conception of presidential leadership that dominated the founding period and most of the nineteenth century, bringing to the fore the idea of a direct relationship between the president and the people through the mediation of public or popular opinion. Though Wilson saw the president less as a competitor of parties and the Congress than as a force that could create consensus and energetic leadership throughout the policy branches of the government, his notion of opinion-based presidential leadership becomes difficult to distinguish in principle from an extra-constitutional politics of demagoguery. The problem is that the increasingly institutionalized presidency of recent years greatly enlarges the opportunities

for demagoguery—a fear that some Americans saw emerging already in the governing style of Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression and in World War II.

The trend toward institutionalization in the politics of the modern world referred to earlier is not limited to the formal political institutions of a state or even to political institutions (notably parties) as such. It also extends to other institutions that are also in the business of opinion formation—in particular, religious organizations, the media, and at least potentially, universities. Let me comment briefly on this neglected dimension of our subject before moving on to the issue of parties.

Religious organizations and political parties have a tangled history, and untangling them, as we shall see, was a precondition for the emergence of democratic party politics as we know them today. Even today, though, we don't have to look far to be impressed by the potential of religious organizations for exercising political leadership, especially in parts of the world where national identities are weak and formal governance remains under-institutionalized. In parts of the Islamic world, notably Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, religiously-based quasi-terrorist parties are better organized than the nominal governments under which they exist. The Islamic world also provides some spectacular examples of media

organizations in de facto autonomous leadership roles, notably the enormously influential Arabic-language (and soon to be English-language) satellite television station Al Jazeera. But we might also want to think about the impact on our own politics of the rise of alternative, mostly conservative media such as the Murdoch empire and radio talk shows. How universities might fit in this picture is less obvious. The days when American university presidents delivered themselves of "public philosophies" seem long gone; but perhaps there are ways in which our universities might again become bulwarks against the winds of demagogic opinion rather than (as they so often seem these days) fanners of those winds. It might be useful in this connection to reflect on the role of philosophic education as conceived by Plato and Aristotle as an antidote to the potentially demagogic temptations of a democratic political elite.

As these examples suggest, extra-constitutional leadership in the sense I am using the term is far from a simply benign phenomenon. Certainly it can support and indeed enable a politics of demagoguery. I believe this is increasingly true of our political parties—indeed, a case can be made that it is parties more than politicians themselves that are the real drivers of the troubling demagogic trends in American politics today. Religious demagoguery is of course a clear and present danger in the form of radical

Islamism. At the same time, it would be a mistake simply to anathematize extra-constitutional leadership. There may well be ways in which it can act to check demagogic tendencies in our politics and political leaders. In the case of parties, as we shall see, this argument was developed originally by Edmund Burke as part of his fundamental defense of party government.

Surveying the contemporary world, what is most striking about the phenomenon of political parties is how accepted a fixture of our politics it has become--and at the same time how deeply problematic it really is. The following observations are very general and rough as well as intentionally provocative.

At one extreme, there is the "Party" with a capital P—the surviving remnants of the Leninist model of the Communist Party in China, North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba. In this model, the extra-constitutional role of the party eclipsed the institutions of the state and formed the core mechanism of totalitarian Communist rule; but this could not have happened without the ideological trappings that made this rule seem (for nearly a century) humanly benign. From this point of view, the Communist party may be said to have been an essentially demagogic institution—the quintessential "modern prince," as Antonio Gramsci notoriously described it. Today, of course, this model seems in terminal eclipse. At the other extreme, there is

what one might call the "non-party" party, the primary function of which is to protect a leadership or political establishment by suppressing the emergence of genuine parties, political issues, or ideological polarization. Noteworthy examples are contemporary Russia, Japan, and Indonesia. In much of the developing world, by contrast, parties tend to be dangerously irresponsible—and not infrequently, armed—representatives of various ethnic, religious, ideological or territorial groupings engaged in a zero-sum struggle for control of the government. It suffices to mention Iraq, but numerous African examples could also easily be cited. In such states, it is difficult to blame political leaders who attempt to find formulas for establishing non-party democracies or, failing that, simply abandon the democratic option.[1]

In the advanced democracies, the picture is complex and nuanced, but even there it is relatively plain that all is not as well as the political science textbooks would have us believe. In much of Europe, particularly "Old Europe," formerly ideological parties have largely lost their edge and identities and become enmeshed in massive log-rolling in defense of the status quo of the modern welfare state. The result has been, on the one hand, a spectacular failure to provide leadership on critical issues of economic performance and European integration, at great cost to their own

credibility, and on the other, encouragement of the emergence of new extra-constitutional political forces (Le Pen in France, for example) of dubious character but growing demagogic appeal to marginalized elements of the population. It is perhaps too paradoxical to suggest that the leadership failure of the mainstream European parties is itself a kind of demagoguery. Yet the fact that such parties are defending rather than challenging the status quo should not be allowed to obscure the reality that they are irresponsibly pandering to the desires and outlook of a population they themselves have systematically debauched for a generation or more.

