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The Taken For Granted:

**Are the Values and Principles that Permit Us
to Live in a Just Society in Danger?**

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To my Mother and Father,
To my sister Vittoria,
To my grandparents and zii,
To Alessandro,
To Alessandro,
To Roberto,
To Violeta,
To Beniamino,
To Isabeau,
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To Peter,
To the Kressmann family
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To Cecilia Han

But most of all to the people who now only live in my memory:

To Claudio Adrian Menendez
To Mila

Abstract :

This thesis deals with the West greatest invention: Liberal Democracy

The work is dedicated to the historical evolution and contemporary challenges of liberal democracy.

It highlights its core tenets and describes how these latter are in danger.

It finally tries to envisage some reflections (intended more as food for thought than as practical solutions) on how to build a more resilient democracy.

Keywords :

Liberal Democracy; Values; Principles; Political Power; Liberalism; Democracy; Freedom; Rights; Elon Musk; MAGA.

INTRODUCTION

Political scientist Larry Diamond in his article “Facing up to the democratic recession”¹ talks about the global recession on democratic standards that countries around the world are undergoing. The number of democratic countries in the world increased greatly in the years following the end of the second world war up to the end of the millennia, but in recent years, as Diamond points out, we are witnessing a recession on democratic values in many countries around the world². Said countries in later years are accentuating their authoritarian features abandoning liberal democratic institutions or devoiding them of their powers resulting in a decline of the quality and stability of democracy. A survey published by the Economist intelligence unit in 2018³ counted 89 countries that would have taken steps backwards from democratic values in the 10 years following the 2007 financial crisis. We live at a time in history where liberal democratic values are all the more important for the survival of our western societies. Many threats, both internal and external, endanger the healthy existence of our world in western societies and often times we do not even realize it. Popular dissatisfaction and the rise of populism are phenomena that threaten the liberal democratic framework shaking it from its very roots.

Even the greatest and longest standing democracy, the United States, is derailing from a liberal democratic framework and forgetting its values and principles after a leader like Donald Trump took power (he wants to give up huge areas of Ukraine to Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin in the name of peace⁴, and funnily enough some of the peace talks have even taken place in Munich⁵ (and we all know how 1938 Munich ended up...). Once again History seems doomed to repeat itself, and Churchill’s famous words will be repeated “you were given the choice between war and dishonour. You chose dishonour, and you will have war”⁶).

Trump’s approach to the war in Ukraine, essentially disregarding the noble value of freedom and downplaying the importance of the struggle and pain the valiant Ukrainians⁷ are going through, is not the only red light that appears in his behaviours, and in the second half of this thesis some other poorly liberal aspects characterising his persona will be presented.

But in order to comprehend the setbacks of democracy Diamond, the Economist and many

¹ Diamond, Larry. “Facing up to the Democratic Recession.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2015, pp. 141–155, [muse.jhu.edu/article/565645](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>.

² Data Team, by the Economist. “Democracy Continues Its Disturbing Retreat.” *The Economist*, 31 Jan. 2018, www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/01/31/democracy-continues-its-disturbing-retreat.

³ Data Team, by the Economist. “Democracy Continues Its Disturbing Retreat.” *The Economist*, 31 Jan. 2018, www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/01/31/democracy-continues-its-disturbing-retreat.

⁴ Yeung, Jessie. “Trump Says Ukraine-Russia Peace Talks Looking at ‘Dividing up Certain Assets.’” *CNN*, 17 Mar. 2025, edition.cnn.com/2025/03/17/politics/trump-putin-meeting-ukraine-intl-hnk/index.html.

⁵ Henley, Jon. “‘The US Is Ready to Hand Russia a Win’: Newspapers on Europe’s Trump Shock.” *The Guardian*, The Guardian, 16 Feb. 2025, www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/feb/16/the-us-is-ready-to-hand-russia-a-win-newspapers-on-europes-trump-shock. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

⁶ Military History Matters. “Winston Churchill Quotes | Military History Matters.” *Www.military-history.org*, 20 Nov. 2010, www.military-history.org/fact-file/winston-churchill-quotes.htm.

⁷ One example of Trump’s egregious and shameful disregard for the Ukrainian cause was the confrontation he and his vice-president Vance had with Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office on the 28th of February 2025. The meeting, featuring Trump and Vance treating with bossy manners a man forced to send his people to die to protect his country’s freedom in a war he did not decide, represents one of America’s lowest, most disgraceful and shameful points in history.

other highly qualified journals and academics talk about, the first step is to fully understand the value of democracy, what this word really means, and most of all in what kind of democracy we live in today, liberal democracy.

This thesis will be divided into two main parts, in the first one we will delve into the historical and theoretical development of the system in which we live in today in the western world by tracing the roots of liberal democracy through the history of democracy, the development of the political power, the coming of liberalism and the impact it had on democratic ideas. Before arriving at a comprehensive definition of liberal democracy in the last section of the first part, and after having defined the development of the values and principles that define democracy and liberalism, the thesis will also present the theoretical framework that some prominent political philosophers built on those ideas.

The second part of the thesis will be devoted to defining the threats that liberal democracy faces today, both external and internal threats will be taken into account. Amongst the external threats we will talk about China, Russia and Iran and the influence these countries have on our system, the following section will be devoted to the internal threats with a particular focus on the United States, the MAGA movement and Elon Musk. After having described the dangers liberal democracies face today, the last section before the conclusion will be devoted at briefly reflecting in a purely philosophical way (meaning that the thesis does not attempt to find practical solutions to specific problems) on some possible solutions to protect liberal democracies from both the external and the internal attacks.

CHAPTER 1 : THE WEST GREATEST INVENTION: LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

When thinking about great inventions and achievements that the Western world has made throughout history and that contributed to the progress, advancement and welfare of the entire world we are spoilt for choice. Science, medicine, agronomy, economics. Just a few of the many fields in which the West has juggled to bring immense benefits to all humankind. If longevity has increased, infant mortality has plummeted or the level of education has risen throughout the world, it is because the West has made it possible by achieving progress in each of these fields. The western industrial model has lifted great nations out of misery and the fight for human rights and to improve the condition of women has started in the West and is inspired by the model that Western societies propose. However, each of these achievements, whether in the social, scientific, economic or legal fields, were made possible by certain conditions that facilitated their realisation. These conditions are the conditions for which the individuals can achieve results because they are left free to do so, and they and the products of their work are protected from thirds. Only if the members of a society enjoy freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, freedom of enterprise, freedom of movement, and at the same time the right to property and to participate to the social and political life can they create a wealthy and thriving society where great results in any field can be achieved. This is exactly why the West greatest invention, although we might be tempted to think it is Gutenberg's printing press because it revolutionised access to knowledge, or the telegraph that transformed communication, or penicillin that enabled us to fight against illnesses that before the 20th century swept away entire populations, is the setting up of a social and political system that enabled all of the previous mentioned achievements and many others. This system has taken centuries if not millennials to develop as we know it today, and today the West greatest invention is called Liberal Democracy.

Section 1a : A Brief History Behind the Word Democracy and the Evolution of Political Power

The word democracy is a fascinating term that we are accustomed to hearing nearly every day in our lives, but its meaning has evolved over time signifying and evoking different things to people at different times in history. We can trace back the origins of the word democracy in ancient Greece. 2500 years ago the Greek knew four main forms of government⁸: Monarchy, tranny, oligarchy, and democracy. Monarchy (μόνος = monos = one, ἄρχω = archy = to rule) was the rule of one individual and had hereditary character. Unlike what a modern audience could think of when hearing the word tyranny, to the Greek this term did not automatically evoke dark images of an evil dictator like character repressing liberties. In ancient Greece tyranny did not have an hereditary character, and the tyrant was simply a man that thanks to his competences and skills had managed to seize and exercise power, be it in a benevolent or wretched way. The oligarchy instead meant the rule of a few people (ὀλίγος = oli = few, μόνος = archy = to rule), these few were considered to be (or at least claimed to be) the best amongst the citizens, the wisest and therefore the most entitled to govern the city-state. Ultimately there was democracy, considered by many today the most virtuous form of government. Unlike the Greek words monarchy (the rule of one, comparable to the tyranny but with hereditary character) and

⁸ cartwright, Mark. "Ancient Greek Government." *World History Encyclopedia*, 20 Mar. 2018, www.worldhistory.org/Greek_Government/.

oligarchy (the rule of a few), the word democracy is not composed of the same suffix archy. Instead the word demos (δῆμος, meaning the people), is accompanied by the word cratos (κράτος), which is the Greek for power. Therefore, the word democracy in ancient Greece did not signify the rule of the people, but the power of the people. This is where the crucial point lies: The word archy (rule, government), inspires a sense of order in the exercise of the political power by the one man or the few, whilst we can see how the word cratos (power), not only does not inspire the same sense of order and tidiness, but on the contrary, if anything, inspires a sense of chaos. Democracy means the power of the people, a brutalising force which can mean the sheer power of the majority. Democracy 2500 years ago was not a representing democracy like we are used today, it was a direct democracy where all the citizens could and had to participate. This naturally could give way to a chaotic political moment. Amongst the most illustrious to critique democracy there were Plato and Aristotle⁹. In his work *The Republic*, Plato questions the goodness of democracy highlighting the fact that it would assign “a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike¹⁰”. He finds this idea dangerous because he firmly believes that human beings are different and ignoring these differences would cause great harm to society. He uses the metaphor of a ship to represent the state arguing that, just like a ship, the state needs a good and skilled navigator qualified for the job. Democracy allows experienced sailors who would be good leaders in the political cruise to be overridden by individuals who he calls demagogues, that through manipulation manage to convince the public to acquire power leading to incompetent leaders and a wretched rule.

“Imagine, [...] The shipowner is taller and stronger than everyone else on board. But he is hard of hearing, he is a bit shortsighted, and his knowledge of seafaring is correspondingly deficient. The sailors are quarreling with one another about captaincy. Each of them thinks that he should captain the ship, even though he has not yet learned the craft and cannot name his teacher or a time when he was learning it. Indeed, they go further and claim that it cannot be taught at all, and are even ready to cut to pieces anyone who says it can. They are always crowding around the shipowner himself, pleading with him, and doing everything possible to get him to turn the rudder over to them. And sometimes, if they fail to persuade him and others succeed, they execute those others or throw them overboard. Then, having disabled their noble shipowner with mandragora or drink or in some other way, they rule the ship, use up its cargo drinking and feasting, and make the sort of voyage you would expect of such people. In addition, they praise anyone who is clever at persuading or forcing the shipowner to let them rule, calling him a “sailor,” a “skilled captain,” and “an expert about ships” while dismissing anyone else as a good-for-nothing. They do not understand that a true captain must pay attention to the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds, and all that pertains to his craft if he is really going to be expert at ruling a ship.”

