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The Democratic Fundamentalism

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CHAPTER I

BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS

On March 20, 2003, an army drawn from military forces of the United States, Great Britain and Australia began a war of occupation in Iraq, defying international laws and the mandates of the United Nations. The decision to invade Iraq was, to some degree, in retaliation for the Al Qaeda terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, although the real motive was the great powers' geostrategic interest in controlling oil sources. Other factors included Washington's increasing distrust of Saudi Arabia, its main ally in the Muslim world, and the administration's desire to establish and lead a new world order in which only China might figure as an alternative power to the United States. The decision to go to war was formalized in the Azores Islands during a meeting between the President of the United States and the Prime Ministers of Britain and Spain, at which they issued an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, ordering him to destroy his presumed arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. The courts of public opinion around the world were told that the primary objectives of this second Gulf war were not only to eliminate this arsenal but also to abolish the Iraqi dictator's

tyrannical regime (Hussein was described as the Hitler of the 21st century and as a staunch ally of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism) and to create a democratic regime in the country —in short, to liberate the people, who would then welcome the occupying troops as heroes. Because the Charter of the United Nations expressly prohibits the use of military action as a means to effect regime change, the governments of the United States, Britain and Spain justified the attack instead by playing up the threat of Saddam's use of nuclear or chemical weapons. While we do not yet know the final outcome, we do know how events have so far played out: the invading forces did not find any weapons that might have justified the White House's fears, the Iraqi state was destroyed nonetheless and the difficulties of building a new regime have become patently clear. In the interim, military and civilian casualties continue to mount in the region.

In October 2003, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution seeking to normalize the situation in Iraq and to establish a multinational reconstruction effort for the country which, despite its large oil reserves and energy supplies, could not generate the revenue needed to finance its own future. The UN resolution was simply an attempt to rescue the international community from the quagmire created by the reckless decisions made by the governments at the meeting in the Azores. The resolution was not, nor could it be, an *a posteriori* attempt to legitimize the invasion of Iraq. The insidious doctrine of pre-emptive warfare, which served as preamble to the ensuing chaos, persists to this day along with lingering doubts regarding the legality or the feasibility of exporting democracy through the use of force.

The occupation of Iraq is the quintessential example of all the developments that have contributed to the current framework of international relations and the creation of the new world order that world leaders had been seeking to establish since the fall of the Berlin Wall and that was seriously threatened by the events of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington. The occupation of Iraq is an example of a system of logic, which, while purporting to act against terrorism and in defense of human rights and democracy, encompasses both ethical convictions and execrable acts. This tangled web of ethical convictions and execrable actions includes, on the one hand, the creation of an International Court of Justice, and on the other, the shameful spectacle of the creation of a concentration camp for holding suspects, established in Guantanamo by the United States, or the Russian government's brutal reaction to the occupation of the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow, where blind force was used to solve the crisis, resulting in the death of all of the hostage-takers and many of the hostages.

None of these events, and others not mentioned here, are accidental or the result of blunders or skills of certain governments of the time. They stem from the increasingly difficult task that free societies face in trying to fit their standards and ways of life into the new framework of globalization; they also emanate from the absence of a theoretical analysis capable of providing definitive answers to issues of 21st century democracy. There is a growing tendency among democratic nations to limit the exercise and practice of freedom in the name of security, be it the security of the state or that of the individual. Globalization has highlighted the paradoxes and contradictions plaguing mature capitalist systems in a world still governed by institutions

spawned by 19th century social conventions that have not incorporated the enormous changes wrought by technological advances, the complexities of the information society, or the now universal rule of economic efficiency, which is increasingly difficult to regulate and ever less subject to political control. This uncertain state of affairs has provided a breeding ground for rogues and opportunists comfortably ensconced in the upper echelons of newly emergent mafias in countries where democracy is in its infancy. It has also served to foster political mediocrity and the role of religion and superstition in modern-day governments.

