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Sacred Values in Secular Politics

Abstract: What role does sacredness play in the secular politics of the liberal democracies of the United States and Europe today? One approach, focusing on the sources of political unity, suggests that they are integrated by a kind of civil religion, however flawed. This suggestion is criticized empirically as ever less plausible and as blind to the currently feasible limits of social solidarity. A second approach, focusing on the growing democratic crisis of liberal democracies due to ever-deepening social divisions, leads to the suggestion that sacredness is increasingly at work in secular politics. As attachment to organized religion declines so does the public deliberation and negotiation of conflicting interests—the arguing and the bargaining that democracy requires.

Keywords: Civil religion, sacred, secular, deliberation, arguing and bargaining, democracy

1 Civil Religion

I want here to ask what role sacredness plays in present-day politics. The question is not an empirical question about the impact of religion on political behavior and processes. Nor is it a normative question about the appropriate role of religion—the proper place of religious ideas and arguments and justifications in public discourse. I want, rather, to ask: to what extent this distinctive feature of religious life and experience—sacredness—is at work in the supposedly secular politics of contemporary modern societies and, in particular in the liberal democracies of Europe and America.

One approach to answering this question is to focus upon the sources of political unity. A traditional way of pursuing this line of thought goes back to Rousseau, and in particular to the last chapter of *Du contrat social* entitled *De la religion civile*. Rousseau's view contrasts with the pure, rationalist Enlightenment ideal as expressed by Condorcet of transparent communication among future citizens, suitably educated and habituated to listening to the deliverances of reason and conscience, once their education, the laws and public institutions have been per-

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fected, who are able, through appropriate constitutional mechanisms, to reconcile the interests of each with the interests of all. Rousseau insisted rather on the need for a civil religion to mobilize social sentiments (*sentiments de sociabilité*) "without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject", whose dogmas "ought to be few, simple and easily worded, without need of interpretation or commentary". Mobilizing such sentiments would, he thought, necessarily involve sacralizing practices and religion-like thinking. The articles of a purely civil profession of faith would be "not exactly like religious dogmas (*non pas précisement comme dogmes de religion*)" but they would include belief in a deity and in an after-life in which virtue would be rewarded and vice punished, and a commitment to religious toleration.

It was Durkheim who developed this suggestion into a way of viewing how political order is sustained that others have applied to various regime types. What basic difference, Durkheim asked,

> "is there between Christians' celebrating the principal dates of the Christ's life, Jews' celebrating the exodus from Egypt or the promulgation of the Decalogue, and a citizens' meeting commemorating the advent of a new moral charter or some other great event of national life?" (Durkheim 1995[1912], 429)

Citizens, in short, are united and regularly reunite in rituals and through symbols that represent what they hold sacred. Political order, he thought, like religion, requires beliefs and practices that relate to "sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community [...] all those who adhere to them" (44). What is sacred is whatever is deemed sacred by any group. Sacredness is the mark that society imprints on an object, or on a category of time or a place, which gives them a sacred character. This account of sacredness is built upon the notion of *taboo*. Sacred objects, phenomena, times, places and persons are protected from violation by interdictions, prohibitions and rules of avoidance.

Durkheim's theory of religion is, of course, more complex and even more problematic than this. 'Sacred' here does not contrast with 'secular' but with 'profane', but, for one thing, his deployment of the sacred-profane duality is inconsistent, marking, on the one hand, a radical dichotomy of mutual exclusion between classes of things and, on the other, a distinction, admitting of degrees and situational flexibility, between the ways people feel and act towards them, so that society can create sacred things out of ordinary ones. Secondly, there is the whole matter of his more than questionable causal sociological explanation of religious belief and practice in terms of collective power, collective effervescences and so forth. I want to leave these further matters aside in order to focus

on his conception of sacredness and on these three claims: first, that religion as he defines it appears to be an anthropological constant, found across (and, one might add, within) all societies; second, that nothing is inherently sacred and that sacred things are demarcated as such by the people who are members of the relevant society or group; and third, that sacred things serve to bind the persons into distinct cognitive and moral unities. As Paden summarizes these three aspects,

> "Every society has certain entities marked off with special respect and power and religious thought and behavior construct themselves around these privileged foci. While not all religions have gods, all have systems of respect for what is sacred. The path of the monks in non-theistic Buddhism is holy ('the deliverance from suffering is a holy thing as is the whole of life which is a preparation for it'), so is a humble totemic emblem, and so may be the principle of human rights in a secular society." (Paden 1991, 15; see also 1992)