Aristotle, in addition to warning about the dangers of the demagogues, also highlights democracy's tendency to prioritise the interests of the majority over the common good. He describes democracy as that system where “the multitude is sovereign and not the law¹¹”. After having been the core of politics and probably the most notable political conception of ancient Greece, with the affirmation of the roman empire democracy and democratic

⁹ Aristotle in his work *Politics* criticises democracy as one imperfect form of government which prioritises the interests of the majority over the common good. In his words: “In democracies [...] where the laws are not supreme, there demagogues spring up. For the people becomes a monarch, and is many in one; and the many have the power in their hands, not as individuals, but collectively. [...] this sort of democracy, which is now a monarch, and no longer under the control of law, seeks to exercise monarchical sway, and grows into a despot. [...] this sort of democracy being relatively to other democracies what tyranny is to other forms of monarchy. The spirit of both is the same, and they alike exercise a despotic rule over the better citizens.”

Politics, Book IV, 1292 a 5-20, Aristotle

¹⁰ Plato. *The Republic*. 2002.

¹¹ Plato. *The Republic*. 2002.

ideals of citizens participation to the political life start to lose grip and eventually disappear. A new conception of the political power starts to affirm itself, and that is the idea of the absolute divine power of kings. This conception of political power, although as we will see questioned at different times in history, will be the predominant conception of political power until very recent times, starting with the English XVII century, the American and French revolutions. This conception will only definitely see an end after the end of the second world war¹².

This new conception of absolute political power in the hands of a single figure is affirmed by the roman empire and its emperors and finds its full and ultimate legitimisation when the emperor Constantine embraces the Christian religion¹³. The idea of one supreme leader in the skies (God) matched by one supreme leader on earth (the emperor) asserts itself throughout all of the first millennium and it is only after the year 1000, with the investiture controversy, that this idea is questioned. Undoubtedly far from being inspired by democratic ideals, pope Gregory VII in a letter¹⁴ to Hermann of Metz in 1081 harshly criticises the power of the emperor as a divine one. In the letter Gregory affirms the superiority of the power of the Church over the power of the emperor, and states that the imperial power in order to be legitimate has to go through the recognition filter of the pope. He believes it ridiculous for the imperial power to be superior to that of the pope because it was the very Jesus who gave to Saint Peter and his successors (the representatives of God on earth) the task to build and run the world through religion. In addition, Gregory argues in his 1081 letter that the empire was founded by pagans, and something founded by misbelievers could not in any way compete with something created directly by God through his son Jesus, namely the Church and the power that, as Pope, he embodied.

“Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam et portae inferi non praevallebunt adversus eam. Et tibi dabo claves Regni coelorum. Quodcumque ligaveris super terram, erit ligatum et in coelis. Et quodcumque solveris super terra merit solutum et in coelis¹⁵.”

(Translation: “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”)

These lines from Matthew’s Gospel (16:18-19) are a key foundation of Christian doctrine because they represent the moment in which Jesus gives Peter and his successors a special leadership role in the Church, the basis for the primacy of the Pope in the Christian world,

¹² It is interesting in this regard the case of Victor Emmanuel II, first king of Italy in 1861. After the unification of Italy, in the official treaty meant to officialise his rule over the country he insisted to be named king of Italy for the grace of God, whilst the liberal establishment at his side wanted his official formula to recite, King of Italy for the will of the nation. In the end a compromise was found and he was named king of Italy for the grace of God and the will of nation. This shows us that even until not so long ago, in the liberal century, monarchs were still very much attached to the conception of the divine right of kings. Only after the last attempt of personification of the political power with the dictatorships in Europe that led to world war II did democratic ideals really penetrate into the conception of political power and finally turned it away from the antique divine conception.

¹³ After the upheavals of the third century, Constantine needed a strong legitimisation for his power, and he found it in the Christian religion, one powerful God above earth and one powerful emperor on earth. Hughes, Cameron. “Why Did Constantine the Great Choose Christianity?” *TheCollector*, 5 Apr. 2023, www.thecollector.com/constantine-great-conversion-christianity/.

¹⁴ Gregorio VII. “Lettera Ermanno Di Metz | Dispense Di Storia Medievale | Docsity.” *Docsity.com*, 2024, www.docsity.com/it/docs/lettera-ermanno-di-metz/10713033/. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

¹⁵ Matthaeum. “EVANGELIUM SECUNDUM MATTHAEUM - Nova Vulgata, Novum Testamentum.” *Vatican.va*, 2025, www.vatican.va/archive/bible/nova_vulgata/documents/nova-vulgata_nt_evangelium-matthaeum_lt.html#16. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

which was, at the time of Gregory VII the whole of Europe. Gregory explains the power of the kings as a power deriving from theft, crime and murder. Princes, kings and emperors do not possess their power in virtue of some divine reason, but because they are the ones who committed the most crimes, the ones who robbed and murdered the most, and have the devil at their side. For Gregory, amongst the few and first powerful voices to question the divine power of kings, the Pope was the only one that could enjoy a divine investiture. Another medieval critique to the divine right of kings is to be found in one of the time's best sellers, the "Roman de la Rose". In the medieval work a different source than divine investiture is found for the power of kings. In the verses of the "Roman de la Rose" is found the idea that at the beginning all men and women were alike and enjoyed a natural communal living. Problems arose when the concept of individual ownership came to disrupt this communal living, resulting in conflicts that necessitated the creation of authoritative structures. In order to obviate to disputes arising from the establishment of the private property the people chose amongst them the strongest individual in hope that he would grant them peace and tranquillity:

"Un grand vilain entre eux ils élurent, le mieux
charpenté, le plus grand, le plus fort qu'ils trou-
vèrent, et le firent prince et seigneur. [...]
de là le commencement des principautés ter-
riennes¹⁶."

(Translation: "A great peasant they chose amongst them, the most robust, the biggest, the strongest they could find, and they made him prince and lord. [...] that is when the earthly principalities began.")

For the first time, the origin of the right of kings does not stem from God, but from the will of the people. This opens the doors to the idea that the authority of the king does not lie above that of the law, and that the king himself is subject to the law. But this idea, as we will see, will take a long time before being fully developed and put into practice¹⁷. Saint Thomas Aquinas contributed in his work to legitimise this vision arguing, in his work "De Regno, ad Regem Cypri"¹⁸, that the rules of kings can turn into a tyranny (in the pejorative sense of today), and in that case the people have a right to disobey the unjust laws of a tyrant and even have the right to overthrow the tyrant and, if necessary, kill him. This should not be carried out in the name of private revenge, but rather in the name of the common good and public authority.

"If the excess of tyranny is unbearable, some have been of the opinion that it would be an act of virtue for strong men to slay the tyrant and to expose themselves to the danger of death in order to set the multitude free. [...] If to provide itself with a king belongs to the right of a given multitude, it is not unjust that the king be deposed or have his power restricted by that same multitude if, becoming a tyrant, he abuses the royal power. It must not be thought that such a multitude is acting unfaithfully in deposing the tyrant, even though it had previously subjected itself to him in perpetuity, because he himself has deserved that the covenant with his subjects should not be kept, since, in ruling the multitude, he did not act faithfully as the office of a king demands."¹⁹

Despite being questioned, under different forms and by different voices throughout the

¹⁶ de Meung, Jean. "Full Text of "Le Roman de La Rose, Par Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meung. Éd. Accompagnée d'Une Traduction En Vers, Précédée d'Une Introd., Notices Historiques et Critiques; Suivie de Notes et d'Un Glossaire Par Pierre Marteau." *Archive.org*, 2025, archive.org/stream/leromandelaro01guiluoft/leromandelaro01guiluoft_djvu.txt. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

¹⁷ The idea that the king is subject to the law and does not lie above it, although implicit already in the Roman de La Rose, will only fully develop with the contractual theory of the XVII century.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas' most famous political treatise, written between 1265 and 1266 and dedicated to king Hugh II of Cyprus.

¹⁹ Aquinas, Thomas. "Thomas Aquinas: De Regno: English." *Isidore.co*, 1266, isidore.co/aquinas/DeRegno.htm.

middles ages, the authority of kings remains strong and stable all along that period, and democracy is not to be found anywhere apart from the parenthesis of the communes in Italy, where autonomous city-states²⁰ would self-govern through popular participation. Communal Italy is the closest to what was once, more than a 1500 years earlier, the Greek democracy. But the word democracy had been forgotten, and the chronicles do not name the communes as democracies but rather as popular rule, or popular government²¹. The only ones that still remember the word democracy at this time (high Middle Ages) are the Byzantines²². They are the only one to call the Italian communes “democracies” because they still keep this old Greek terminology in their language and culture.

The first time the term democracy appears again in more modern times is when during the renaissance period the humanists re-discover the old Greek classics and start to study them. Tommaso Garzoni, a Renaissance intellectual is amongst the first to re-use the term democracy in his works after the oblivion of the Middle Ages. Towards the end of the 1500s in his “La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo” Garzoni describes democracy as follows: “quando la moltitudine ingiustamente oppressa, tratta dall’ira, spinta dal furore, si delibera vendicare gli oltraggi ricevuti, subito ne nasce la Democratia, cioè l’amministrazione del Popolo, [...] il Popolo diventa sfrenato, usa l’audacia e l’insolenza invece della giustizia e delle leggi²³.”

(Translation: “and it is when the multitude, unjustly oppressed, pushed by rage and anger decides to vengeance the injustices received, there is where Democracy is born. The rule of the people, the people turn unbridled and use contempt and villainy instead of justice and laws”)

It is evident from this quote what consideration Garzoni had of democracy; the recipe for disaster, chaos and unrestrained violence. Behind this consideration lies the idea that the people cannot virtuously govern themselves in an autonomous manner, and that democracy is therefore a side effect of bad government rather than a desirable objective.

The idea that the people are not capable of self-government continues in history, and it is only throughout the XIX century that the word democracy, thanks to the triumph of liberalism²⁴, loses its meaning of chaos and confusion. At the beginning of the XIX century

²⁰ During the 12th and 13th centuries in Italy the communes or city-states were political entities enjoying self-governance and popular participation, although still far from the idea of democracy we have today (universal suffrage, democratic cycle, free and fair elections...) the communes challenged the conception of divine right of kings taking in consideration the popular factor and creating elaborate systems of check on power aimed at preventing dominance by any single faction.