It is worth noting that, in an era characterized by major scientific advances, the fruits of these discoveries are frequently hijacked by those intangible forces that seek to govern the world —not through moral principles that inform law— but rather according to personal and partial visions of truth. Moreover, this truth is treated as revealed and thus unquestionable; it transcends, conditions, and, to some degree, determines man's fate. The worship of this ultimately alienating truth constitutes a new chapter in the occult history of humanity, one that is sacred in the religions of the Book and mythological in the polytheistic religions of classical times. Religion and myth have played central roles in the political organization of societies since the dawn of time, which has proved decisive in the case of cultures of the Book, which has always been considered to be the word of God and simultaneously has served as a spiritual guide and a code of conduct.

Through current usage and the influence of the Anglo-Saxon media, the term *fundamentalism* has come to describe the radical Islamic movement, but the roots and origins of fundamentalism date back to the Bible and Judeo-Christian civilization. The difficult process of secularizing a society —one that once glorified the notion of a Holy Empire and whose Crusades effectively implemented the concept of Holy War— culminated in the 18th century with the success of the Encyclopedist movement, just prior to the revolutions of the *bourgeoisie*. These led to the development, first in North America and then in France, of a new concept of social and political democracy, whose main tenet was equality before the law. Present-day western democracies continue to uphold this tenet but, despite this, they have not been able to eradicate entirely the inevitable interplay between religion, myth and politics. This interplay was especially noticeable in Spain, whose liberal revolution was not on the same scale as that of its European neighbors. At the end of the 19th century, Ramón Nocedal, a dissident Carlist, founded a movement that soon came to be known as *Integrist*, a name that reflected its ideology. Its mouthpiece was the paradoxically named *El Siglo Futuro* (The Coming Century), a newspaper founded by Nocedal's father and now considered to be one of the most reactionary publications in the history of modern Spain. In 1902, Nocedal delivered a speech in Congress against Sagasta's liberal cabinet, in which he clearly stated his position:

"I am not advocating civil war or rebellion or riots, but to all of those who hear my voice, I would say that, if you do decide not to exercise your rights, then you are ignoring the voice from heaven and disobeying the sovereign will which bids us to unite and charge forth in pursuit of the rights which have been usurped, and to defend the unknowable truth, to restore the absolute power of our integral and pure faith, and to fight against the liberal parties, who have been denounced,

not by me but by Leon XIII, as Lucifer's followers, until we topple and utterly destroy the accursed tree."

With the death of its leader, the *Integrist* movement languished as a political party. Nevertheless, the movement's outlook, forged in the fires of the Vatican's reactionary phobias, proliferated extensively, both in Spain and beyond. Even Protestant denominations joined the bandwagon, avidly supporting and spreading these views. At about the same time that Nocedal was shouting in Madrid, a movement arose amongst Protestant groups in the United States, demanding a literal interpretation of the Bible and rejecting science-based knowledge, particularly the theory of evolution. Ministers and theologians who resisted these changes were barred from their posts and an assortment of educational institutions were created to propagate this orthodox faith, which included, amongst other remarkable things, the physical resurrection of believers. It came to be known as the *fundamentalist* movement, after a collection of twelve books, *The Twelve Fundamentals*, which laid out the tenets of the movement's doctrine and which garnered great public support. The movement's influence peaked during and after World War I, gaining special prominence in the South. Its apostles, many of them powerful businessmen, lobbied with some success for the enactment of laws prohibiting the teaching of scientific principles that contradicted their beliefs to the extent that a measure outlawing the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools was passed in the state of Tennessee and remained in effect until 1968.