Durkheim himself wrote that there could be

> "no society which does not experience the need at regular intervals to maintain and strengthen the collective feelings and ideas that provide its coherence and its distinct individuality. This moral remaking can be achieved only through meetings, assemblies and congregations in which the individuals, pressing close to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments." (Durkheim 1995[1912], 429)

Durkheim himself applied this conception to politics during the Dreyfus Affair, when he published an article entitled 'Individualism and the Intellectuals' (Durkheim 1969[1898]) in which he neatly turned on its head a favorite argument of the anti-Dreyfusard supporters of the army and the Catholic Church, that national unity was threatened by the 'individualism' and 'anarchy' of various intellectuals who, for the sake of one individual's rights, presumed to put their reason above authority by questioning the legally suspect judgment of the Court that had condemned Dreyfus. To the contrary, Durkheim argued, it was individualism—a "religion of which man is, at the same time, both believer and God"—which was "henceforth the only system of beliefs which can ensure the moral unity of the country" (21-22.) This religion, this "cult of man", which "had for its first dogma the autonomy of reason and for its first rite freedom of thought" (24), viewing the individual person as sacred, had "penetrated our institutions and our customs" and "become part of our whole life" (22). Accordingly, outrages against individuals' rights

> "cannot rest unpunished without putting national existence in jeopardy. It is indeed impossible that they should be freely allowed to occur without weakening the sentiments they violate; and as these sentiments are all that we have in common, they cannot be weakened without disturbing the cohesion of society. A religion which tolerates acts of sacrilege ab-

dicates any sway over men's minds. The religion of the individual can therefore allow itself to be flouted without resistance only on penalty of ruining its credit; since it is the sole link which binds us to one another, such a weakening cannot take place without the onset of social dissolution. Thus the individualist, who defends the rights of the individual, defends at the same time the vital interests of society." (27)

This was powerful rhetoric, written at white heat, and it had considerable influence at the time. Durkheim was here doing what public intellectuals and politicians typically do: appealing to a set of abstract values and principles and claiming that they are shared by all, even though they are not ('We hold these truths to be self-evident') and proclaiming that they are central to the very identity of the wider community. What is striking is his framing this appeal in, so to speak, secular religious terms, embracing the paradox of referring to the secular religion's first *dogma* as autonomy of reason, its first *rite* as freedom of thought and to acting contrary to these as *sacrilege*.

Durkheim had in mind an emergent civil religion proclaiming the principle of human rights in a secular society.[1] But as the twentieth century proceeded a far darker vision of moral remaking was offered by Durkheim's nephew Marcel Mauss, who wrote to the Swedish sociologist Svend Ranulf in the late 1930s:

> "Durkheim, and after him, the rest of us are, I believe, those who founded the theory of the authority of the collective *représentation*. One thing that, fundamentally, we never foresaw was how many large modern societies, that have more or less emerged from the Middle Ages in other respects, could be hypnotized like Australians are by their dances, and set in motion like a children's roundabout. This return to the primitive had not been the object of our thoughts [...]. Basically, we never allowed for the extraordinary new possibilities [...]. I believe that all this is a great tragedy for us, too powerful a verification of things that we had indicated and the proof that we should have expected this verification through evil rather than a verification through goodness." (Ranulf 1939, 32).

And, more pithily but in similar vein, in the same period, Leon Brunschvicq said to Raymond Aron: "Nuremberg is religion according to Durkheim, society adoring itself." (cited along with Ranulf in Lukes 1973, 338)

Several historians and social scientists have studied in depth and detail the phenomena observed by Mauss and Brunschvicq,[2] analyzing systematic sacral-

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1 For a present-day discussion of this theme in the light of Durkheim's argument, see Joas 2008, ch. 11: 'Human Dignity: The Religion of Modernity?' (233–247).