“Italy - the Rise of Communes.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/place/Italy/The-rise-of-communes.

²¹ As Prof. Alessandro Barbero points out in one of his lectures about democracy and dictatorship (11-IX-2023)

LA7. “In Viaggio Con Barbero - Democrazia E Dittatura.” *La7.It*, 12 Sept. 2023, www.la7.it/in-viaggio-con-barbero/rivedila7/in-viaggio-con-barbero-democrazia-e-dittatura-12-09-2023-502250. Accessed 25 Mar. 2025.

²² As Prof. Alesandro Barbero points out in one of his lectures about democracy and dictatorship (11-IX-2023)

LA7. “In Viaggio Con Barbero - Democrazia E Dittatura.” *La7.It*, 12 Sept. 2023, www.la7.it/in-viaggio-con-barbero/rivedila7/in-viaggio-con-barbero-democrazia-e-dittatura-12-09-2023-502250. Accessed 25 Mar. 2025.

²³ Garzoni, Lorenzo. “La Piazza Universale Di Tutte Le Professioni Del Mondo (Tommaso Garzoni) : Tommaso Garzoni : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive.” *Internet Archive*, 2025, archive.org/details/ScansioneGIII446MiscellaneaOpal/page/n73/mode/2up?view=theater. Accessed 25 Mar. 2025.

²⁴ Liberal thought essentially adds to democratic ideals of popular participation the notion of rule of law, thus setting a clearer framework in which democracy can occur.

in the United States, the only democracy²⁵ alive on earth back then, John Adams, second president to lead the US after Washington, writes as follows in a letter to John Taylor dated 17th of December 1814: “Democracy has never been and never can be so durable as Aristocracy or Monarchy. But while it lasts it is more bloody than either. [...] Remember Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes exhausts and murders itself. There never was a Democracy Yet, that did not commit suicide. [...] Democracy is chargeable with all the blood that has been spilled for five and twenty years. (referring to the Napoleonic wars in Europe²⁶)” Adams’ words make us understand how democracy was still viewed as something bloody and wretched at the beginning of the XIX, this view radically changes and in the second half of that same century another president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, praises democracy as “The Government of the people, by the people, for the people²⁷”. Alexis de Tocqueville in his work “La Démocratie en Amérique”, highlights one of the most important aspects lying behind the concept of democracy, namely that of the equality of individuals, the fact that we are all the same and we all count alike. Tocqueville says:

« Parmi les objets nouveaux qui, pendant mon séjour aux États-Unis, ont attiré mon attention, aucun n’a plus vivement frappé mes regards que l’égalité des conditions. . [...] Bientôt je reconnus que ce même fait étend son influence fort au-delà des mœurs politiques et des lois, et qu’il n’obtient pas moins d’empire sur la société civile que sur le gouvernement. [...] Ainsi donc, à mesure que j’étudiais la société américaine, je voyais de plus en plus, dans l’égalité des conditions, le fait générateur dont chaque fait particulier semblait descendre, et je le retrouvais sans cesse devant moi comme un point central où toutes mes observations venaient aboutir.²⁸ »

(Translation : “Amongst the things that, during my dwelling in the United States, have captured my attention, nothing has struck me more than the equality of conditions. [...] I soon realised that this fact extends its influence well beyond just the political and legal morals, and it comprises and rules on civil society and government alike. [...] Thus, as I studied the American Society, I saw more and more, in the equality of conditions, the generating fact from which each particular fact seemed to descend, and I found it again and again before me as a central point where all my observations came to an end.”)

Many forms and ideas of democracy have succeeded themselves throughout the course of history from ancient Greece to our days, but the origins of the modern western conception of democracy can be traced back to the English parliamentarism of the 17th century, and later the American presidentialism of the 18th century. In England’s case parliamentarism was born from the necessity to limit the monarch’s powers, which led to the institution of a parliament meant to take decisions such as the one to raise taxes (no taxation without representation). The idea of separation of powers was a founding one in this process of democratisation which later led to the shaping of democracies as we think of them at present.

Today, when we (in the western world) think of democracy we refer to liberal democracy. To continue with the analysis of the roots of words, we can say that the notion of liberal democracy is a binomial formed by two concepts, that of liberal and that of democracy. In liberal democracies there are therefore two forces that confront each other’s, that of the

²⁵ Despite not being fully democratic in today’s terms, the United States were, at the time, undoubtedly the country upholding the most democratic principles. These principles were just limited to white male citizens, but they were there and the constitution was inspired by it. “We the people...”

²⁶ Adams, John. “Founders Online: From John Adams to John Taylor, 17 December 1814.” *Archives.gov*, 2020, founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6371.

²⁷ Lincoln, Abraham. “Gettysburg Address Delivered at Gettysburg Pa. Nov. 19th, 1863. [N. P. N. D.].” *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA*, 19 Nov. 1863, www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.24404500/?st=text.

²⁸ de Tocqueville, Alexis. *De La Démocratie En Amérique*. 1835.

private autonomy of the citizens and individual rights and freedoms (liberalism), and that of the public autonomy of the citizens and the collective deliberation (democracy). Western modern democracies are the combination of these two elements, they are like two ingredients to the recipe of the worst form of government (except for all the others). A good and healthy balance of the two ingredients is, however, required in order for the final product to be thriving. An excess of one ingredient over the other, or vice versa, could result in the very deterioration (as we will see later) of the well functioning of liberal democracy.

Section 1b : What is Liberalism

But in order to continue our discourse on liberal democracy and its threats, and try to understand what liberal democracy is all about by giving a comprehensive definition of it and delving into the thought some major scholars, it is necessary to spend a few words on the first half of the duo, liberalism.

In his *History of Western Philosophy*²⁹, Bertrand Russell touches upon the question of liberalism and its origins, particularly wondering whether it was first a philosophical concept born out of the liberal endeavour of some intellectuals in the XVII century that subsequently influenced the way the economic and political systems functioned in England, or if it was first a spontaneous trend of society that later influenced intellectuals to develop ideals such as the right of property and habeas corpus³⁰. His solution to this dilemma was that “the truth lies between the two extremes” and that “between ideas and practical life, as everywhere else, there is reciprocal interaction; to ask which is cause and which is effect is as futile as the problem of the hen and the egg³¹.”

Liberalism is at first an English and Dutch product having its foundations on religious tolerance, in fact the XVII century had seen Europe martyred by the wars of religion (namely the 30 years war), and we can identify the roots of liberal thought in the rejection of the driving forces behind the wars. Instead of focusing on religion, English and Dutch middle-class merchants and bourgeois rejected bigotry and religious fanaticism in favour of commerce and industry. Liberalism, as the word suggests, is about liberty, about freedom. Early liberal ideals were about the partial rejection of the hereditary principle and the divine right of kings and in favour of the view that every community should have a right to choose its own form of government. We can see, already from the beginning, a clear tendency towards democracy and right of property.

Liberalism was optimistic, energetic, philosophic, representing the very growing forces of the middle classes as opposed to everything that was medieval and aristocratic, in this early stages liberalism was a force wanting to liberate the energies and channel the determination

²⁹ Russell, Bertrand A. W. *A HISTORY of WESTERN PHILOSOPHY and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* SIMON and SCHUSTER, NEW YORK ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING the RIGHT of REPRODUCTION in WHOLE or in PART in ANY FORM COPYRIGHT, 1945 , by BERTRAND RUSSELL PUBLISHED. 1945.

³⁰ “An ancient common-law writ issued by a court or judge directing one who holds another in custody to produce the person before the court for some specified purpose”
“Habeas Corpus | Definition, History, & Scope.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/habeas-corpus.

³¹ Russell, Bertrand A. W. *A HISTORY of WESTERN PHILOSOPHY and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* SIMON and SCHUSTER, NEW YORK ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING the RIGHT of REPRODUCTION in WHOLE or in PART in ANY FORM COPYRIGHT, 1945 , by BERTRAND RUSSELL PUBLISHED. 1945.

for the exciting enterprises of commerce and science.

All of these forces, eventually transplanted in France, were amongst the main causes which led to the French Revolution at the end of the XVIII century.

Another distinctive character of liberalism was individualism, which stemmed from Protestantism, and was conceived as opposed to the centuries long tradition of the enterprise of seeking the truth as a collegial, social endeavour governed by the institution of the Church. Individualism meant that determining the truth was no longer a social, but an individual enterprise. This new way of conceiving the process towards truth naturally gave way to new and diverse perceptions and point of views on religion (Protestantism, Calvinism,) as well as the power of kings and the Church, or which system was best fitted to govern the people. Descartes' "I think therefore I am"³² helped to shape new opinions around Europe, opinions of which the point of departure was the very individual and personal experience of each thinker and not anymore the truths voiced by the main institutions such as the Church or the Kings.

Liberal thought mainly developed in specific historical circumstances, like in England during the XVII century. That was the time of the civil wars and the conflict between the Parliament and the king, a conflict on the limitation of the king's powers³³ such as that to grant trade monopolies, impose taxes, impose opinion and practices (especially in religious terms), arbitrarily arrest citizens and influence judges or controlling the military and declaring martial law³⁴. The Englishmen had grown weary of a monarchy of divine right type and wanted a monarchy dependent upon legislative sanction, a constitutional monarchy kept in check by parliament. This conflict also fostered compromise and moderation, which are in a way features of liberalism.

But in order to better understand the ancient origins of liberalism one man, who witnessed with his own eyes the upheavals of XVII century England, is to be mentioned. That man is John Locke, the father of liberal thought, whose works lied at the foundation of political liberalism³⁵. In his philosophy Locke fostered religious tolerance, the need for parliament and laissez-faire. He posited that men should be prudent, since the prudent man is able to accumulate wealth whilst it is the imprudent man that remains poor, and prudence is indeed a characteristic of Liberalism. Locke believed in the harmony between private and public interests, ascertaining that even if in the short-run the two might differ, in the long-run they coincide.

On matters of governance, in his First Treatise on Government³⁶, Locke criticises the doctrine of hereditary power. His critique is built upon Robert Filmer's "Patriarcha: or The Natural Power of Kings"³⁷. In his work Filmer upholds the divine right of kings positing that the king should be free from all human control, and that the Lords could only provide him with counsel, just like the Commons. The king, according to Filmer is not to be bound by his predecessors and not even by himself arguing that "impossible it is in nature that a

³² Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. 1641. Oxford University Press ed., 2008.

