Three Dogmas and Illusions of Democracy

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Abstract

Historically, the essence of democracy is purportedly the opportunity for popular participation in governance. But this thought, traceable to classical Athens and Locke, is fraught with three major dogmas/idols: one, the illusion of freedom and equality (leading to inequality and social stratification); two, of majority rule (a misplaced priority arising from the emphasis on superiority of quantity over quality); and three, of representative governance—simply a veil on the mass of citizens. These three vaunted features are the pillars/idols of democracy—a political system predicated on the conviction/theory that society is socially contracted and on liberalism. But as lofty and practical as these principles sound, they leave more to be desired for they, recrudescently are false phantoms, superstitions, and are the paucity of democracy. Hence Athenian democracy killed Socrates; and modern democracy breeds competition and society bereft of wisdom and morality. If a system which kills its best citizen is not good enough, another which produces its worst (via election) as ruler cannot be the ideal. The theory of democracy and accompanying liberalism breeds violent competition—which is the bane of the world today. Accordingly, this article is simply laterally critical of democracy and its theoretical idols. And, about the idol of freedom (leading to immorality), it canvasses moderation (as was preached by the renaissance Petrarch); about the idol of equality (breeding competition—individual and state, violence, criminality and terrorism) it preaches welfare; against the idol of majority rule, it preaches knowledge and wisdom; and against the idol of popular participation/representation, it preaches referendum.

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I. Introduction

The praxis of democracy thrives on basic illusions; and the theory itself is dogmatic. Dogmas are somewhat fixed (especially religious) beliefs or (any) set of beliefs) that people are expected to accept uncritically. It follows that dogma is faith, and is often beyond reason or opinion. Traditionally, dogmas are likeable to myths, beliefs, and some absolute cultural accretions. In more rational pedestal, dogmas are established structures, theories, procedures, patterns or principles long held sole working ways; fortunately, many **(……..)** did challenge and indeed subsequently prove some of such to be obtuse, erroneous and hence rejectable (as is the post-modernist rejection of foundationalism). For instance, Kuhn **(……..)** indicated the need to reject an un-objectionable paradigm in science; similarly, Rorty **(……..)** detests a philosophical enquiry/search for ultimate reality based on some "given" or apodictic truths. Such strides have helped the world rationality morph toward (or against?) the ideal life. In all accounts, I hold dogma/dogmatism as the method of believing an idea as true or otherwise in a strong way and not accepting anyone else's or contrary/alternative opinion; in this sense, dogmas could be illusory and antithetical to critical thought and rational development. Unfortunately, most personalities are replete with dogmatic attitude and such pervades every aspect of society, including socioeconomics, religion, science, philosophy and politics. Specifically, the theory of democracy is one political thought that thrives on some basic (dogmatic) principles; these tend to render it un-dynamic and a closed system; and this claim is what I try to demonstrate in the following paragraphs.

Earlier, in the paper, *Towards an alternative political structure for nascent Africa…demonarcracy*, I pointed out, *inter allia,* that:

> *…democracy has been resilient as a modern mode of governance without great signals of incorrigibility in the face of emergent and particularly cultural vicissitudes. Yet Africa has neither been successful nor fortunate with it—they have found themselves in peculiar socio-political circumstances pointing to an Armageddon or apocalyptic holocaust…* (2017, 23-34).

The main point of the above was to point the way for a peculiar socioeconomic and political system for a new Africa (committed to justice, development and peaceable sociopolitical order) which must reject a wholesale importation of *democracy* as the sole route to governance. In what follows, I shall dig deeper to adumbrate the major flaws of the ballyhooed democratic tradition as political order. And I hold these flaws both essential

and devastating because they each form some basic assumption/pillar on which the tradition of democracy is purportedly rested. It follows that once these pillars are shown to break down, the entire tradition collapses. And once the tradition collapses, at least, theoretically, it shall be sufficient ground to indicate the need for modification of the essentials of democracy and necessity for nations around the world to possibly awaken to the reality of their "dire need of (to seek alternative) workable model of governance/social organization which at once properly incorporates modernity into their traditions, expedience into necessity, and efficiency into progress" (Asekhauno, 2017).