Thus, one does not need turn to the Inquisition for examples of religious fundamentalism intertwined with politics. In France, in the age of the free thinkers, this same combination inspired intellectuals such as Charles Maurras, an unrepentant monarchist who was sentenced to life in prison for his collaboration with the Vichy regime. In the Jewish world, the realities of the Diaspora simply did not permit an immediate translation of fundamentalism into political power. However, recent developments in the state of Israel and the growing influence of the orthodox parties, as well as the criminal policies of the Sharon government, are stark indications of how easily its leaders can adopt measures supposedly exclusive to Nazis. In 1995, a fundamentalist Orthodox Jew assassinated Prime Minister Rabin in Jerusalem.

Nevertheless, the current everyday use of the term *fundamentalism* refers mainly, at least in popular speech, to radical Islamic groups who advocate Holy War and further their cause through acts of terrorism. However, the use of violence as the ultimate individual and collective commitment to a particular faith is not exclusive to Islam. We are shocked by the number and willingness of Muslims, many of them adolescents, to act as suicide bombers, yet we continue to extol the heroism, equally suicidal, of the peoples of Sagunto and Numancia and we still venerate the distinction conferred by martyrdom as though it were a God-given privilege. When young Muslims immolate themselves perpetrating heinous acts of terrorism against the innocent citizens of Israel and other Western nations, they are only acting according to the religious doctrine that was inculcated in their schools and *madrassas*. They know that they will earn a place in Paradise if they give up their lives in the fight against the infidels

invading their country. Most of them have nothing to lose, considering the abject misery, oppression and injustice in which their countries are mired.

The role of the Book in the Muslim faith is far more pervasive and rigid than that of the Talmud and the Bible in Judeo-Christian traditions. The Koran is not just theological truth; it also serves as a code of conduct for its adherents and symbolizes their cultural and linguistic unity. The *ulamas* possess spiritual power; as religious authorities, they interpret spiritual doctrine and opinion, but they also administer and control the judicial system. The Islamic faith considers the Koran as the true word of God and not just a reflection of it; thus, it is a unique Book, one that cannot be imitated, repeated or even translated. As Professor García Pelayo states: "From the traditional Muslim perspective, philosophy and science, as well as jurisprudence, are simply different aspects of the Koran (...) This is why it was unable to take the decisive steps to become a secularized society."

The process of secularization was accelerated in the West by the development of the printing press which facilitated the spread of divergent interpretations of the Bible, and in turn led to debate, dialogue and research. The Lutheran Reformation was under way at the dawn of the Enlightenment, the era that gave rise to democracy as we know it today. But, in certain aspects, Muslim society, at least in its early history, was ahead of Christianity when it came to citizen participation, valuing it much as democracy does. Lacking anything like a hierarchical church, Islam was built as a community of the faithful whose consensual interpretation of the Koran and of oral tradition defines the cultural and legal structure of the different countries that make up the Muslim world. To separate oneself from that community is to separate oneself from Allah. As a result, Islamic fundamentalists or radicals are able to maintain a formidably unified set of views, even when they live in different environments and societies, separated by space and time. This is something that expert analysts at the CIA have tended not to recognize when drawing their new geopolitical strategies on the map; it also lends a unique strength to Islamic movements that support terror and violence

CHAPTER II

MESSIANISM, POPULISM, AUTHORITARIANISM

The term *fundamentalism* mainly applies to the beliefs held by followers of monotheistic religions, when, by their nature, they become rigid and intolerant. Religious intolerance provokes an impulse to proselytize in those who are convinced they own the truth. If one owns the word of God, how could one not wish to share it with others, or even to impose it on others, through force if necessary, since it will bring them eternal happiness? There is another, more benign, type of *fundamentalism*, which stems from philosophies that affirm that knowledge itself provides the ultimate foundation on which all forms of understanding rest, analogous to the solid foundations on which buildings are

erected. This leads to reductionism such as that frequently displayed by communists and the left in general, though it can serve any ideology. Thus, reductionism is a form of fundamentalism, one that has tainted our understanding of what a democracy, with its laws, signifies. The reductionist model tends to describe democracy mainly or solely as a system of government by majority rule. Reductionism ignores many other aspects of the democratic system that are just as *fundamental*, if not more so, such as legal equality, minority rights and individual liberties. Authoritarian regimes seeking self-justification have frequently claimed the support of majorities, ignoring other constraints and all too often, this argument has undermined fledgling democracies. Another irritating example of reductionism is the position taken by the International Monetary Fund regarding the economic policies of developing nations. The IMF's cookie-cutter approach has been a recipe for financial disaster in Third World countries and has sacrificed thousands of lives at the altar of neo-liberal fanaticism.