³³ The king in question is Charles I (1600-1649)

³⁴ Ohlmeyer, Jane H. "English Civil Wars | Causes, Summary, Facts, & Significance." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Feb. 2019, www.britannica.com/event/English-Civil-Wars.

³⁵ Rogers, Graham. "John Locke." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Britannica, 5 Dec. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/John-Locke.

³⁶ Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. 1689.

³⁷ Filmer, Robert. "Patriarcha: Or, the Natural Power of Kings. 1680 : Filmer, Sir Robert. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive." *Internet Archive*, 2024, archive.org/details/bim_early-english-books-1641-1700_patriarcha-or-the-natu_filmer-sir-robert_1680/page/n35/mode/2up.

man should give a law unto himself³⁸”.

He justifies his claims on a religious basis arguing that originally God bestowed upon Adam the regal powers, and after him these powers descended to his heirs to finally descend upon the various monarchs of the then modern times. Filmer regards the desire for liberty as impious since it is the very desire for liberty that first caused the fall of Adam, and conceives the relation king-subjects as the relation father-children, the regal authority is like a father authority and even when the children grow adults it still remains.

Locke had no difficulties in demolishing Filmer's arguments. He points out the absurdity to think that actual monarchs are, in any real sense, the heirs of Adam, and leveraging on the primogeniture argument he points out how Adam could only have one heir, and therefore only one person, may that be a king or a peasant, would be the only and real king, and all of the other monarchs (usurpers) should lay their crowns at his feet³⁹. He then adds a very interesting, and probably the most relevant thing for us especially because we are trying to trace back the origins and features of Liberalism. He says that paternal power is temporary, and at any rate it does not extend to life or property.⁴⁰ This is a crucial point Locke makes in his analysis, distinguishing kinds of authorities and categorising fields on which these authorities can, or cannot exercise their power. It is for this reason that heredity cannot be accepted as the basis of legitimate political power Locke says⁴¹. In his *Second Treatise on Government*⁴² he seeks for political power a more legitimate source. Having established in his *First Treatise* that deriving the authority of government from that of a father was impossible, basing himself on scholastic philosophy⁴³ and Grotius⁴⁴ he gives an answer to why we should obey governments and why these latter have a right to exact obedience. If this right cannot come from God, Locke argues that it comes from a contract. Civil government is the result of a social contract made amongst individuals to get out of an initial state of nature, this explanation of the origin of the authority of governments results in a much earthlier legitimation of political power⁴⁵. Exactly what XVII century England demanded.

I mentioned the state of nature, and I now feel it my duty to spend a few words on explaining what it is. The state of nature is for Locke the state in which human beings

³⁸ Filmer, Robert. "Patriarcha: Or, the Natural Power of Kings. 1680 : Filmer, Sir Robert. : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive." *Internet Archive*, 2024, archive.org/details/bim_early-english-books-1641-1700_patriarcha-or-the-natu_filmer-sir-robert_1680/page/n35/mode/2up.

³⁹ Russel, Bertrand A. W. *A HISTORY of WESTERN PHILOSOPHY and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* SIMON and SCHUSTER, NEW YORK ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING the RIGHT of REPRODUCTION in WHOLE or in PART in ANY FORM COPYRIGHT, 1945 , by BERTRAND RUSSELL PUBLISHED. 1945.

⁴⁰ Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. 1689.

⁴¹ Since paternal power is not political power, and ends at any rates when children reach maturity.

⁴² Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. 1689.

⁴³ Locke's conception of natural law and natural rights is rooted in medieval (thus scholastic) philosophy.

And naturally the social contract is nothing more than what had already been imagined in the medieval

bestseller "Le Roman de La Rose" .

⁴⁴ Grotius (1583-1645) greatly influenced Locke in his social contract theory particularly in the context of natural law, arguing that natural law could be valid even if God did not exist thus emphasising its secular and universal nature. In Locke's theory individuals form a government to protect natural rights, the same natural rights (deriving from natural law) that Grotius thought should be the guiding principles for political and legal structures.

"Hugo Grotius - Later Life | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, www.britannica.com/biography/Hugo-Grotius/Later-life.

⁴⁵ Much earthlier because it does not stem from God but from Individuals.

found themselves before the advent of civil society and authorities. In the state of nature individuals were completely free and no hierarchies of any sort were to be found amongst them. For Locke, unlike for Hobbes which described the state of nature as “a war of every man against every man⁴⁶”, the state of nature was a condition of relative peace where individuals lived in relative harmony following the laws of nature. The difference between the two conceptions of state of nature in Hobbes and Locke is said to lie in their respective different approaches to religion. Hobbes was considered an atheist, whilst Locke was a deeply religious man, and his ideas of human behaviour were pervaded with Christian morality⁴⁷. It is not clear whether for Locke the state of nature was just a fictional device or an actual historical period in time, but this is in any case not particularly relevant vis-à-vis the fact that he provided us with a way out to the otherwise dominant vision that political power had a divine origin. According to Locke the Government is a party to the contract and it can therefore be justly resisted and opposed if it fails to fulfil its obligations. Positing that the Government is a party to the contract is a crucial point in Locke’s thought development, because it is another ploy to prevent the executive power to place itself above its citizens, we can see here a democratic tendency which is indeed characteristic of liberal thought.

Let us now see how Locke defines political power:

"Political power I take to be the right of making laws, with penalty of death, and consequently all less penalties for the regulating and preserving of property, and of employing the force of the community in the execution of such laws, and in the defence of the commonwealth from foreign injury, and all this only for the public good⁴⁸."

For Locke political power means the right of making laws and inflicting penalties corresponding to the gravity of the misdeed, it is also the government’s role to preserve property and defend the commonwealth from foreign injury for the sake of public good. The fact that the authority of the government does not derive from God and is not hereditary also highlights another crucial point of liberal thought, namely the stress on the idea that powers should be independent, what we now call separation of powers. The social contract is needed to get out of the state of nature, a precondition where individuals were essentially judge of their own and inconveniences between individuals could not be dealt with impartially because of a lack of a neutral authority. The social contract provides a solution to the problem of unfair judgments influenced by personal interests. For Locke the setting up of a civic society through the contract means that the authority should also be able to find remedy for those inconveniences that happened in a state of nature where individuals were judges of their own and there was therefore no impartial justice. Being a remedy to inconveniences means that even when the authority is a party to the dispute, the judgment should be neutral and impartial. Kings, by holding both executive, legislative and judiciary powers could not be impartial in a case where they were involved as well, because they would have been judge and plaintiff at the same time. This would not have been a remedy to any inconvenience. On the contrary, assuming that there be a separation of the

⁴⁶ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. 1651.

⁴⁷ Russel dwells on the issue of Hobbes’ and Locke’s different conceptions of the state of nature deriving from two different approaches to religion. In Russel’s words: “In regard to the state of nature, Locke was less original than Hobbes, who regarded it as one in which there was war of all against all, and life was nasty, brutish, and short. But Hobbes was reputed an atheist. The view of the state of nature and of natural law which Locke accepted from his predecessors cannot be freed from its theological basis. [...] The belief in a happy "state of nature" in the remote past is derived partly from the biblical narrative of the age of the patriarchs, partly from the classical myth of the golden age.”

Russel, Bertrand A. W. *A HISTORY of WESTERN PHILOSOPHY and Its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* SIMON and SCHUSTER, NEW YORK ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING the RIGHT of REPRODUCTION in WHOLE or in PART in ANY FORM COPYRIGHT, 1945 , by BERTRAND RUSSELL PUBLISHED. 1945.

⁴⁸ Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. 1689.

powers even when the authority be party to the dispute, an impartial verdict could have been found to the dispute representing a real remedy to inconveniences.

This is the idea of check and balances, which is indeed a crucial milestone in liberal thought. For Locke the executive meant the king and the legislative meant the parliament, he summoned that the legislative power must be supreme, but also removable by the community, implying that a popular vote from time to time should take place to elect a new legislature. Today we would call this a democratic cycle. The executive for the English philosopher should carry out governing with the legislative, and whenever it failed to do so, the people would have the right to remove it by force, force which “is to be opposed to nothing but unjust and unlawful force⁴⁹”.

In order to make the whole system work and avoid civil wars, Locke identifies in the practice of compromise and common sense a solution, adding that they would have to be first of all habits of mind and not just theoretical principles written on a piece of paper somewhere.

Having seen how the Englishman thought is democratic (in that it posits that parliament should change from time to time for instance), Locke does not fully clarify one crucial point, which is and always will be controversial. Considering the rule of the majority as governing principle of the system of government developed in the Treatise, what value do the rights of the individual have as against the government? Coercion is the essence of government, and the executive must, indeed, coerce, but we are also aware that the rule of the majority, if unconstrained and pressed too far can turn into a baleful tyrannical one (Garzoni's one) just as much as the rule of a king. As anticipated Locke does not provide us with a clear solution to this problem, in this sense the most useful thing that comes to our help to understand his view on this issue is to be found in his letters on Toleration, where he writes that a believer should not be penalised on account of his or her religious opinions. This view highlights the importance that Locke gives to tolerance, which is of course a characteristic of liberalism.

Other ideas developed by Locke that are reflected in liberal thought, apart from the right of property, is the force with which this right is taken into consideration and protected. Locke argues that the power of the government, by contract, never extends beyond the common good. What is private is strictly a matter of the owner and the authority cannot even pretend to have any right on it. In Locke's words: "The supreme power cannot take from any man any part of his property without his own consent⁵⁰."

It seems like for the English philosopher the role of the government should be more or less limited at guaranteeing the private properties of individuals and providing a remedy there where this right was infringed. We see in this idea the maxims of Liberalism “laissez-faire laissez-passer⁵¹” which express the liberal sentiment of minimum state intervention.

We can say that the centre of Locke's philosophical endeavour is certainly the individual, Locke is ready to defend him and his rights in front of anything, giving him freedom and independence from a system that until then, had always overshadowed him in favour of royal and clerical crowns and papal tiaras, elevating him to defy even God and to be free to choose and legitimise his own government. Locke sows the seeds for the philosophical basis of liberalism, which will be harvested by many intellectuals after him towards the course of history: Montesquieu developing further on the question of separation of powers⁵², Smith identifying clearer economic foundations to liberal thought characterised

⁴⁹ This quote of Locke's Second Treatise resonates highly with Saint Thomas Aquinas' idea that the people can go as far as killing an unjust king if his rule is unbearable and the murderous act is not carried out as simple personal vengeance.

Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. 1689.

⁵⁰ Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. 1689.

⁵¹ The famous maxim attributed to Vincent de Gournay become emblematic of non-interventionist liberal economic policies.