2 These are well summarized by Robert Paxton: "a chauvinist demagogue haranguing an ecstatic crowd; disciplined ranks of marching youths; uniform-shirted militants beating up members of some demonized minority; disciplined ranks of marching youths; obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood; and compensatory cults of unity, energy, and

ization, involving ceremonies, oratory, poster art, parades, rallies, uniforms, cemeteries, monuments, insignia, rituals and symbols of all kinds, and invoking origin myths, leadership cults and transformational, apocalyptic goals deployed by various totalitarian and authoritarian regimes to induce mass loyalty, chief among then Nazism, Italian fascism and Soviet communism. One of them is Emilio Gentile, who while aware of the "wider variety of political sacralization of politics in historical reality", draws a conceptual distinction between what look like two Weberian ideal types: *civil* and *political* religion. Political religion is "the sacralization of a political system founded on an unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments". Thus a political religion is "intolerant, invasive and fundamentalist, and it wishes to permeate every aspect of an individual's life and of society's collective life". Civil religion, by contrast, sacralizes "a political system that guarantees a plurality of ideas, free competition in the exercise of power, and the ability of the governed to dismiss their government". Civil religion therefore "respects individual freedom, coexists with other ideologies, and does not impose obligatory and unconditional support for its commandments" (Gentile 2006[2001], xv).

The question is: does this conception characterize—or, better, to what extent does it characterize—the workings of present-day Western-style liberal democracies? More specifically, is it, and if so to what extent is it, plausible to see their citizens as united through sharing common sentiments based on a range of individualist, freedom-favoring values that they view as sacred? There is a tradition of studies, mainly focused on the United States—let us call it neo-Durkheimian—that make this case. Thus Lloyd Warner gave a famous account of "Memorial Day ceremonies and subsidiary rites (such as those of Armistice or Veterans' Day)", arguing that they "are rituals of a sacred symbol system which functions periodically to unify the whole community, with its conflicting symbols and its opposing, autonomous churches and associations" (Warner 1959, 8). They are part of the "ceremonial calendar of American society" which "functions to draw al people together to emphasize their similarities and common heritage; to minimize their differences, and to contribute to their thinking, feeling and acting alike" (Warner 1962, 7). Edward Shils and Michael Young wrote of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth the Second in Britain as providing "at one time and for practically the entire society such an intensive contact with the sacred that we believe we are justified in interpreting it [...] as a great act of national communion" (Shils/Young 1953,

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purity, pursued with redemptive violence." (Paxton 1998, 1) For a Durkheimian interpretation of these phenomena as exemplifying 'mechanical solidarity' see Brooker 1991.

80). Sidney Verba analyzed the popular reaction to the Kennedy assassination as an "intense mutual rededication ceremony" that brought "to the fore a pre-existing commitment—a commitment fundamental to the political community in the United States", invoking "the kind of primordial emotional attachment that is necessary for the long-term maintenance of a political system" (Verba 1965, 354–355, 358).

It was Robert Bellah's article 'Civil Religion in America' (Bellah (1967) that crystallized this neo-Durkheimian tradition, generating an intense debate that reached its peak in the mid-1970s. Starting from the Durkheimian notion that every group has a religious dimension expressed in "beliefs, symbols and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity" (8). Bellah traced the course of its sacred symbolism stressing the ways in which it reproduced biblical archetypes. First there was the Revolution, the final act of Exodus leading the American Israel from the old lands across the waters to the New Jerusalem, and then the Civil War, introducing, especially with Lincoln, a new theme of death, sacrifice and rebirth. It had its own sacred texts—the Constitution, Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights—and "its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols" (18). Bellah wrote that these were "powerful symbols of national solidarity" that are able to "mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals" (13). But it is important to note that for Bellah, just as for Durkheim himself, this was nationalism, or perhaps patriotism, with a universalistic mission (see Wallace 1977). Aware that it "has often been used as a cloak for petty interests and ugly passions", he viewed it as a "living faith" in need of "continual reformulation, of being measured by universal standards"—an "understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality" so that "a world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion". It was concerned, Bellah concluded, "that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations" (18–19).