However, in proposing the foregoing (*demonarcracy*), I did acknowledge that the essence of democracy is purportedly the opportunity for freedom/popular participation in governance. But this thought, traceable to classical Athens and Locke, is, as shall soon be argued, fraught with three major dogmas/idols: One, the complex dogma and illusion of freedom and equality; but against which I shall argue that such leads to inequality and stratification. Two, the dogma of *majority-rule,* which is a misplaced priority arising from the emphasis on superiority of quantity over quality; and against this, I shall argue that the tradition ignores qualitative (and relevance of) participation. And three, the illusion of popular participation/representative governance—which is simply a veil on the mass of citizens; so against this I shall preach referendum. It shall be further acknowledged that those three vaunted features are the major pillars/idols of democracy predicated on some social contract theory and liberalism. And admittedly as lofty and practical as these principles seem, it shall also be shown that they leave more to be desired for they also are the false phantoms, superstitions, assumptions and paucity or excessiveness of democracy. I shall then try to indicate that such is a historical trajectory and is the bane of contemporary world.

II. The Research Question/Goal

Specifically, the questions/issues addressed in this work are:

(i) What is democracy, and what is/are its philosophical foundations?
(ii) How tenable/justifiable are those basic principles/superstitions of democracy?
(iii) To articulate that the theory of democracy is replete with basic dogmas and flaws; and
(iv) To adumbrate that the pursuance of the democratic tradition and its expectations is the bane of contemporary world; the ultimate goal is to suggest route out of the quagmire.

III. Background/Justification for the Work: Democracy and Governance

Most generally, government is the institution conferred with the obligation to govern upon certain rules and amid responsibility. The institution of government is relatively permanent; yet the nature and performance of governance vary from one society/state to the other—even though there could be some common basic indices. Importantly, the ideological stance and quality of the political class of a particular society could form the strength and direction of its governance. Although it could almost certainly be said that government is essential for the proper organization of the State and maintenance of social order, and though common principles/conditions for its recognition (territory, people, control, law, *et cetera*) are clearly set out, it is only unfortunate that the core principles of governance are various from one state to another. Yet clear/certain fundamental principles of state governance need to be set forth for a State—the "political system of a body of people who are politically organized" (Garner, 2009: 1,537). A State is an association of self-sufficient individuals in a universality and abstraction, brought together by some legal order/system (the Constitution) and common needs/security (of life and property) to ensure substantial universal order and public life (Hegel, 1821). Though each state ought to have its model of governance, the democratic tradition seeks to dominate and obliterate all other options.

Clearly, "governance" is the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are (or are not) implemented. At the nation-state level, government is the major actor in governance; others being mainly its organs or agencies and the "civil society"—including lobbyists, pressure groups and propagandists, all of which form the *democratic* society. But government refers to the "structure of principles and rules determining how a state or organization is regulated; is the sovereign power in a nation or state; and is an organization through which a body of people exercises political authority" (Garner: 764). Such "body of people", however, must be recognized or so empowered. The term government is also used more abstractly as a synonym for governance. Accordingly, governance involves politics; *participatory* governance focuses on deepening democratic engagement through the participation of citizens in the processes of governance of their state. The idea is that citizens should play a more direct role in public decision-making or at least engage more deeply with political issues, though government officials should also be responsive to this kind of engagement. In practice, participatory governance can supplement the roles of citizens as voters or as watchdogs through more direct forms of involvement. This implies that governance is hierarchical and ordered. Democracy is one platform of how the "institutional arrangements" are provided within which governing takes place—others including socialist/communist (Marxist), anarchist, monarchist, and military traditions—though with varying degrees of popular acceptability and patronage.

Following Locke, and in contrast to other forms of governance such as aristocracy (government by the rich), Lincoln holds democracy is rule of the people by the people, for the people **(……)**; it means the sovereignty of the people expressed not directly by a vote on any or every individual issue but through their elected representatives (Blackburn 1996: 98). Thus democracy thrives on (the idols of) representation decided by consent of majority citizens; it encourages popular participation, individual freedom, periodic elections, *laisez faire* (free market) economy, the rule of law, recognition and respect for basic human rights, and separation of powers among different agencies. The democratic tradition has pervaded the world stage since the late 18th century (with the emergence of the USA) through the imperialist adventures of the West. One could wonder: what could be wrong with such a generous and enduring system? Deciphering this is the imperative of this work.