While *fundamentalism* depends on truth, revealed by God or established by man, as its ultimate point of reference, democracy shuns doctrine and relies rather on opinion. Autocrats find this hard to understand. When José Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of the Spanish Falangist Movement —the Fascist party that won that country's civil war— mockingly stated that ballot boxes might one day decide the existence of God, he was simply revealing his ignorance of the very meaning of democracy. Majority rule does not bestow an understanding of the truth; all it does is to confer the legal right to govern on a group of individuals.

Bodies of laws and constellations of rules characterize democratic governments. As Norberto Boccio has pointed out, democracy exists when the citizens understand that they have the sole authority to establish the laws that bind them and are unwilling to accept any other type of limitations. Democracy is based on social consensus, which is, by definition, subject to change. Lincoln defined it as a system of government of the people, by the people and for the people. By this he meant that the will of the people, as expressed at the ballots -- one man, one vote -- is the only legitimate source of power. This is precisely what gives democracy its integrity.

When viewed from this angle, democracy cannot be an ideology per se. Rather, democracy can embrace an infinite variety of ideologies, so long as these ideologies respect the laws that have been proclaimed by the people. Counterintuitive though it may seem, this paves the way for antidemocratic ideologies to emerge and develop without constraint in the midst of political systems that respect and promote liberty. Ideologies tend to bind people to a particular truth; they set boundaries that grow ever narrower in proportion to the degree of perfection with which their creeds are constructed and no matter how lenient they might be, they end up by becoming exclusionary. Democracy depends on consensus, in fact it is a means towards that end, and it cannot afford to be exclusionary, except where provided for by law. Thus, democracy is incompatible with the notion that the ends, if they are good, justify the means, because virtue lies in the manner in which we act rather than in the merits of our achievements. Political democracy does not in any way guarantee good

government, nor is that its mission. Its objective is to ensure that, whatever its qualities or defects, power emanates directly from the will of the people.

One might ask how it is possible to talk about *democratic fundamentalism*, when these terms seem so inherently contradictory. I am not attempting to contribute to the body of political science by addressing this issue. I merely seek to describe attitudes, behaviors and gestures that, while invoking freedom, threaten to stifle it. Certainly, "fundamentalism" and "democracy" are words that clash, notwithstanding their literal definitions. As we have seen, fundamentalism originates in religion and subscribes to a literal interpretation and strict adherence to holy texts. In the same vein, we can apply this word to those movements that seek both to apply the platform of a particular political party in an orthodox manner and to institute public policy in the same way. In this light, a fundamentalist believes there is only one way to think, resulting in only one way to be and only one way to act. In trying to make sense of this, we might suppose that fundamentalism is a well-intentioned quest for perfectionism, an attempt to make one's views or beliefs and one's life coherent, which forces a strict adherence to basic principles. This would seem like a fairly innocuous undertaking were it not complemented by far more intrusive behavior: convincing others, redirecting their misguided steps and shepherding them towards the correct path, with the use of varying degrees of coercion and force where needed. In the end, fundamentalists are integrists, so firm in their convictions that they are willing to employ any means necessary to impose their views on others for their own good.