There has been considerable discussion of the empirical evidence for and against Bellah's case and of its potential for theoretical elaboration.[3] The civil religion idea has entered public discourse in the United States, invoked by Presidents during the civil rights movement and after the 9/11 attacks. But revisiting this debate after four decades of ever-greater inequalities of condition, social con-

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3 Bellah himself came to see civil religion as an "empty and broken shell" (quoted in Gorski 2017, vii) and wrote of a "broken covenant" (Bellah 1992). Philip Gorski has defended the "civil religious tradition" against thinkers he sees as having corrupted it. In contrast to religious nationalism and radical secularism, Gorskl views it as "a dynamic and living tradition" (Gorski 2017, ix).

flicts now fueled by immigration, mass incarceration and the hegemony of market liberalism and in the wake of the Vietnam and Iraq wars, one is struck by the lack of ironic distance between its exponents and the object of their analyses: by their readiness to adopt an uncritical interpretation of its articles of faith and to embrace its aspirational claims at face value. Contrast the tone of the passages cited above with the following comments by Andrew Bacevic, critic of the over-extension of American power, about 'the church of American the Redeemer':

> "This is a virtual congregation, albeit one possessing many of the attributes of a more traditional religion. The church has its own Holy Scripture, authenticated on July 4 1776, at a gathering of 56 prophets. And it has its own saints, prominent among them the Good Thomas Jefferson, chief author of the sacred text (not the Bad Thomas Jefferson who owned and impregnated slaves); Abraham Lincoln, who freed said slaves and thereby suffered martyrdom (on Good Friday, no less); and, of course, the duly canonized figures most credited with saving the world itself from evil: Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, their status akin to that of saints Peter and Paul in Christianity. The Church of America the Redeemer even has its own Jerusalem, located on the banks of the Potomac, and its own hierarchy, its members situated nearby in high temples of varying architectural distinction […]. When it comes to shalt's and shalt not's, it tends to be flexible, if not altogether squishy. It demands of the faithful just one thing: a fervent belief in America's mission to remake the world in its own image." (Bacevic 2017)[4]

Moreover, as Douglas McAdam and Marina Kloos have shown (McAdam/Kloos 2014), America has never been more divided politically and economically in the last hundred years than now. Recognizing this requires treating long-accepted claims of value consensus, even 'overlapping consensus' (in John Rawls's phrase) of conceptions of the good, with ever-greater skepticism. There have certainly been moments, at times of crisis, when such claims can look more plausible—flurries of reverential activity, during wartime, above all, and rather briefly after 9/11. But even these are pallid simulacra of real religious rituals and symbolism. What they amount to is episodic and short-lived evocations of dormant dispositions summoned by the invocation of symbols and the performance of ceremonies such as flags, national anthems, monuments, solemn oaths, the naming of battleships, and the like. But these are universally seen as merely metaphorical though

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4 I agree with Jan Werner Mueller's account of civil religion as denoting "a more or less metaphorical invocation of concepts, dispositions and behaviors associated commonly with religion […] as having been transferred from religious to political objects. Veneration of symbols such as flags, national anthems, pledges of allegiance, ceremonies at statesmen's tombs, 'Constitutions Days', even battleships named after the constitution." Here 'religion' is just an increasingly empty metaphor for creating and reinforcing the symbolic power of constitutions (Mueller 2007, 81). And, as Gorski writes, "America's civil holidays have been gradually colonized by consumer capitalism" (Gorski 2017, 228).

capable of activating collective emotions that will soon pass, as when after 9/11 people were encouraged to go shopping.

But, apart from the dubious empirical plausibility today of their analyses, there is a central theoretical flaw that these neo-Durkheimian exponents of civil religion inherit from the master. Recall Durkheim's religion of individualism, whose conception of the individual person as sacred had 'penetrated our institutions and our customs' and become 'part of our whole life', so that a violation of any individual's rights was a sacrilege that could not go unpunished without weakening the cohesion of society. Given the ever-greater heterogeneity of modern societies, social solidarity can only, on Durkheim's account, be based on viewing the individual as sacred and the individual's rights as therefore inviolable. Even allowing for the rhetoric of an embattled Dreyfusard who believed that such solidarity was both needed and coming into being, this altogether fails to address the (actual and potential) limits of such solidarity.[5] These derive from the existence of social divisions among conflicting groups of all kinds—status, religious, ethnic, racial, regional and occupational groups—and the boundaries they erect and police, which limit and sometimes preclude respect and even concern for individuals outside the group, let alone viewing them as sacred. Dominant or privileged groups or groups that feel threatened or marginalized will often, at best, treat members of others—poor, urban Afro-Americans, for example, or Muslims or immigrants—with suspicion rather than solidarity. Members of most groups will regard some outsiders—sex-offenders, violent criminals, recidivists—as excluded from the solidarities of citizenship, treating them as outcasts and outlaws. Durkheim and the neo-Durkheimians see the rituals and symbols of civil religion as affirming a solidarity that already transcends group boundaries rather than acknowledging the extent to which it is confined within them, and the challenge of reaching beyond them.