Accordingly, this research is important for several reasons; let me mention just a few by posing the following questions. If democracy is the ideal political system: 1. would Athenian democracy have killed Socrates, her acclaimed wisest of all men who had lived? 2. Why does modern democracy breed *competition*; why is it bereft of wisdom and regard for morality? If a system which kills its best citizen is not good enough, another which produces its worst as ruler cannot be the ideal. Hence the theory of democracy and ensuing competition-driven atmosphere is the bane of the world today. My approach through analysis is innovative and creative in the sense that it uproots the central defect in the tradition (of democracy) which makes those two unsound outcomes inevitable.

IV. The Three Dogmas and Illusions of Democracy

As indicated above, without the prevalence of representation (decided by consent of majority citizens), popular participation of citizens, individual-social freedom, periodic elections, *laisez faire* economy, the rule of law, recognition and respect for basic human rights, and separation of powers among different agencies, democracy is not established. There are two immediate consequences of the foregoing. 1. That the very pillars of democracy (just outlined) do not seem to be in support "of the people" they purport to. They are therefore illusory which veil the inhuman nature of the system. 2. That those principles, because of their appeals to emotion (*ad populum*) represent the very possible ideal political system are dogmas, meant to blur all other options and obliterate future researches in the quest for alternative sociopolitical and economic systems. Such is behind the imperialistic gerrymandering posture of the great "world democracies" (the USA, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy). Now, if our point number (1) above dissolve democratic principles as illusory idols, then point number (2) above (blurring dogmas) lacks any premise(s). Hence, to be clear, all the defects of democracy could be reducible to three dogmas.

Dogma no. 1: …*Of Freedom and Equality*

Freedom implies the capacity to act without restriction, and, as Irele (1998, 87) sees it, "freedom, conceived in this way generally refers to all aspects of unfettered action." In socio-political discourse, freedom is often interpreted negatively as the freedom *from* unreasonable external constraints on acting (Berlin, 1969). It also involves (freedom to) the positive exercise of rights, capacities, and possibilities for action, and the exercise of social group rights (Taylor, 1985). In both senses, freedom is understood in terms of the absence of *internal* constraints on political action or speech such as social conformity, choice of religious doctrines (Emerson, 2007). Political freedoms and social freedoms are intricately intertwined with civil liberties and human rights in socio-political discourse. By civil liberties is meant the freedoms that the government cannot abridge either by law or by judicial interpretation, without due process. Some of such liberties include the right to freedom of worship, freedom of assembly, and the right to equal treatment. Still, different thinkers, schools of thought, and certain organizations naturally differ on the nature and dispensation of socio-political freedom and civil liberties. For the extreme liberals (Mill and Nozick), the freedom of the individual is the highest political value, and that institutional practices are to be judged by their success in promoting this value; the moderate liberals (Rawls) hold a conception of liberty that will be evenly distributed and compatible with the liberty of others to the advantage of even the disabled. Communitarians stress those innumerable ways in which individuals are indebted to the society and, therefore, define the freedoms of members of a society with reference to the dictates of such societies. Conservatives argue for a "manly, moral and regulated liberty" (Burke, 1821, 10). The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) reflects those democratic ideals and seeks to protect certain fundamental freedoms of the individual within the community.

Critically, justifying human rights could be a forlorn exercise: what is the basis for claiming that certain rights are basic? Could man be said to be a free agent, not socially, economically, politically, biologically, legally or spiritually determined/restrained? One can only imagine the frontiers of unlimited freedom—violence, gay and lesbianism/bestiality, for instance.

One good of *freedom* is that individuals are actually theoretically free and unrestricted in their ability and legal capacity to act willingly. A citizen may be free to go to school or hope for political leadership position or to be a sport idol; but what if one could not afford (or no opportunity for) such? Freedom therefore becomes selective and discriminatory based on monetary capability or other determining force; it is, as such, freedom for the few, not all citizens. The offshoot of this is that it eventually produces social stratification and breeds inequality, where some individuals become more empowered by dint of their physical or social advantage—by birth or ascribed. Freedom thus breeds competition,

which could be violent; and to the losers, frustration and depression. And the one with hopes/aspiration but dashed expectation seeks alternative routes to satisfy himself, perhaps, takes to criminality, delinquency and unimaginable perversions of morality. And the society and nature is worse for it.