⁵² In his 1748 “*De l'esprit des lois*” Montesquieu gives the first modern formulation of the separation of powers doctrine distinguishing between legislative, executive and judicial powers.

by limited government intervention⁵³, Tocqueville analysing democracy with its flaws and qualities⁵⁴, up to more modern times with Keynes, Rawls, Habermas, Friedman and Fukuyama. Many others have contributed to the development of liberal thought, and although there is no such thing as a formal omni-comprehensive definition of liberalism, one thing is certain; the individual is the undisputed protagonist in liberalism.

John Grey writes:

“Common to all variants of the liberal tradition is a definite conception, distinctively modern in character, of man and society ... It is individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity; egalitarian, inasmuch as it confers on all men the same moral status and denies the relevance to legal or political order of differences in moral worth among human beings; universalist, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms; and meliorist in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements. It is this conception of man and society which gives liberalism a definite identity which transcends its vast internal variety and complexity.”⁵⁵

Liberalism explains the relation between the individual and society, giving rights to the individual (for Locke this rights were liberty, life and property⁵⁶) and subsequently protecting them from societal collective demand or threat, assuming that every individual is equal and worth the same despite external differences in beliefs or origin because we all enjoy the same moral status.

Freedom of speech, association, belief, autonomy, right of property, right to undertake economic transactions, right to hold political views and express them through the vote, right to actively participate to the political life, the rule of law, the separation of powers. All of this is liberalism. A conception of man and society that enables us to build a system that permits us to peacefully manage diversity and pluralistic societies.

Section 1c : A Fair and Just Society

After having immersed ourselves into the history of political power and after having dwelled into the histories and meanings of democracy and liberalism and thus grasped some of the key values and principles central to the two concepts, it is now time to see what major authors of political philosophy have managed to build on those ideals and how they envisage a just and fair society.

Robert Dahl is one of them, in his 1971 “Polyarchy”⁵⁷ he identifies some institutions⁵⁸

The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. “Separation of Powers | Political Science.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 21 July 2016, www.britannica.com/topic/separation-of-powers.

⁵³ Adam Smith in his 1776 “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations” lies a comprehensive system of political economy, in which the system of perfect liberty (as he calls it) calls for market determined wages and free rather than government-constrained enterprise.

Heilbroner, Robert. “Adam Smith - the Wealth of Nations.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/biography/Adam-Smith/The-Wealth-of-Nations.

⁵⁴ Especially in his work “De La Democratie en Amerique”

⁵⁵ Fukuyama quotes John Grey in his *Liberalism and its Discontents*. 2022.

⁵⁶ Przetacznik, Franciszek. “Individual Human Rights in John Locke’s Two Treatises of Government.” *Netherlands International Law Review*, vol. 25, no. 02, Aug. 1978, pp. 195–216, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0165070x00015515>.

⁵⁷ Dahl, Robert A. *Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition*. 1971. New Haven and London, Yale University Press ed.

necessary to the establishment of a fully fledged democracy: these are universal suffrage and the right to run for public office, free and fair elections for all adults, availability and observance of the right to free speech and the protection to exercise it, the existence of and free access to alternative information not controlled by government, the undisputed right to form and join relatively autonomous organisations and also political parties (crucially oppositions), the responsiveness of government and parties to voters, and the accountability of government and parties to election outcomes and government. In Dahl's view, the coming about of these institutions means being on the right path towards democratization. It is important to note how Dahl's idea of polyarchy focuses on the institutional framework and process leading towards democratization, no country for Dahl is a fully fledged democracy because no country in the real world comprehensively realises the full participation and equality of citizens, what we consider "democracies" in Dahl's terms are polyarchies, polyarchies aspire to be democracies and can be considered as not fully realised democracies.

But a Democracy, and a liberal democracy is not only what Dahl describes, the philosophy behind this term has seen major political philosophers dwelling on the significance of it, for Jurgen Habermas for instance, free speech and communication are at the basis of democracy. A democracy for Habermas means a deliberative democracy, where there is full participation in the democratic moment. In his normative theory, communication is central in changing ideas and shaping reality.

In his 1981 "The Theory of Communicative Action"⁵⁹ Habermas conceptualises two tracks, the world of life and the world of system. The world of system consists of the institutions, where decisions are formalised and legitimised. (Parliament, Senate, Judiciary, Administration etc etc...), the world of life on the other hand consists of the every-day reality, the informal world of public opinion formation outside of the formal context, the fluid and unpredictable world of public opinion and spontaneous popular flows. (Radio, Newspapers, television, Media, Manifestations, protests... etc etc...). The two worlds represent the public institutionalised sphere and the public civil sphere, these two have to be close to one another's, communicate and influence one another's in Habermas's opinion. This is possible thanks to democracy, in a process that allows to reconcile individual freedoms and public authority, thus overcoming the dichotomy liberalism v democracy, we can see how the liberal part of the duo conceptually approaches itself to the world of system putting in place organs and institutions that define the framework into which citizens can exercise their individual and public freedoms, reconciling public and private autonomy. Therefore for Habermas the liberal and the democratic moment have to be conceived as complementary. They necessitate one another's. In order to be part of a public process we have to have individual rights, being free citizens (liberal part), on the other hand, the individual rights in question cannot abstain themselves from going through the recognition filter of the public sphere and collective deliberation (democratic part). In a society, we all together set individual rights, but in order for these rights to be legitimised and not remain individual whims and tantrums, we need a superior validation, which goes through collective deliberation. In this way Habermas points at reconciling public and private autonomy. In order to do all of that, and to come back to the idea of the importance of communication, the two above mentioned worlds have to be able to be in contact and reciprocally influence each other's. The world of system cannot close itself to the world of life (considering for example Parson's theory of systems⁶⁰ which asserts that

⁵⁸ Keman, Hans. "Polyarchy | Political Science." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 21 Sept. 2015, www.britannica.com/topic/polyarchy.

⁵⁹ Habermas Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action : Lifeworld and Systems*. Polity Press, 2015.

⁶⁰ ---. "Talcott Parsons | American Sociologist." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 9 Dec. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/Talcott-Parsons.

the various systems tend to close and become independent), on the contrary it has to be responsive and flexible to respond to the changing needs and values of society, only in this way it does not risk to stifle the discourse making democracy stagnant and unresponsive. The dynamic interplay between the two spheres is what gives democracy its vitality, this is also why another element of great importance for Habermas is participation and political engagement. One issue with participation is that in today's complex societies⁶¹ there is a growing need for specialisation and experts, and this reliance on experts can create barriers for everyday citizens trying to engage in the democratic process by alienating them and causing them to feel like they lacked the knowledge to effectively participate in the political discourse and the democratic process. The specialisation issue could lead to a knowledge elite holding a disproportionate amount of power and potentially excluding a major part of the citizenship from democratic processes.

Stating that the world of system has to be permeable to the outside, to the spontaneous popular flows is all the more complicated if we consider the pressure and influence the capital has on it. The world of system has to maintain a lively interplay with the world of life and resist to the power of the great economic asset. Private entities can in a way endanger the democratic well-functioning of a society when putting pressure on the structured political system, it is not a new phenomenon, but we see it today even more clearly in the blatant union of Mr. Trump and Mr. Musk, two men holding the reins both of big private enterprises (the capital) and of the structured system.

Having seen how Habermas conceptualises and conceives a liberal democratic society, we now move on to describing another main political philosopher's conception of how a liberal democracy should look like.

In his 1993 book "Political Liberalism"⁶², John Rawls asks himself a very interesting question, the question can be summarized as follows: How can a society stay stable, when its citizens have different beliefs and different moral, philosophical and religious convictions?

We will see how in the answers that Rawls tries to give to this question, and in the reflexions he makes in a way he goes close to defining what a liberal democracy is, and he certainly helps us understanding what, at least, it should look like.

A very important concept in Rawls's philosophy is that of comprehensive doctrines, he calls comprehensive doctrines the core beliefs that shape how we see the world. Starting from this concept, he undelights how in a society each individual follows or is at least influenced by their comprehensive doctrines thus having their own opinions on what is right and wrong, good and bad. Given this, how do we prevent these differences from tearing us apart, and how do we create a system where people can coexist peacefully and fairly?

If in his previous book, "A theory of justice"⁶³ from 1971, Rawls had tried to give an answer to these queries by focusing on moral stability, positing that everyone in a society would have to agree to a moral in order for that society to be peaceful and just, in "Political Liberalism" he shifts his focus on political stability, realizing how expecting every single individual in a society to agree upon every single moral issue was indeed slightly idealistic. Focusing on political stability meant for Rawls focusing on a framework that could actually work in many societies, even where people held conflicting beliefs. His idea was that a society can be just and peaceful even when the individuals that compose it hold different sets of comprehensive doctrines. The key to success in that direction is reasonableness. In

⁶¹ Habermas, Jurgen, and William Rehg. *Between Facts and Norms Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. 1996.

⁶² Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. 1993. COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS ed., Columbia University Press, 1996.

⁶³ (Rawls, *A THEORY of JUSTICE*)

order for a pluralistic and diverse society to achieve peace and justice is not that its citizens share a moral, but that they are reasonable. Being reasonable for Rawls is not just about being rational, it is something more. Reasonableness means being willing to cooperate fairly with others, even when you do not necessarily agree with them, taking other people's perspectives into account and foster respectful dialogue. We see here a certain similarity, or at least something is common with Habermas's ideas. Rawls draws his idea of reasonableness from Aristotle's *phronesis*⁶⁴ which is the practical wisdom of knowing how to apply general principles to real life situations and from Kant's idea of respecting others in themselves and not just as means to our own ends⁶⁵ (the idea that our own self interest should not always trump what is good for everyone). So for Rawls reasonableness is a blend of practical wisdom and moral duty, and will enable us to live together fairly even when we disagree on the fundamentals. It is also important to note the difference between rationality and reasonableness, they are two distinct, although connected concepts. Reasonableness endorses us to think of our actions as of having external effects on the collectivity, whilst rationality is more selfish. Acting rationally means acting merely pursuing one's own self interest disregarding the bigger picture in which one happens to live and act. If everyone were to act rationally society would be chaos, so we could say that reasonableness is in a way, if not the opposite, the complementary of rationality, because being reasonable means exactly taking into account the bigger picture. The duo reasonableness reason is, in a way, similar to the duo freedom license, where freedom takes into account others, whilst license compromises them.