2 Deep Divisions

I shall now argue that, rather than helping to explain political unity, sacredness may contribute to accounting for both the sustaining and the deepening of such

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5 For an intensely interesting discussion of the limits of solidarity see Richard Rorty's chapter on solidarity in Rorty 1989 and the critique by Norman Geras in Geras 1998. Rorty made the mistake of denying the reality of *human* solidarity (specifically among rescuers during the Holocaust) rather than acknowledging the obstacles to its attainment.

social divisions and hence for the current and growing democratic crisis of our contemporary liberal democracies.

Let me first state the argument in a highly abstract form. The field of politics is a space of diverse and often conflicting interests and of communication by means of speech acts. As Jon Elster, in a study of constituent assemblies (Elster 2000), has remarked, agreement is reached in such assemblies, and also in legislatures, committees and decision-making bodies, by talk (and, we should add, more generally, verbal communication), as distinct from victory by fighting, and this, I here want to propose, is true more widely in politics, for example, in electoral campaigns, in negotiations, in mediating disputes, in mutual cooperation and in general in the securing of compliance to power and in organizing and mobilizing to resist it. Elster suggests that the speech acts in question are

> "of two basic types: arguing and bargaining. Rational argumentation on the one hand, threats and promises on the other, are the main vehicles by which the parties seek to reach agreement. The former is subject to criteria of *validity*, the latter to criteria of *credibility*." (371–372)

This suggestion reproduces a distinction, most fully developed by Jürgen Habermas, between communicative and strategic action. In communication we seek to achieve understanding and are thus committed to three validity claims, and if communication is even minimally to succeed, those we address assume that we fulfill these commitments: to propositional truth, normative rightness and truthfulness. The first refers to factual claims. The second, albeit controversial, can best be seen (if invoking justice) as involving some version of the idea of impartiality. And the third signifies sincerity. The pure form of communication involves speech acts oriented to *rational discussion*, where everything is open to questioning and the "no force but that of the better argument" prevails (Habermas 1975, 107).

Bargaining, by contrast, involves the making of threats, on the one hand, and offers and promises, on the other, within an assumed context of actors pursuing their several interests. The threats and offers constitute negative and positive incentives motivating actors who are seen as deciding among options. The pure form of bargaining thus involves rational calculation by the actors of the value to them of alternative prospective outcomes measured against one another, the weighing of alternative options against one another in the light of the actors' preferences in terms of some assumed metric of costs and benefits, where all the actors—those making and those receiving threats and offers—are employing *instrumental (or means-end) rationality*. Both these pure forms are, of course, just that: ruthless abstractions from the complexity of real-world interactions, in which interests must be communicated and argument is most often more or less strategic. Self-interest

typically needs to be clothed in the language of impartial argument if it is to be effectively pursued, and sometimes, as Elster remarks, "the garb matters" and "the outcome is different because the actors have to pull some of their punches" (421). Elster calls this "the civilizing role of hypocrisy" (349). And real argument rarely meets the rarified conditions of Habermas's 'ideal discourse', but sometimes the normative pressure of such ideals can persuade interested parties that the conclusions of well-reasoned arguments are inescapable.

The point to notice here is that the category of sacredness is not only orthogonal to both communicative and instrumental rationality; it is actually incompatible with both. For, first, to hold something sacred is to withhold it from rational scrutiny. What makes sacred things sacred is a set of assumptions and principles of action which, being dogmas, are taken on faith as given and which, though they can be interpreted, are not to be put in question or critically examined for their truth or subjected to searching debate and discussion that might undermine them. And, second, to treat something as sacred is not simply to accord it unconditional or absolute value relative to other values or lexical priority relative to other goods; it is, rather, to view it as incommensurable in a specific way: that is, as set apart from comparison with other items. It is to have a specific attitude to such comparisons, namely, to denounce, even anathematize them. This, I claim, is the difference between *trade offs* and *sacrifices* (see Lukes 1997).[6]