In its present form, democracy is largely the result of the triumph of reason and scientific positivism over a theocratic or supernatural framework of coexistence. However, in recent years, a new theology of power has started to emerge in which the Holy Trinity has been re-packaged in order to make it more accessible to modern sensitivities, while retaining its mysterious, secretive and transcendental aura. The ineffable has always been a breeding ground for priests and sorcerers, while language has been the cornerstone of our civilization. The Enlightenment was principally an uprising of speech, of *logos*, against the silence of power. It aspired to an understanding of the world through the prisms of reason and skepticism, through man's ability both to learn and to err. Democracy today is a distant descendant of the ideas of the Enlightenment. In its dangerous reluctance to face uncertainty, modern democracy has cloaked itself in ever more resonant certainties: the market, globalization and competition. These concepts define a new reality in which the differences between technocracy and theocracy boil down to a couple of consonants.

At the inauguration as the rotating President of the European Union, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi convinced parliament to grant him temporary immunity from prosecution by the Italian courts, allowing him to perform his presidential role with greater dignity than would have been possible otherwise. A German Social Democrat and member of the European Parliament criticized him for these proceedings. Berlusconi churlishly replied that if a film about World War II were to be shot in Italy, his detractor could star in it as a Nazi *kapo*. His reply shocked many. Here was a media mogul —whose entertainment

empire has littered several countries' television programming with trash—issuing an arrogant challenge to determine who was a better democrat in the international arena. Yet, one of the most salient features of democratic fundamentalism and its adherents is their penchant for granting democratic membership cards left and right, arrogating to themselves the right to decide who is and who is not a militant enforcer of freedom. Certain blustering writers and news columnists in Spain are a case in point. Not satisfied with having sung the praises of the dictatorship, they now portray themselves as heralds of the new era. Even José María Aznar, in the course of barely fifteen years, has ditched his opposition to the Spanish Constitution and is now, supposedly, one of its stalwart defenders. I am less interested in underscoring the suspect nature of this behavior, than in pointing out how frequently democratic fundamentalists style themselves as bona fide oracles of the system of coexistence that has brought them to power. In their view, they are adopting an ideology, not a method, thus the distinction between ends and means tends to be lost in their analyses. The question of whether or not democracy can be legitimately defended by systems or means that are not strictly democratic is an enduring dilemma. Weber's views on the ethics of responsibility have played a large role in this debate and politicians of such stature as Felipe González have frequently used these views in order to justify or explain actions taken in the struggle against terrorism; his comment that democracy is also defended from the gutters, is famous.

Bertrand de Jouvenel raised the alarm against what he called *totalitarian democracy*, pointing out that all power has an inherent tendency to expand. Given that power is more widely distributed and shared in a democracy, one would not expect power to be more concentrated in democratic systems than in totalitarian regimes. Nevertheless, democratic fundamentalists are firm allies of the pro-totalitarian and absolutist trends of power because the mantle of voter sanction guarantees their decisions. When leaders and pundits put the relativism of their convictions aside and take up ever more categorical definitions of the social values they claim to champion, democracy, converted into ideology, ceases to be a dialectic system that is open to debate, and takes on the shape and vices of a new and subtle form of slavery. The chains of the past are replaced by present-day conventions, which are the mainstay of what has come to be known as *political correctness*. Language works in mysterious ways; this expression does not refer to that which is worth changing, as one might infer, but rather to that which is inherently and utterly incorrigible.

The fiery arguments presented by the Aznar camp in their attempt to convince Spanish voters that military intervention in the Gulf was undertaken to establish a democratic regime in the area have not yet succeeded in erasing doubts as to whether it is legitimate or even possible to impose democracy by force. This is because the proponents of this argument view democracy as an end in itself, something to be achieved, rather than a social framework. If political democracy— as opposed to social or economic democracy, as Professor Sartori so clearly explained— is not based on the consensus of the people, it will become a mere figment, a simulation, a pretense.