The problems we face in our society derive from the fact that we live in complex societies, where it can be hard, sometimes impossible, finding definitive conclusions or solutions to complex issues, but this is exactly way reasonableness is all the more important to live in a peaceful society. Reasonableness and tolerance are crucial because they allow us to be open to others' ideas and have respectful debates even when we disagree.

Another crucial point in Rawls's vision is that of Public Reason. When debating political issues, Rawls believes that we should be using arguments and justifications that can be understood by everyone, regardless of their personal beliefs. We should try to find common grounds based on reasons that everyone can understand, therefore "we should do A because my religion says so" should not be considered as a good reason for doing A because it might have no value to those people who are not part of that religion, therefore making it difficult for them to see why "we should actually do A".

This all idea of reasonableness does, of course, raise some issues and is not exempt from critics.

Maffettone⁶⁶ identifies two main categories of critics to Rawls's idea of reasonableness, the political and the epistemic critics.

According to critics of political nature, the notion of reasonableness can be used by certain groups of individuals in power in a society to dominate the discourse and impose their hegemony on others, silence their opponents and maintain the status quo. One of the main voices up-holding this view is Chantal Mouffe, who argues that conflicts and exclusion are part of the power struggle which makes up politics, and trying to pretend that everyone can be reasonable is ignoring this reality. In a way Rawls's idea of reasonableness is perceived as being naïve about how power really works.

Another school of critics, the epistemic ones, argue that by focusing so much on reasonableness and stability, Rawls avoids making any strong claims about whether his own

⁶⁴ Maffettone, Sebastiano. "Political Liberalism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 30, no. 5-6, Sept. 2004, pp. 541-577, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453704045754>. Accessed 13 Jan. 2020.

⁶⁵ Maffettone, Sebastiano. "Political Liberalism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 30, no. 5-6, Sept. 2004, pp. 541-577, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453704045754>. Accessed 13 Jan. 2020.

⁶⁶ Maffettone, Sebastiano. "Political Liberalism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 30, no. 5-6, Sept. 2004, pp. 541-577, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453704045754>. Accessed 13 Jan. 2020.

principles of justice are really true. In the name of keeping everyone happy (agree to disagree) some important truths might be left undiscovered, in the name of consensus, truth might be ignored.

To these critics Rawls responds trying to find a balance between the demands of truth and stability, arguing that pursuing truth is important, but that political philosophy also has to address the practical side of building a stable and just society, building a well functioning liberal democracy.

There are of course lofty ideals and then there's the real world, and finding the way we can apply those lofty ideals to the real world is the struggle. Nonetheless, one thing is certain for Rawls, however difficult it might be to apply theoretical principles of justice and fairness to the reality of things, the practice of democracy itself can help us doing that by making us more reasonable. Through open and honest debate and by listening to each other's, we can collectively figure out what we all want to agree on, both as individuals and as a society, through talking and listening to one another's we can all get more reasonable and get a clarification of what actually reasonableness means. For Rawls the concepts of reason and reasonableness are like muscles that can be exercised and strengthen through the process of democratic deliberation.

Naturally in order for this process to be effective and work well, there have to be some basic principles we all agree on, and it is not enough for these principles to be written somewhere in a constitution, society has to actually be governed by them, laws and institutions have to be built on them, the whole system has to be based on them and ultimately citizens themselves should be using these shared forms of reasoning and investigation when debating political issues. This does not mean going back to Rawls's first conception of a just and peaceful society where all citizens agreed on a moral, and therefore on what is right or wrong and on final decisions. The focus here is no more on final outcomes, but on the process involved to reach them. A peaceful and just society can be reached when we are able to justify our decisions in front of others using reasons that everyone can understand even if might not share. One main idea in this regard is naturally that of transparency, which is a positive one because it obviously helps to build trust.

Another crucial element in Rawls's theory which rests on the idea of reasonableness and good reasons is the liberal principle of legitimacy, which posits that political authority in a liberal society should not be unconstrained. For Rawls using political power, can be acceptable only when it is based on principles that all citizens can reasonably accept. The "we are in charge, therefore we do what we say" for the government is not acceptable and certainly not enough to exercise its political power. In Rawls's best style, the government needs to back up its actions with solid reasons.

Rawls undoubtedly provides us with a really helpful theoretical framework to try and understand what a peaceful, just and stable society would look like, but it is certainly up to us to then figure out how to apply this framework to the real world. One thing is certain though, and that is that a diverse, pluralistic and free liberal society requires willingness to compromise within certain boundaries represented by the basic principles of justice, fairness, freedom and equality.

Section 1d : Liberal Democracy

After having dwelled on the changing meaning of the word Democracy throughout history, the evolution and core principles of liberalism and the philosophy of some major and influential thinkers on the ideas behind a just society, and in light of all that has been said, we can now proceed into an attempt to give a full and comprehensive definition of Liberal Democracy.

A liberal democracy is undoubtedly a combination of democracy and liberalism, incorporating elements and values of democracy alongside principles of liberal thought.

The main legacy of democracy on liberal democracy is the idea that all citizens should be entitled to have a saying in the political life of a country and participate in it.

Universal suffrage, the right to run for public office, the regular holding of free and fair elections, the establishment of a representative government based on the preferences expressed during the elections. These are all key characteristics of modern day liberal democracies that derive from the democracy part of the pair.

The liberal principles that go with them are the stress on separation of powers and limited government, which are conceived to guarantee individual rights to citizens, first amongst all the right of life, liberty and property described by Locke. Individual rights also encompass civil liberties, the freedom of production and trade as well as the rights of minorities.

Liberal thought adds a touch of reasonableness (in Rawlsian terms) in democracy, preventing it from degenerating into the mere rule or tyranny of the majority. Values such as that of tolerance and compromise allow individuals to peacefully coexist and are characteristic traits of liberalism and thus of liberal democracy. Another important trait is naturally the stress on individualism (it is important to highlight how individualism does not mean egoism or selfishness, but merely a tendency to focus on one's own personal sphere without denying the importance of society), pluralism, political competition, distinction between public and private and last but not least the pivotal role of the rule of law.

These values and principles are all embedded in liberal democratic institutions like government, legislature, courts, administration, constitution. We can say that this model of state development has been followed throughout modernity by a majority of western countries, the turning points in the history of liberal democracy have undoubtedly been the English civil wars of the XVII century, the American one a century later and the French revolution and its ideals from 1789 onwards. Today The Economist Democracy Index⁶⁷ identifies well-functioning democracies, that in light of what has been said so far, we can call liberal democracies, in Europe and North America. The Index, from 2010 onwards, has come out every year in an attempt to assert the state of health of democracy around the world and it is based on sixty indicators assessed by experts grouped into five categories (electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, civil liberties). The Index ranks from 0 to 10 and divides the results into four main categories: full democracies (8+), flawed democracies (6-8), hybrid regimes (4-6) and authoritarian regimes (0-4). According to the Index countries like Russia, China and Iran are authoritarian regimes where even if democratic aspects such as elections are, in a way, upheld, the liberal part of the duo liberal democracy is totally missing making them backslide and regress to the worst and more infamous part of the Index. The 2024 Index shows a concentration of blue (indicating full or flawed democracies) in Europe and North America, Australia and New Zealand. In particular Norway ranks highest, followed by New Zealand and other Scandinavian countries. Big countries like Germany, Canada, Japan and UK stand around 8.5 of the scale, France scores 7.99, the US 7.85 and Italy 7.58.⁶⁸

In the second part of this work, we will delve into the main dangers that threaten liberal democracy there where it was born and it is well established (Europe and North America) before delving into a case study concerning the current situation that the United States is facing with the election of Donald Trump to the White House, the affirmation of the MAGA ideology and the rise of the king of the oligarchs, Elon Musk

⁶⁷ The Economist. "The Global Democracy Index: How Did Countries Perform in 2024?" *The Economist*, 2024, www.economist.com/interactive/democracy-index-2024.

⁶⁸ The Economist. "The Global Democracy Index: How Did Countries Perform in 2024?" *The Economist*, 2024, www.economist.com/interactive/democracy-index-2024.

CHAPITRE 2 : THE SIEGE : DEMOCRACY UNDER ATTACK

As mentioned in the introduction, several highly credited scientific observatories, such as The Economist and Larry Diamond with “Facing up to the democratic recession”, have observed how in recent years we are witnessing democratic backsliding (which we can now call liberal democratic backsliding) all around the world. The West greatest invention is in danger even where its ideals were first originated and later developed. Liberal Democracy is under attack both from external and internal enemies. Illiberal countries like Russia, China and Iran, which already carry within themselves the seed of anti-liberal practices values and principles, also play in the international geopolitical arena at undermining these same values by meddling with democratic processes in free western liberal countries in a manner that could be defined as hybrid warfare, in which they pursue attacks on western liberal democracies both directly through more conventional offensive tactics and indirectly through more sophisticated methods. Let’s think for example of Iran’s support of terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah or the Houthis in Yemen, each works to destabilise liberal democratic countries belonging to the western world. Israel for what concerns Hamas and Hezbollah, and more in general global trade (affecting western liberal democracies) for what concerns the Houthis. At the same time such countries pursue attacks on our western world also through more indirect (but still aggressive) means, such as cyberoperations aimed at destabilising the well functioning of institutions, propaganda and disinformation campaigns, corruption or last but not least, economic coercion.

But the external threats are not the only ones that endanger western liberal societies. There are dangers even within our societies, and these are represented by ourselves, our ways of thinking and our taking for granted the reality in which we live, which is (despite economic disparities) for most citizens a reality that enables them to live a tranquil life in a rather fair society. People living in western societies can enjoy freedom of thought, speech, expression, enterprise, movement, equality before the law, civil rights, human rights. However, we often forget that all these noble and lofty concepts did not materialise from one day to another or fall from the sky on a sunny day, but were conceived, developed, and conquered throughout history. This disregard for such precious values paired with a lack of political culture and dissatisfaction with the political class leads the people to give more and more validation to populist parties and powerful and charming individuals (the demagogues that Plato and Aristotle warned us about) that ultimately put at risk what we are accustomed to.

Section 2a : Today’s Main Threats to Liberal Democracy

Focusing first about the external threats, in an increasingly interconnected and digitalised world, it is not surprising that one important danger has to do with advanced technology and the digital field.

The essays collection titled “Disinformation Age⁶⁹” edited by W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston examines the origins of disinformation campaigns and the impact these latter have on democracies, particularly the United States. The collection also explores the role media and technology have in spreading misleading information and touches upon the matter of Russian disinformation campaigns against democracies, aimed at disrupting elections, amplifying social conflicts and sow distrust amongst the population of liberal democratic countries (especially Europe and the United States).