Descending now from the high abstraction of the foregoing argument to the realities of present-day politics, I observe that the question of sacredness is very much alive in both European and American political life. Should anything, then, be immune to questioning and debate? Should there be laws, even constitutional provisions to prevent certain questions from arising in public? What about Holocaust denial? For understandable reasons this question has generated strikingly different answers, namely, no in the United States and yes in much of Europe, notably Germany, Austria and France. And yet in the US the idea has become accepted by enlightened liberals that certain topics and issues are off limits and thus not to be questioned or discussed—the idea labelled by their enemies as 'political correctness'. This very idea turned out itself to be an important source of conflict and resentment in the recent US election; it was effectively used by Donald Trump to rally supporters on the basis that matters important to them were excluded from open discussion and debate, that even to raise them was to invite being labeled 'deplorable' and *stigmatized* (note the religious term) as being racist and bigoted.

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6 I admit to adopting what the authors of *Is Critique Secular?* call the conventional account that "features a linked series of constitutive oppositions: secularism-religion, critique-orthodoxy, reason-belief, judgment-obedience, truth-faith, transparency-opacity" (Asad et al. 2013, viii).

Thus, as Arlie Hochschild wrote, "it was with joyous relief that many heard a Donald Trump who seemed to be wildly, omnipotently, magically free of all PC constraints". This "giddy, validating release produced a kind of 'high' that felt good. And of course people wanted to feel good. The desire to hold on to this elation became a matter of *emotional self-interest*." (Hochschild 2016, 227–228)

I shall now suggest that perhaps there is a more specific way in which sacredness has been at work in our democratic politics and in ways that do not appear to be diminishing in scope and significance. I want to explore the idea that a realistic account of how our democracies function, as opposed to the prevailing view of how they ought to, suggests that the category of sacredness could help to make sense of this disjuncture.

In their recently published book *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections do not Produce Responsive Government* Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels expound what they call the conventional, 'folk theory' of democracy. According to this,

> "democracy begins with the voters. Ordinary people have preferences about what their governments should do. They choose leaders who will do those things, or they enact their preferences directly in referendums. In either case, what the majority wants becomes government policy—a highly attractive prospect in light of most human experience with governments. Democracy makes the people the rulers, and legitimacy derives from their consent." (Achen/Bartels 2016, 1)

This set of ideas has "passed into everyday wisdom, not just in the United States but in a great many other countries around the globe" (1). Moreover, it has been accepted by much of—and indeed much of the best of-contemporary political theory, which has focused on models of participatory or deliberative democracy that assume full or nearly full compliance with democratic norms. These models emphasize and often simply assume "rationality, mutual consideration, and the patient exchange of publicly justified reasons for supporting specific policies" (301).

Most of the rest of their book displays abundant evidence for concluding how unrealistic these expectations are. Indeed, they write,

> "the ideal of popular sovereignty plays much the same role in contemporary democratic ideology that the divine right of kings played in the monarchical era. It is a 'quasi-religious commitment', in Stimson's terms, a fiction providing legitimacy and stability to political systems whose actual workings are manifestly—and inevitably—rather less than divine. The fiction feels natural within the Enlightenment mind-set of rationality and human perfectibility. Thoughtful people and important scholars believe it. And its credibility is bolstered by the undeniable practical successes of many of the political systems that invoke it." (19)

Of course, this skepticism about both the enactment of citizens of their democratic duty and indeed of their capacity to do so has a long history. Achen and Bartels cite Walter Lippmann in 1922 observing that

> "the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simple model before we can manage it." (Lippmann 1922, 16)

And more than half a century ago political scientists were commenting that vote choices were "relatively invulnerable to direct argumentation", "characterized more by faith than by conviction and by wishful expectation rather than careful prediction of consequences", and that many citizens "do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time" (31, 32). And things have not changed. The authors cite one contemporary scholar writing that most people "know jaw-droppingly little about politics" (37). From the various findings of present-day research they gather together in the book they conclude that modern electorates do not even come close to meeting the requirements of democratic theory.

Nor, they add, are they any better at retrospective voting (which demands much less of voters than prospective issue voting), that is at assessing "responsibility for changes in their own welfare". For instance, they find that "voters punish incumbent politicians for changes in their welfare that are clearly acts of God or nature", and are poor judges of assigning credit and blame. Retrospection, they argue, is blind and at very best myopic. The retrospective theory of voting, they write, "asks too much of ordinary people. They cannot meet its demands, and the result is capricious judgments at election time." (214) Nor do the various experiments in direct democracy, from direct primaries, citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies to plebiscitary referendums offer any basis for concluding otherwise. What these deliver is "a mishmash of heightened responsiveness to popular impulses, behind-the-scenes elite influence, and self-defeating choices stemming from the limited political experience and attention of ordinary citizens" (86). And this is not just true of US voters. For example, it turns out that in France, the very home of ideological politics and of the very distinction between left and right, most voters do not understand the difference.

