

51st Economic Conference – Zurich, May 31, 2021

«Sovereignty from below. Switzerland in the international context»

Summary of the speech by Oliver Zimmer

Does elite democracy have a future?

Democracies, and particularly liberal democracies, cannot do without the input of responsible elites. In fact, as a power-sharing mechanism democracy is unlikely to survive without elites who are willing to defend it, not only on grounds of self-interest but out of a sense of communal loyalty and civic duty. The question, therefore, is not if democracy can do without elites. The question, rather, is what kind of elite can sustain democracy, conceived as an institution endowing communities – what in German we call *Gemeinwesen* – with political legitimacy and meaning.

This, at any rate, is the question I am going to address in my brief talk. My answer is that living democracies depend on elites committing to a particular social epistemology, a particular way of processing the world around them: Above all, they need to accept that they have no privileged access to the truth; and that, in politics, the search for truth involves a contest between different legitimate perceptions, ideas, values, and interests. What I argue here does not amount to cultural relativism, as is often claimed by today's numerous critics of participatory democracy. What it amounts to is an acceptance of one's own limitations, coupled with the awareness that democracy needs to reflect different life experiences.

Yet it is exactly this attitude – that in politics truth emerges from contentious debate among people who disagree on important issues – that is now frequently called into question. It is being undermined by an epistocratic culture that ascribes truth to a sphere of abstract, and often highly normative, deduction; a sphere that is located outside of politics and social experience. Bearing some similarity to Plato's philosopher kings, epistocracy can thus be defined as the rule of the knowers. It is rooted in the belief that, by virtue of their superior education and enlightened liberal mindset, elites enjoy privileged access to the truth; and that this justifies their claim to holding greater power than a conventional liberal democracy – based on universal suffrage and majority voting – could legitimately afford them.

As a political vision, epistocracy has long played an important role. We encounter it at the dawn of modern mass democracy, when leading republican figures in both the US and France (including James Madison and Abbé Sieyès) advocated restrictions to democratic participation not only on functional grounds, but also because they trusted members of their own milieu more than they trusted those from different social backgrounds and walks of life.

We currently witness a return of this epistocratic mindset. Within academia, authors such as Bryan Caplan and Scott Althaus have questioned the virtue of mass democracy. Democracy, so they have maintained, fails to deliver progressive outcomes. The most influential recent proponent of this line of argument is probably the US-philosopher Jason Brennan. In his bestselling book, *Against Democracy* Brennan argues that democracy is intrinsically unjust because it grants power to incompetent citizens. To prevent this, Brennan proposes a restriction of the franchise through “a voter qualification exam akin to a driver exam.”

What carries even greater weight than the endorsement of epistocracy by academics and portions of the media is its silent embedding within supranational institutions. The institutions of the European Union, for example, invest more trust in a triumvirate of technocrats, judges and other unelected executives than in politicians elected by ordinary citizens. Another political field that is defined by the same epistocratic vision concerns global agreements in areas such as migration or taxation. Commonly known as ‘soft law’ which (as its proponents never tire of reassuring us) lacks direct legal effect, these agreements serve to buttress a narrative of global justice that now carries considerable moral clout.

Yet when all is said and done, epistocrats and populists are bedfellows. Both believe in enjoying privileged access to the truth. While for hard-core populists the truth resides in an unimpeachable *Volk*, for epistocrats it is the preserve of a university-trained elite. When epistocrats call for more global regulation, populists accuse them of selling out their country for personal gain. When ordinary citizens express concern over a policy of open borders, epistocrats accuse them of behaving like unenlightened twats. In a recent book, the historian Sophie Rosenfeld highlights the affinity between the two camps: “In the end, dyed-in-the-wool populists and technocrats mimic one another in rejecting mediating bodies..., procedural legitimacy, and the very idea that fierce competition among ideas is necessary for arriving at political truth.”

Modern liberal democracies cannot do without elites. Yet if democracy is to survive in more than name, it will need an elite that combines exuberant curiosity with genuine modesty. One that is prepared to accept that the part it can play in shaping political outcomes, albeit vital, is always going to be limited. An elite that knows that political truth resembles the truth that Moses was offered by the God of the Old Testament, who, when asked to reveal his name, replied: “I will be who I will be.”