These attacks aimed at destabilising the western electorate take the form of hackers stealing

⁶⁹ Bennett, W. Lance, and Steven Livingston. *The Disinformation Age*. Edited by W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, Cambridge University Press, 6 Oct. 2020.

sensible data or bots and sock puppets human directed accounts that spread hoaxes and fabrications, or amplify already existing narratives favourable to specific interests. One blatant example of how Russia meddled with another country's domestic affairs undermining liberal democratic values and putting them in danger, happened during the 2016 US presidential election campaign.

In July 2016 Russian hackers launched a cyber attack against democrat candidate Hilary Clinton and her staff targeting email addresses and consequently getting access to thousands of mails in an attempt to embarrass Hilary Clinton and undermine the Democratic party⁷⁰. The mails and their content were later displayed on WikiLeaks and made public.

In the same electoral campaign context, Russian hackers also stole information about some 500.000 voters (names, addresses, social security numbers, dates of birth and license numbers) in an attempt to influence election result, embarrass the public, discredit specific parties and ultimately stoke social division. Russian state propaganda claimed the attacks against the National Convention Committee and Hilary Clinton originated in Ukraine and not from Russia. This claim, echoed by Trump and his supporters, enjoyed no evidence whatsoever and was proved wrong by official government investigations. Furthermore, in 2019, the Senate Intelligence Committee, issued a report that stated that election systems in all 50 states had been targeted by Russian hackers during the 2016 presidential elections. Another example of an illiberal country trying to influence a liberal one by meddling with sensitive data of the latter's citizens is the case of the ambiguous China's role in the 2015 cyberattack on US office of personnel management. As highlighted by Sarah Harvey and Diana Evans in their report on ways to defend from cyber espionage⁷¹, China is the primary suspect for the 2015 attack that resulted in the theft of approximately 21.5 million personnel records and included sensitive information such as social security numbers and most importantly fingerprints of around 5.6 million individuals. Several elements would suggest China's involvement with the attack, namely the fact that the Obama administration spent time dwelling on the most effective way to retaliate against China without escalating even further already tense bilateral relations, the fact that US intelligence personnel was recalled from Beijing due to safety risks following the attack and from the fact that the relevant literature, the two co-authors tell us, seems to tacitly agree that China was indeed behind the breach. Another element that could be seen as proof of China's involvement in the affair is the arrest, by the Chinese government, of hackers accused (by Beijing) of the cyber attack just before an official state visit by President Xi Jinping to Washington in 2015. It appears that this operation (a plea of guilty) carried out by Beijing is indeed indicative of a calculated strategy, designed to allay concerns, enhance its reputations, and create a favourable impression in the lead up to the visit to Washington.

Naturally illiberal actors, although actively involved in the destabilisation of liberal democratic countries in a continuous pursuit of power and influence, are also committed to provide themselves with a safety net and they therefore highly invest in soft and, as Christopher Walker⁷² accurately observes in his paper, sharp power. Authoritarian regimes such as China enjoy increasingly global influence and employ sharp power techniques to manipulate information and undermine democratic institutions Walker notes, examples of

⁷⁰ Nakashima, Ellen, and Shane Harris. "How the Russians Hacked the DNC and Passed Its Emails to WikiLeaks." *The Washington Post*, 13 July 2018, www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-russians-hacked-the-dnc-and-passed-its-emails-to-wikileaks/2018/07/13/af19a828-86c3-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html.

⁷¹ Harvey, Sarah, et al. *Defending against Cyber Espionage: The US Office of Personnel Management Hack as a Case Study in Information Assurance*. 2016.

⁷² Walker, Christopher, et al. "The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2020, pp. 124-137, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0010>.

this are the editing of Wikipedia entries related to China⁷³. For instance, Mandarin language entries were re-written to describe the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre as “the June 4th incident” to “quell the counterrevolutionary riots”, the Wikipedia page related to Taiwan was also modified from “a state in East Asia” to “a province in the People’s Republic of China”. We can identify in these actions efforts to reframe matters and sensitive topics in a manner congenial to the Chinese Communist Party’s narratives in a way that effectively trumps the users’ possibility to get access to a free and unbiased information. Very recently the coming out of the Chinese ChatGPT DeepSeek also had a huge impact worldwide, and many users observed how, comparing ChatGPT to DeepSeek, queries related to the Tiananmen Square massacre were carefully avoided by the Chinese AI confirming the fact that China is actively thwarting free information, and not only within its national borders. China effectively employs various methods to manipulate information and undermine democratic institutions, on top of the three above mentioned examples, Walker notes how China is developing and increasingly applying domestic manipulation tactics internationally (especially in Hong Kong and Taiwan), these tactics involve internet trolls made up to mislead the electorate as it happened before the 2018 Taiwanese elections when PRC’s trolls targeted Taiwanese citizens on platforms like Twitter, Facebook or chat groups. China is also leveraging on technology for surveillance and censorship, working on “safe-city” surveillance projects like WeChat, a platform designed for messaging, online payments and many other functions which is politically partisan (in the sense that it includes politically based content restrictions) and gathers many user’s sensible information, first amongst all, fingerprints. This app is also increasingly being utilised by China in its Belt and Road initiative to, in a way, Walker says, coerce economic partners to play according to China’s rule thus ensuring this latter to have an upper hand in the initiative. This app exemplifies consumer convenience, surveillance and censorship. A convenient recipe for the user to comfortably carry out daily running errands and administrative tasks, and a perfect recipe for the government to constantly watch and control you. China’s shaping and development of authoritarian technology like WeChat or DeepSeek is also starting to cross Big Brother⁷⁴’s national borders and it can be said that China is effectively exporting a model of digital authoritarianism, and proofs of this are the presence in countries like Germany, Italy, the Netherlands or Spain of technological giants like Huawei implementing Chinese “digital authoritarianism”⁷⁵ in open societies. China’s digital model poses serious threats to open societies where free access to free and independent information is pivotal for the persistence of a healthy liberal environment.

Less subtle yet impactful on western liberal societies is the role of Iran and its proxies on the international scene, in establishing and analysing the relation between Hezbollah and especially the Houthi groups with Iran the authors of the report “Could the Houthi be the next Hizbollah?”⁷⁶ highlight some important elements in Iran’s foreign policy that show why Iran represents a threat to the values and principles of Liberal Democracy. Iran essentially aims at expanding its regional influence and limiting the United States’ one in the Middle East, and it pursues its objectives through questionable means like supporting borderline, if not fully fledged terrorist groups. Its primary objective in supporting these groups is to carry out its political interests (at odds with any liberal democratic value or principle) maintaining a degree of plausible deniability by hiding behind the groups and thus minimising the risk of direct conflict with countries that suffer from the groups’

⁷³ Walker, Christopher, et al. “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2020, pp. 124–137, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0010>.

⁷⁴ China, because it watches and controls us in every aspects of our lives

⁷⁵ Walker, Christopher, et al. “The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power.” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2020, pp. 124–137, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0010>.

⁷⁶ Johnston, Trevor, et al. *Could the Houthis Be the next Hizballah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement*. 2020.

attacks. Hezbollah is the first and arguably most important of Iran's proxies, operating from Lebanon it aims at destabilising the Middle East's only real liberal democracy, Israel. The Houthis is the second most important group supported by Iran, it is based in Yemen and like Hezbollah for Israel, is meant to disrupt and destabilise Saudi Arabia by carrying out attacks and draining military and financial resources of the sand kingdom. Hezbollah has also had the role to protect the Syrian regime of Assad, allied with Russia and Iran, and one of the greatest illiberal actors in the geopolitical arena guilty of innumerable atrocities against humanity. One of Iran's main ambitions, is also that of disrupting the existing geopolitical order that, despite all its possible flaws, was built by liberal democracies and reflects liberal democratic values. Numerous operations led by the two abovementioned terrorist groups and backed by Iran have an impact on the energy markets, on global trade, refugee flows and the very existence of these groups and their religious imprint (other than political as we have seen) foster extremism which one of the very things that liberalism, from the beginning, abhors and rejects.

Another big problem posed by Iran's support for these groups, which can be compared metaphorically to the tentacles of the Hydra, with the head of the mythological beast being represented by Iran, is related to accountability. By supporting non state actors that engage in armed conflict and terrorism, Iran eludes the traditional mechanisms of international relations and accountability between states, effectively challenging the rules based international system upheld by liberal democracies (also challenged by the fact that the actions carried out by these groups are actions of unelected actors).

For what concerns indirect attacks on liberal democratic values and principles in general, and on western liberal democracies in particular, strong illiberal actors like China and Russia can also count on their economic might. The main principle underpinning modern nation states and one of the core tenets of liberal democracy is state sovereignty and more broadly a country's autonomy, this core principle is put greatly at risk by China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative, as described by Britannica, is a "Chinese-led massive infrastructure investment project aimed at improving connectivity, trade and communication across Eurasia, Latin America and Africa."⁷⁷

It was first launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 to enhance economic connections and collaborations of various parts of the world with China but it is also seen, especially by the West as a means through which China is expanding its sphere of economic and political influence around the globe, to the extent that former US President Joe Biden called it a "debt and noose agreement"⁷⁸. It is indeed in these footsteps that Thomas Ameyaw-Brobbe titles his report on the Belt and Road Initiative "The Belt and Road Initiative: Debt Trap and its Implication on International Security"⁷⁹. In this report the author focuses on the negative aspects of the Chinese investment project, pointing out the risks that a country partner to the Initiative could face when allowing itself to be involved with the project. It is understood from the report how the financing strategies of the Belt and Road Initiative can potentially undermine democratic values and principles resulting in potential dangerous political consequences. In fact, the Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure financing model involves lending, from the part of the Chinese government, to sovereign countries. This can potentially turn into debt traps, because if the partner country struggles and eventually does not manage to repay its debts and fulfil obligations to China in due times (and this is all the more possible in an increasingly unstable world,

⁷⁷ Tsuji, Chinatsu. "Belt and Road Initiative | Asian Development Project | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, 22 Nov. 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/Belt-and-Road-Initiative.

⁷⁸ Tsuji, Chinatsu. "Belt and Road Initiative | Asian Development Project | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, 22 Nov. 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/Belt-and-Road-Initiative.