How, then, are we to understand how democratic citizens make their electoral choices? The authors' answer, which they claim to have a basis in political psychology and provide "a more scientifically accurate and politically realistic foundation for democratic theory" than the folk theory, focuses on group attach-

ments: on people's *identities*, which they claim are "emotional attachments that transcend thinking" (228). Here is their summary of their alternative picture:

> "real people are not much like the citizens imagined by the folk theory. Numerous studies have demonstrated that most residents of democratic countries have little interest in politics and do not follow news of public affairs beyond browsing the headlines. They do no know the details of even salient policy debates, they do not have a firm understanding of what the political parties stand for, and they often vote for parties whose long-standing issues positions are at odds with their own. Mostly, they identify with ethnic, racial, occupational, religious, or other sorts of groups, and often—whether through group ties or hereditary loyalties—with a political party. Even the most attentive citizens mostly adopt the policy positions of the parties as their own: they are mirrors of the parties, not their masters. For most citizens most of the time, party and group loyalties are the primary drivers of vote choices."

Now 'identity' is a notoriously slippery and unilluminating concept that conceals more than it reveals (see Brubaker/Cooper 2000). For one thing, it is entirely ambivalent on the matter of *agency*: is my identity determinate or indeterminate, solid or fluid, given or subject to choice, fixed or invented? Nor is it clear how it can provide a 'foundation for democratic theory'. So how can we get beyond the unhelpful notion of identity to focus on the motivations and mindsets of democratic citizens and on where the threats and dangers to a functioning democracy lie. Assuming that Achen and Bartels are right about the overwhelming importance of group affiliations in explaining people's voting choices, we need to ask how this connection works. What is the mechanism?

The folk theory of democracy—the lay version of what Enlightenment thinkers from Condorcet to Habermas have theorized—assumes democratic citizens to be, to some significant degree. both communicatively and instrumentally rational, arguing and bargaining in the public sphere—able to "formulate policy preferences, assess where candidates stand on the issues, set aside cognitive biases and group prejudices, and then choose a candidate who embodies an uplifting version of their own policy views", or at least retrospectively reward or punish governments accordingly.

Instead, it seems that the evidence suggests that, for the most part, people faced with political choices tend to treat their political standpoints, especially at the national or Federal level, as *sacred*. They see them as immune to questioning or even comparison with others and to compromise or balancing with the policy preferences of those on the other side, and as binding them, as the Durkheimian view would predict, to the groups with which they affiliate. As such they not only bind but blind them to what might be said for other views. In Rousseau's words, they are like religious dogmas—"few, simple and easily worded, without explanation or commentary". Political positions and policy views in general mirror group,

especially party affiliations and this applies equally to the poorly and the highly educated. Indeed, as Achen and Bartels comment, "the political beliefs of more attentive, knowledgeable citizens are often *more* subject to partisan bias than those of their less attentive neighbors" and the highly engaged even "develop ideological frameworks rationalizing their group loyalties and denigrating those of their political opponents" (310).

None of this evidence, as the authors freely admit, is news. Nor is their negative evaluation of the competence and performance of voters when measured against the requirements of what they call the 'folk' and used to be called the 'classical' theory of democracy. In the 1950s and early 1960s it was, indeed, common among social scientists studying electoral behavior in the face of such evidence to draw revisionist conclusions about the conditions for a well-functioning democracy. Following Schumpeter, they viewed democracy as a competition between elites and argued, with the memory of Nazism and Fascism and the spectacle of Communist elections in mind, that democracy was better off without too much participation. One political theorist even wrote an article entitled 'In Defense of Apathy' (Morris-Jones 1954). Such complacency is certainly far from warranted today. It will be obvious to readers of this article, without the need to spell them out, where the dangers of sacred thinking in politics lie, at a time when populist leaders and parties, xenophobia and anti-Muslim prejudices and fears generated by mass immigration have acquired a rather sudden and unforeseen dominance in the politics of both Europe and the United States.