What about the United States? Looking at the contemporary political scene in this country, one can only say that the Neo-Wilsonians should have been more careful what they wished for. In Wilson's day and as late as the 1970's, the two American parties were large, rather amorphous tents each accommodating a range of economic, social, sectional and ideological tendencies, and managed in some combination by local notables, big city machines, and a smattering of prominent national personages. Today, they are much more ideologically driven and internally homogeneous. They are more responsive to a set of well-organized and well-funded so-called "special interest" lobbying groups than to the broad constituencies of the party; and the role of party consultants and professionals of various kinds in

leadership roles at the national level has increased at the expense of local notables and national politicians. Much of this, of course, is the ironic result of party and primary election reforms designed to increase broad popular participation in candidate selection, but it also reflects various demographic developments as well as the growing ideological polarization of the country--particularly following the rise of a vigorous conservative movement in the 1980's and its effective (if not altogether complete) takeover of the Republican Party.

That there is much to be deplored in the new partisan environment of American politics will be agreed in many quarters. Wilson argued that open debate between parties would clarify political principles and lay the groundwork for national consensus on issues—a notion that from the vantage point of today seems naïve in the extreme. Constant ideological posturing, reflecting the permanent campaign mode in which both parties now largely operate, tends rather to frustrate efforts to forge workable compromises on major national problems (social security or health care, for example). In a particularly disturbing development, ideological rancor and perceived partisan advantage have begun to break down time-honored traditions of bipartisan cooperation in critical arenas such as judicial appointments and national security policy. The use of such sensitive issues

as intelligence collection methodologies as a political weapon in a time of war represents an appalling and dangerous new low in partisan behavior, and raises serious questions whether the phrase "loyal opposition" continues to have any meaning in this country. Lest this comment seem insufficiently fair and balanced, let me hasten to add that there is hardly any better recent example of demagogic squalor across the entire political spectrum than the congressional panic over the Dubai Ports World matter.

To suggest that parties rather than individual politicians are the drivers of contemporary demagoguery is a large and novel claim, one that would need extensive analysis. Yet there is much plausibility to it. For the fact of the matter is that American politics has thrown up few politicians of the sort Lincoln warned of in his Lyceum speech—men of soaring and dangerous ambition. Perhaps it is simply too hard for people like that to get ahead in politics—in the institutionalized politics of modernity, to return to my earlier point. Instead, we have organized parties that offer themselves as the vehicle for more modest kinds of political advancement by more modest sorts of personalities. The phenomenon that would have to be explained is the internal dynamic of parties that transforms otherwise modest and for the most part decent politicians into a demagogic collective.

Would we be better off without political parties? What might political life in democracies look like without them? Outlandish as these questions seem to us, it is well to remember that organized parties had no place in the vision of the American founders, and that the long-standing prejudice against party politics remained strong even in England as late as the eighteenth century. The first defense of parties in republican politics appears in the Discourses of Machiavelli in the context of a discussion of the clash between patricians and plebeians in ancient Rome. But it was Edmund Burke who first lent political respectability to parties in the Anglo-American world, and it is worthwhile glancing briefly at his argument. In the first place, Burke was quite clear that party government was only defensible in a society that was not riven by fundamental religious or ideological issues or shared a basic consensus about the nature of the regime—the case of England following the Glorious Revolution of 1688. (Consider the modern political history of France in contrast to that of Britain from this point of view.)

Secondly, and more interesting, Burke saw parties as the only alternative to one of two undesirable political options for Britain's emerging constitutional order—on the one hand, the domination of the great houses of the old aristocracy, and on the other, the rule of a claque sustained corruptly

by the monarchy. As for the latter, Burke had in mind particularly the notion of a "patriot king" popularized by Lord Bolingbroke, a monarch above party politics ruling through the preferment of men of outstanding "virtue and ability." This apparently attractive vision seemed to Burke in reality a recipe for the advancement of unscrupulous and unprincipled placemen and political hacks at the expense of the solid core of the nation. This solid core—the "gentlemen," Burke called them--were the respectable and propertied classes rooted in local communities whose sentiments reflected, in an inexact yet politically vital way, those of the nation as a whole, and who had sufficient means to serve in public life with tolerable honesty. Parties as Burke understood them provided an essential framework for the political activity of such people. For the more ambitious among them, in particular, they offered a set of political principles that acted as a constraint on their ambition. As such, parties provided a fundamental bulwark against demagoguery as well as corruption.

This view seems at first sight hopelessly antiquated; yet it offers a way of thinking about party leadership that bears interestingly on a number of the themes we have been discussing. Perhaps the key point is that any attempt to rethink parties today must come to grips with the fundamentally problematic nature of opinion leadership in contemporary democracies, and

consider how it might be possible to reconnect parties with natural communities and ordinary citizens.

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[1] Strikingly, though it seems to have been little noticed, American promotion of democracy throughout the developing world has seemed to regard British-style parliamentarianism as the norm, whereas it can be argued that the American model of a strong executive above parties and legislatures is much more appropriate for such societies.