One of the first things that any good democrat must inquire is how applicable is the concept of equality before the law in countries with traditions that oppose this principle, and what needs to be done to bring about the changes, or, if necessary, the cultural earthquake that would facilitate the social contract on which all free systems are based? Democratic fundamentalists think that their system is an exportable item because they ignore the fact that it is not a commodity per se, but rather a system that springs from a genuine belief in individual rights. By turning democracy into an ideology, they aspire to become apostles of their faith and are capable of undertaking the bloodiest of crusades in the name of freedom.

Fundamentalists would not be such if they did not believe that they are responding to a divine calling with their actions, and if they were not absolutely convinced that they have a mission to accomplish. Many who have spoken privately with President Bush report that he openly recognizes that his recovery from alcoholism, after having lived a frivolous and dissolute lifestyle, was for him a total change of course along his personal road to Damascus, which, paradoxically, led him to Baghdad. One of Aznar's ex-ministers told me that when he visited Aznar in hospital on the same day that Aznar had miraculously escaped an attack by ETA he found that Aznar, then head of the opposition party in Spain, seemed convinced that he had survived through divine intervention. Undoubtedly he had a mission that still needed to be accomplished in this life.

Democratic fundamentalists' messianic behavior frequently slips into populism and demagoguery, both offensive affiliates of authoritarianism. Populism drowns out an individual's rational positions by enflaming the emotions of the people. Nowadays, populism also enjoys the support afforded by its powerful partnership with the media and entertainment industry, which have managed to make a show out of almost every moving thing on earth. *Show business* covers it all, from public opinion to power plays and this was something that Karol Wojtyla understood well from the start of his papacy. Having historically been one of the essential pillars of Western European civilization, the Catholic Church could not simply ignore the fundamentalist tendencies of the end of the last century that, on its own playing field, threatened to undo much of the progress made by the Second Vatican Council. The strength of Pope John Paul II lay in his ability to reconcile his increasingly reactionary moral and dogmatic views with an open defense of social justice and equality. But in his determination to be the spiritual leader of an increasingly uncertain world, even he eventually succumbed to the temptations of populism, evidenced by the mass receptions that welcomed him on his travels, the sea of young people that crowded around him, spilling out over vast open spaces, and in the grandiosity and ritualism of his public appearances. José Martín Patino, the vicar-general of the diocese of Madrid at the time of Franco's death, explains that we have seen the shift from the Church of mediation to the Church of presence. The first devoted most of its attention to the individual; it also supported research and science, and, in purely religious terms, pinned its hopes of winning converts on its administration of the sacraments and on its preaching. The Church of presence feels that it has to show itself solidly triumphant to the world, in order to defend itself against current anticlerical trends. Displaying power is also a

way of gaining it, so the church now seeks front page headlines, it rubs shoulders with politicians, it stages shows, comparable in size and following with major rock concerts, and it prefers to measure its influence on public opinion through government itself, with which it continues to deepen its access while spreading, undaunted, through hundreds, if not thousands, of non-profit organizations around the world.

In this way, the church makes use of current neoliberal trends to contribute to the inherent expansion of power mentioned earlier. Because of its moral authority on public issues, it has proved an excellent ally for democratic fundamentalism, not so much because of its actual opinions —the Pope was against both Gulf wars, while fanning the flames of independence in Croatia— but because of its contribution to the interaction between so-called temporal and spiritual powers. Thus, the frequency with which President Bush utters the name of the Lord is not arbitrary nor were the gains made by the Catholic hierarchy during José María Aznar's administration, considering how insistent he was that the preamble of the European Constitution should include a reference to the continent's Christian roots.

Attention must be drawn to the totalitarian, authoritarian and demagogic trends that are sweeping through the corridors of power of the world today and point out the distortion of democracy, its conversion into a closed ideology that serves the interests and obsessions of the ruling classes. This might be a universal malaise, but its symptoms have been especially virulent in Spain under the right-wing government of recent years. This essay will also discuss the perverse consequences for our coexistence, haunted as we still are, while remembering the hopes inspired by the dictator's death.