It may, however, be worth drawing attention to various features of today's political environment that render those dangers all the more acute. First, there is the massive and ever-expanding flow of increasingly unfiltered and unverified information, transmitted across the internet and other media, leading to information-overload for individuals seeking to reduce their perplexity in face of the ever-greater complexity of political life. Second, there is the increasingly segmented diffusion of this information: hence the recurrent metaphors of 'bubbles' or 'silos' within which people consume information as interpreted by those who police the boundaries of the groups with whom they affiliate. And third, there is the ever-more-apparent fraying of the norm of truth-telling and respect for the virtue of truthfulness in public life and consequent decline of the civilizing role of hypocrisy—a trend rendered startlingly visible in both contemporary Russia and in the course of the recent US election campaign and its aftermath.

The overall story may be more complex still. For one thing, the distinction I have drawn between the sacred and rational may be overdrawn. Insofar as this distinction draws upon a conception of rationality as invoking conscious and deliberative thinking, it is susceptible to the critique, supported by the findings of cognitive science, that human cognition is based on two kinds of processes—one fast,

automatic and largely unconscious, the other slow, deliberate and largely conscious (Kahneman 2011; for further applications see Vaisey 2009). Viewed from this perspective, the persistent failure of voters to meet democratic requirements, so amply documented by Bartels and Achen and all their illustrious predecessors, takes on a different coloring. For it is a failure of rationality of the second kind, notably of arguing and bargaining. But voting and, in general, taking and expressing political stands, can be viewed as manifesting a form of practical consciousness, or *habitus*, where conscious reasoning and the weighing of goods is absent or at best marginally involved.

Political life is not confined to the seminar and the market. People can know intuitively where they stand politically, drawing on their life experience and with reference to their group affiliations, and this can indeed be seen as rational when there is little time and space in their lives to acquire the information needed for the reasoning and calculation required for discursive or 'slow' cognition. This point is of importance in suggesting restraint in labeling voters as irrational, even though it has no bearing on the assessment of the rationality of their choices and positions—in particular, on whether these are evidence-based and whether they favor or subvert their interests.

Secondly, there are various empirical questions to be asked about the extent and distribution of what we may call the sacredness of political allegiances. Under what conditions do these become more sacred? Are Bartels and Achen right to suggest that 'more attentive, knowledgeable citizens' are even more subject to them than other citizens? Has there been an increase in such sacredness in recent US political life? Is it more prevalent in the political life of the US than, say, in the more secularized societies of Western Europe? If so, could this be because of American exceptionalism in respect of the prevalence of sacredness in religion itself?

And what happens when religious people abandon organized religion? This is happening fast. In the US the proportion of those rejecting any religious affiliation rose from 6 percent in 1972 to 22 percent in 2014 and among Millennials the figure was 35 percent. According to Peter Beinart, as Americans have left the churches, "they haven't stopped viewing politics as a struggle between 'us' and 'them'. Many have come to define us and them in even more primal and irreconcilable ways." Under adverse and ever more precarious economic circumstances and beset by all kinds of personal troubles, and unable to realize their traditional aspirations, people become intolerant in different ways. Citing recent research, Beinart reports that evangelicals who do not regularly attend church, though less hostile to gay people than those who do, are "more hostile to African Americans, Latinos and Muslims" and "among Catholics, mainline Protestants, and born-again Protestants, the less you attended church, the more anti-immigrant you were".

(Beinart suggests that this may also be true in Europe. Citing evidence from Sweden, he observes that supporters of the far right are less likely to attend church or belong to any community organization.) Thus "when cultural conservatives disengage from organized religion, they tend to redraw the boundaries of identity, de-emphasizing morality and religion and emphasizing race and nation". And something similar may be happening on the left of politics among both white and black people. Thus "liberal non-attenders fueled Bernie Sanders's insurgency against Hillary Clinton" and were more likely to call the American dream a myth. Black Lives Matter, unlike the civil rights movement, adopt a post-Christian perspective, accusing black churches of insufficient militancy in the face of racial injustice. Perhaps, Beinart concludes, "secularization isn't easing political conflict" but is rather "making American politics even more convulsive and zero-sum" (Beinart 2017). Perhaps, in short, sacredness survives in ever more virulent forms as our societies become ever more secular.

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