Nonetheless, one must observe that the concept of equality signifies a "qualitative" relationship, in that equality (or equal) signifies a correspondence between a group of different objects that have the same qualities in at least one respect but not in all respects since no two persons are completely equal as some differences would always exist between them. Yet, the demand for equality is a phenomenon that is common place in political cum ethical discussions and debates. White (2007, 2) identifies five (5) forms of equality as *legal equality*, *political equality*, *social equality*, *economic equality*, and *moral equality.* This, however, does not resolve the controversy over equality for people "who praise it or disparage it disagree about what they are praising or disparaging" (Dworkin, 2000, 2). Hence, there is the need to adumbrate the perspectives of different thinkers and schools of thought on the subject-matter. Egalitarianism views persons as being fundamentally equal, not that everyone's condition should be the same, but in certain fundamentally respects, as possessing equal fundamental worth and dignity as equally morally considerable. This implies equal opportunity (for eligible persons); legally, to the 'rule of law' or equality before the law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is committed to equality and non-discrimination. But has this been universally and fairly applicable? In fact, is equality possible or is the idea of freedom not antithetical to that of equality and one equally holding high both within the same society/system?

Dogma no. 2: …*Of Majority Rule*

Commonly, *majority rule* is government formed by a party/candidate who wins the highest electoral vote. All democracies have their version of the meaning of majority. For parliamentary democracies (such as Britain, Canada and Australia), majority is at two counts: One, members of the parliament are assembled after winning popular votes; two, thereafter they converge to appoint leaders/portfolios to form a *government*—often time to be ratified by some nominal head of state (as the case of the British monarchy where the monarch is the chief executive). But for presidential democracies (such as the USA and Nigeria), an executive government is formed once a party/candidate is pronounced victorious. The stake is higher for the USA (the source and world's leading democracy) where a candidate could win on popular vote count but loses at the electoral-collegiate level (as was the case with the Clinton-Trump contest in 2016). In both strands, winners and government are decided based on superiority of vote counts; or could lose both on popular vote count at the electoral-collegiate level (as was the case with the Trump-Biden contest in 2020).

However, I have termed the democratic practice a dogma since it is a misplaced priority arising from the emphasis on superiority of quantity over quality. In fact, what is quantity? Check out the calculus: (Could ten bad eggs be better than one or two good ones?) Hence a community majority of whom citizens' desire freestyle shooting would always have elected its leaders with the same desires! In this way, it would be immoral to be moral in an immoral society; thus, under this condition, it is only moral to be immoral in an immoral setting. Then, analogously, ought not fast moving vehicles to always reach their destinations before trekkers? Ought bombs not to destroy beyond guns and swords? Ought not more rational and intelligent minds to always be innovative, creative and wise? Or is Israel and North Korea not more influential (beyond population) above Nigeria or Namibia? Quality would always rule over quantity.

Besides, its preference for individualism is against human nature and often leads to ancillary social-political and economic infamies. Moreover, who is the origin of the law/constitution? Also, questions arise as to whether various mechanisms ensure that decision making authentically answers to the people or serve their interests. Perhaps the worst issue with democratic tradition is that it does not regard the relativity of culture which may not tolerate some of its ideals as a result of other enduring core values of a people. Thus the goal of democracy encourages imperialism. Consequently, the democratic tradition is replete with so much inadequacy that has been the bane of the world.

The point of the above does not wholly or even partially validate either form of communism as envisaged by Plato or Marx. For, while in the former the untainted/unspoiled human essential and social nature is exaggerated in citizens having to lose their right to privacy, property and family, in the latter, the violet and despotism of human nature is apparent (as witnessed in recent Russian, Cuban, Korean, and Chinese experiences). Thus, though in varying degrees, the theories of communism and democracy fall short of the ideal in the search for alternative routes to State governance.

