

## Vox Populi: Vox Loki\*

The famous dictum *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* (i.e., “The voice of the People is the voice of God.”) has been proclaimed by Western progressive thinkers for centuries as the *raison d’être* of democracy. However, we will argue in this essay that it should rather be changed to read *Vox Populi: Vox Loki*.

First, some historical background: It seems that the original use of the phrase dates back to a warning in 739 by Alcuin –leading scholar at the court of Charlemagne– counselling the emperor to resist such a dangerous democratic idea.

On the other hand, in 1327 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Walter Reynolds, brought charges against King Edward II for his absolutist behaviour in a sermon entitled *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*. From Reynolds onwards, English political use of the phrase has favoured greater democratic participation in policy-making and expansion of the franchise. Further in the same vein, the phrase was used as the title of a Whig tract of 1709, entitled *The Judgment of whole Kingdoms and Nations*, reprinted many times since.

The idea that the “voice” of “the People” is sanctioned by some divine power has become one of the ideological pillars of the most important political revolutions of the last two centuries: the French, American and Russian revolutions –in their turn, influencing all major constitutional changes in Western and liberally-minded nations throughout the world. Parliamentary democracy, the principles of equality before the law, civil and political rights of the citizen, as well as universal franchise regardless of class, creed, gender or race, all derive from the progressive idea enshrined in this divine sanction.

However, there has never been a clear and precise idea of what the term “People” really means. This has resulted in some tragic aberrations both in theory and in practice. There are some important questions that have never been properly answered:

- (1) What are the territorial boundaries within which a people have the sovereign right to rule;
- (2) What are the ethnic, cultural or racial characteristics that define a “people”?
- (3) When do the collective rights of a people or an entitled minority outweigh the individual rights of the residents in any one state?
- (4) Are methods such as mass vote by acclamation or plebiscites better or worse than parliamentary elections by secret ballot?

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century we have witnessed the use or distortion of the label “People” to inflict horrific acts of repression and genocide which have obliterated millions of human lives: The definition of the people of Germany as *Der Volk* to justify racial dominance over other ethnic groups considered inferior resulted in the Jewish Holocaust. The rhetoric of the Marxist class struggle was utilized to disenfranchise and repress millions of people in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era. Furthermore, many instances of “ethnic cleansing” in Rwanda, Yugoslavia and Myanmar, are recent tragic examples of this semantic misunderstanding.

At the writing of this essay, confusion as to who or what are “the people” is creating great political and constitutional crises throughout the world. Since the Brexit referendum, the U.K. has been in a state of political crisis which is destabilizing that state as well as the whole of Europe; while Venezuela is in turmoil with two different presidents claiming to be the legitimate representatives of the people.

It remains for us to ask: to what divinity is the dictum *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* referring? As we’re still in thrall of a monotheistic conception of divinity, we would assume the god in question must be either the Judeo-Christian Yahweh or the Muslim Allah. Only the Ancients appear to understand how problematic it could be to attribute divine sanction to only one god or goddess, as we see from Homeric epics like the *Odyssey* that the quarrels in Olympus could create havoc among their human subjects depending on the gods’ predilection.

So, my choice of divinity is Loki, the trickster god of Norse mythology who plays with both gods and humans. A shape-shifter, Loki appears sometime as beneficent or malevolent: a joker in the courts of Destiny. Trusting in the “Voice of Loki” to define the righteousness of the People in an electoral process can produce monstrous anomalies like the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

In conclusion, only a clear and precise definition of “the People” depending on the historical context of each nation state can determine what portion of the electorate has the divine wisdom to elect their representatives. And no *Deus ex Machina* can ever come to our aid in this endeavour.

\* Written by ©Pascual Delgado, January 25<sup>th</sup> 2019