Dogma no. 3: …*Of Representative Governance*

The democratic theory holds political leaders to wield official power on behalf of citizens. But, in the first place, it is only the (financially) capable who offer to represent the handicapped. However, even if one is so elected be a representative, does he often work the mind/wish of the represented? Moreover, what is meant by participation is preposterous. Does mere voting mean participation beyond being a periodic tool for other's political ascendancy? Consider the *laisez faire* principle. Only capitalists have the capacity to own the means and control of production and distribution, with the active workers/producers drifting as consumers. The issue of respect for rights ignites the

question as to the very meaning of rights: what are rights where there is no right to the basic means of survival? How can one struggling to survive in a competitive environment meaningfully participle in from others' competing for power? In this way, only the few as against the many are actually enabled and capable of practical participation in the day-to-day governance in a democratic state. Such is the acme of structural/harmful exploitation—taking "unfair advantage of… another person's vulnerability for one's own benefit" (Weithermer, 2016). Under democracy, therein lay the harm on the represented by the purported representative. Thus while the former relapse into the wagon of reserved army of the oppressed; the latter enlarges his family through its widening sociopolitical and economic power.

V. Analysis

In the hope that the theory of democracy could be redeemed from its abyss of its nasty (essential) idols, I propose the following preachments. For convenience, I treat separately of the twin idols of freedom and equality.

1. …*Since the idol of freedom leads to immorality*: This idol has led in most nation states (developed or developing) untold moral decay enhanced by the art/mass media. Generally, art is an informative/educative and entertaining human representation; but it could be eminently socially corruptive. The corruptiveness and nastiness of the art of social media is both quantitatively and qualitatively inestimable. Through the employment of social media, countless families have been rendered destabilized, sometimes dissolved; individual privacy is plundered, characters decimated, and falsehood propagated; persons have been deceived and get their heads cut off; and corruption, injustices, immoralities advertised to the parent and child alike, to the lay and pious altogether. Child-upbringing and control has eluded the world, particularly the African world which deeply values moral behavior. Given that the scientific development is a dynamic process, and that the function of reason is to promote the art of life, recent technology has not tended to promote the art of life, especially in entertainment and amorous activity (in music, style, values, art, drama, etc.). Unregulated video theaters are spreading across the world; these makeshift shafts are now open to people of any age, including children. Pornography has become standard farce and has led to a loss of primary cultural values—those values which, for instance, forbid children and young adults to discuss sex-related topics much less practice such. Today, the *selfie* allows for personal adverts replete with different postures of nudity; irresponsible immoral disorder becomes inevitable in the 'contagious effect' and social dislocations everywhere. For example, "next-to-nudity" has become the ideal fashion, indecent exposure, violent attractions, rape, and perversion pervades. Able youth waste away glued to cell phones and other electronic/communication media, platform or device for charting, twitting, and so on. Contemporary milieu, with the social media as catalyst,

represents the acme of moral degeneracy; for us in Africa, our lofty/basic moral virtues have been deeply devastated. This condition needs to be evaluated with a conviction for its emendation.

Against this trend, I propose moderation (since society requires some social control to realize its essence). What is here meant by moderation concerns censoring. By censoring is meant (state) official and comprehensive inspection of print and electronic content to ensure removal/deleting of (perceived or real) material/content considered offensive/corruptive. Material uploaded to the net should get such initial procedures before getting into private access. This applies to all communicative platforms including drama and the standards at colleges and cinemas.

2. …*Since the idol of equality breeds an unbridled quest for amassment of material possessiveness, private and state competition, violence, criminality and terrorism:* From petty family misdemeanors, local rivalry in the bid to attain socioeconomic and political relevance, to intercommunity territorial ambition or imperialism, the democratic tradition has breaded untold competition. Local evidences abound around you. Asekhauno (2017) states that:

> However, as we settle into the 21st century, issues of grave concern have increasingly brought people face to face with questions about survival. Millions of people around the world battle with day to day existence, trying to obtain food, shelter, and clothing and redress violence or life-threatening health problems. Issues of unemployment, housing, education and health care are a concern to all but those who enjoy substantial wealth. People are worried about poisons in their air, water and food. At another level of awareness, enormous changes in national and global economies are creating an ever widening gap between the rich and the poor. Military interventions, civil wars, up-risings and ethnic conflicts are responsible for the death of millions of people each year. Millions more starve to death while their own countries export food, feed grains to livestock and lose arable land to desertification or expansion of cities. Species are becoming extinct at a rapidly escalating rate as the oceans are emptied of fish, forests razed and all manner of hazardous chemical substances invade the biosphere. Climatically, the earth is heated up, threatening extinction of humanity and other specie beings. And the situation is worse for Africa. Then, the following question exemplify the dilemma facing the global community: How can the majority of people, who may already feel overwhelmed with day to day existence, understand and feel empowered to make a difference on issues

> concerning corruption, injustice and impoverishments? Critical thinking must go beyond ordinary problem-solving techniques to questioning and challenging ideas, policies and institutions, not matter how sacred they may be held.

In the world today, the scientific conquest of nature has become the scientific conquest of man—the union of growing productivity and growing destruction; the brinkmanship of annihilation; the surrender of thought and hope and fear to the decisions of the powers that be; and the preservation of misery in the face of unprecedented wealth—constitutes the most description of the present dilemma of man robed in violence; it shapes entire universe of discourse and action, intellectual and material culture, turning things topsy-turvy. Perhaps, such is the product of human egotistic and imperialist adventure introduced by Locke's thought. Part of its hesitation is the conviction that, including in the US, "war, terrorism, and other forms of political violence are in many ways more threatening today than ever…until the 20th century, the vast majority of war deaths were soldiers; today, the young drafted/conscripted and civilian casualty is higher and it is worsening" (Rourke 2005, 11). In today's world, cyber warfare ranges; violence against nature and its environment is relentless; the world, nature and its natures is heated in hopelessness. On the one hand, pre-20st century citizens, it seems to me, were more receptive to nationalistic/universal feelings than what it is today where less altruistic and humane ones dominate, on the other.

Against this trend, however, I propose social welfare and guided minds. By welfare is meant wellbeing in any respect. This prosperity involves public's health, peace and improved morals, safety, social order and security. This social insurance should also aim at providing assistance to those in need through food stamps and/or family allowances; this may be cosmetic but is poor relief via unemployment benefits, old age pensions, support the disabled and the orphans. And, on the other hand, by guided minds I mean man should undergo some revaluation of his values; redirect the object of his interest, away from violent individual/imperial competition, to embrace the fact that humanity is one; that all men are brothers, irrespective of all perceived social, racial, economic, religious and political distinctions. Humanity should be one another's keeper. This would stamp out the inordinacies that today heat-up our world.

3. …*Since the idol of representative governance and majority rule upholds democracy or politics as a game of numbers:* Democracy expects the group with majority simply gets a toothless opposition alternative as opponent. Government is seen as representative of all citizens. However, representation implies "some persons compete for power by telling their electorates what policies they would carry out when given their power" (Irele, 85). To

Schumpeter, democracy " is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people's vote" (1976: 269). Beyond this, how can the vast interest of the electorate be dispassionately articulated and aggregated without some imputation of certain indices as culture, religion, educational and other sociopolitical interests? In fact, what is people's interest beyond the provision of services—roads, power, security, and collection of taxes? Would such also count as the sole interest of the representative? What this implies is that where some acquire and apply authority, other relapse into idleness as mere observers waiting the next period to be asked to repeat the cycle. Again, democracy stands as the people's albatross since citizens remain veiled in the feeling that "it is they (the people) who rule! The real problem is that the citizens continue to wallow in this illusion—from which they need to be pulled out beyond state provided welfare.

Beyond welfare, I propose that only men of knowledge and wisdom be allowed the opportunity to compete since they will not be moved away by private amassments. By men of knowledge, I mean well trained technocrats firmly aware of the transient nature and essence of humanity. Such men of universal knowledge and wisdom are likely to be dispassionate and disinterested actors beyond the hegemonic order; and should treat of humanity as though its one. Then all other positions, no matter how minute should be occupied by the electorate so as to participate in the day to day affairs of the state beyond running commentaries unpaid for.

VI. Conclusion

This article is simply critical of democracy, a political approach to governance purportedly rooted in citizens' popular participation, social freedom and equality as its essence (which, looking at the basis of governance, I referred to as illusory and dogmatic). We have pointed out the absurdity in holding those principles as the ideal and how they ignite untold competition, immorality and social inequality, and how they arouse the critical concerns over the epistemological basis of governance. For the present, and while expecting that other critical efforts (not directed at reflecting on the praxis of democracy) could offer some better alternatives, nascent democracies should hone their new/better approaches to the extant system if those idols of democracy must be redeemed.

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