⁷⁹ Ameyaw-Brobbe, Thomas. "View of the Belt and Road Initiative: Debt Trap and Its Implication on International Security | Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies." *Asianjournals.org*, 2024, asianjournals.org/online/index.php/ajms/article/view/30/30.

especially after the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war that made inflation stagger) this latter can, as it has been the case with Sri Lanka and its Hambantota port⁸⁰, respond with policies such as debt for equity swaps. A debt for equity swap is a practice which involves the swapping of debt with equity shares by the creditor, meaning that the creditor that had lent money to, for instance, a company or a business, when such company or business cannot repay the money the creditor had given it, can effectively take possession of some of the company or business's equity shares becoming a co-owner of the business/company.

It goes without saying that this practice, which can be beneficial and even salvific in the context of private companies and businesses, becomes extremely dangerous when applied to sovereign states. As the case of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka suggests, China deals with sovereign nations treating them like private companies or businesses, where once they fail to repay their obligations in time the Divine Land⁸¹ can effectively take possession of that company becoming the company's owner, but sovereign countries are not businesses and ultimately their sovereignty belongs to the people of that country and not to China. By creating debt traps China rips away the right of the people to their own country. Another negative consequence of the Belt and Road Initiative for liberal democratic principles and values is the fact that once China asserts its influence over one country through economic coercion exercised through debt traps, it starts to impose a growing involvement in the domestic affairs of the country supporting non-democratic and autocratic forces and fostering domestic resentment and civil conflicts. This Chinese economic initiative blatantly gives China the upper hand, making participants increasingly economically dependent on China ultimately resulting in giving it undue political leverage, which goes indeed against the sovereignty principles as stated above.

We can see another case of potential economic coercion on European liberal democratic countries from an illiberal actor with the Russian energy supply to Europe. In 2011⁸² energy represented almost 77% of total EU imports from Russia accounting for nearly 150 billion €, and by 2021⁸³, the year before the second Russian invasion of Ukraine, European gas imports from Russia accounted for 155 billion cubic meters. This huge figure, because of the invasion, drastically dropped in 2022⁸⁴ to around 63 billion cubic meter to reach 28 in 2023⁸⁵. As mentioned, the decision to cut on Russian imports of natural resources came from Europe, but the two above mentioned figures, 77% of Russian imports consisting of energy in 2011 and 155 billion cubic meters of gas imported from Russia in 2021 have to make us ponder about the sensibleness of relying so highly on Russian energy supplies for Europe's survival. It is clear that, as also highlighted already in 2014 by Andreas Goldthau and Nick Sitter in their study "A liberal actor in a realist world? The Commission and the

⁸⁰ The Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, as a consequence of Sri Lanka's failure to repay its debt towards China in the context of the Road and Belt Initiative, has been leased to China from 2017 for 99 years, basically meaning that Sri Lanka has effectively lost its sovereignty over its port to Chinese authorities.

⁸¹ China

⁸² European Commission. "In Focus: Reducing the EU's Dependence on Imported Fossil Fuels." *Commission.europa.eu*, 20 Apr. 2022, commission.europa.eu/news/focus-reducing-eus-dependence-imported-fossil-fuels-2022-04-20_en.

⁸³ European Commission. "In Focus: Reducing the EU's Dependence on Imported Fossil Fuels." *Commission.europa.eu*, 20 Apr. 2022, commission.europa.eu/news/focus-reducing-eus-dependence-imported-fossil-fuels-2022-04-20_en.

⁸⁴ European Commission. "In Focus: Reducing the EU's Dependence on Imported Fossil Fuels." *Commission.europa.eu*, 20 Apr. 2022, commission.europa.eu/news/focus-reducing-eus-dependence-imported-fossil-fuels-2022-04-20_en.

⁸⁵ European Commission. "In Focus: Reducing the EU's Dependence on Imported Fossil Fuels." *Commission.europa.eu*, 20 Apr. 2022, commission.europa.eu/news/focus-reducing-eus-dependence-imported-fossil-fuels-2022-04-20_en.

external dimension of the single market for energy⁸⁶, Russia has been (and it is important that it does not back to being) in a dominant supplier position for what concerns the energy market in Europe. The Russian state-owned company Gazprom is amongst the main exporters of natural gas and, to a lesser extent, oil. Being a state-controlled company its actions do not necessarily reflect merely economic interests but can also reflect political will and be used to leverage on geopolitical disputes in a way that is neither liberal nor democratic. Being in a dominant position in the European energy market means that Russia can have a huge influence on prices and supply of energy, as it was the case during the 2009⁸⁷ Russian Ukrainian crisis which resulted into the interruption of gas supply to some South East European countries for some time.

China and Russia both pose a threat to the western liberal democratic order essentially by presenting an alternative political economic model characterised by, as we have seen up to now with different examples, mercantilism and state control over strategic sectors. But cyber attacks, theft of sensible data, debt traps and economic subordination are not the only ways in which authoritarian countries like Russia and China work to undermine and dismantle the western liberal democratic order alongside with its core principles and values. They have also tried to achieve this same objective through more standard and legitimate (because contemplated in the liberal democratic order) ways, using as means for their illiberal goals the most (arguably) liberal of all institutions: the United Nations.

China and Russia are working to reshape global governance and their actions within the United Nations can be interpreted as challenging the existing liberal democratic order. Achieving a common goal though also means working jointly, this is why the two countries are deepening their partnership in global governance intensifying political, economical and military cooperation.

At the United Nations level, this alliance can be seen already just from looking at voting patterns of the last three decades as Dimitry Nurullayev and Mihaela Papa have done⁸⁸.

China and Russia frequently find themselves in disagreement with the United States on several policy positions within the United Nations General Assembly. The Chinese Russian partnership at the United Nations promotes resolutions concerning the “multipolarisation of the world and the establishment of a new world order in which no country seeks hegemony or monopolises international affairs⁸⁹” as Yeltsin and Jiang jointly declared in 1997. This seems like a subtle critique to the US leading role in international affairs, especially if we take into account the historical context of 1997, where the Cold War had been won by Uncle Sam⁹⁰ which detained a monopolistic position of international relations. China and Russia have ever since played a major role in explicitly criticising in the United Nations hegemony, unilateralism and the imposition of democratic standards on other countries and one instance of this is the ever fading (due to the ever-increasing

⁸⁶ Goldthau, Andreas, and Nick Sitter. “A Liberal Actor in a Realist World? The Commission and the External Dimension of the Single Market for Energy.” *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 21, no. 10, 22 May 2014, pp. 1452–1472, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.912251>. Accessed 3 June 2020.

⁸⁷ Goldthau, Andreas, and Nick Sitter. “A Liberal Actor in a Realist World? The Commission and the External Dimension of the Single Market for Energy.” *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 21, no. 10, 22 May 2014, pp. 1452–1472, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.912251>. Accessed 3 June 2020.

⁸⁸ Dmitriy Nurullayev, and Mihaela Papa. “Bloc Politics at the UN: How Other States Behave When the United States and China–Russia Disagree.” *Global Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1 July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad034>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

⁸⁹ Dmitriy Nurullayev, and Mihaela Papa. “Bloc Politics at the UN: How Other States Behave When the United States and China–Russia Disagree.” *Global Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1 July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad034>. Accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

⁹⁰ The United States

authoritarian character of their governments) support for human rights by the two countries.

Menaces to the liberal democratic order, its values, its principles, its institutions and practices do not only come from without the western sphere scoring badly on The Economist Democracy Index, but also from within the western world.

The crisis of democracy is long been noted as the 1975 Trilateral Commission report demonstrates⁹¹, and represents a complex and multifaced issue composed of many elements. One of the most important contributors to the phenomenon of the crisis of democracy is popular dissatisfaction. Popular dissatisfaction with the traditional elites in power delegitimises democracy because people do not feel the individuals in charge of the functioning of the nation represent them, and because this also leads to less political participation and involvement. In the western world, and not only, we have witnessed popular discontent being incorporated by strong and charming individuals who find a collective enemy to blame for the degradation of the state of health of the nation.

This is the case in Russia with Putin blaming the west and its immoral liberal values, in Hungary where Orban point his finger at Soros, in Turkey with Erdogan targeting the Kurds, in Venezuela with Maduro blaming the United States and in many western countries (like the United States) where populist right wing parties point the finger at immigrants. Such leaders obtain from the beginning robust electoral victories in often times regular competitions thus receiving a fully fledged democratic investiture and legitimisation. Once in power these leaders gradually work to undermine and dismantle the system of liberal protection of democracy (such as laws, rules and the institutions that guarantee them) and potentially turning democracy back to what it once was, the unconstraint rule of the majority that leads whoever screams the loudest to effectively gather power and utilise it at his or her own sheer pleasure. The bloody chaos that Garzoni described in his works in the Italian renaissance and Plato criticised 2500 years ago. Following this mechanism, this reckless spiral towards blood and chaos, freedom of expression, interpreted as vile attacks to the democratically elected majority, starts to get attacked and reduced and independent journalists put aside, courts and judges, increasingly perceived as evil elitist anti-democratic counter majoritarian actors ruling against the legitimate elected majority get questioned, reduced and eventually silenced like it was the case with the 2024 judicial reform in Mexico⁹², and even forms of social antagonism and dissent get progressively compromised. The liberal part of democracy gets attacked and Liberal Democracy through democracy, turns to illiberal democracy. Another problem of today's liberal democracy is related to the economy and consists of the relationship between democracy and capitalism.

Starting from Karl Marx, many economists, philosophers and more broadly speaking intellectuals have dwelled on the relation between capitalism, society and democracy and warned us about potential dangers. Schumpeter saw in the very birth and development of a capitalist system the conditions for the establishment of modern liberal democracies as we have seen them during the 20th century up to our days. In his idea the affirmation of a middle class (bourgeoisie) increasingly eager and determined to carry out and pursue its economic interests and ultimately protect them through political means thus ensuring the access to politics for an increasing number of individuals gradually gave birth to increasingly democratic societies.

Capitalism, despite creating the economic and social conditions that allowed liberal democratic models of political development to emerge, also poses threats to the very model it contributed to build as Junger Habermas taught us in "Between facts and norms".

⁹¹ The report identified how democracies in the 70s were suffering from an excess of democracy

⁹² The 2024 judicial reform in Mexico saw the amendment of the constitution to substitute the appointment-based system for selecting judges with one where judges are directly voted by popular vote, thus erasing the separation of powers principles, since if we start to vote judges just like we vote politicians what is the difference between the two? The idea behind an appointment-based system for selecting judges rests on the fact that courts have to check on the political power, and if necessary represent a counter-majoritarian power to balance possible breaches of the law from the part of the executive or legislative powers. With the 2024 judicial reform in Mexico this idea is put into question.

The big capital threatens the healthy sustainment of this model because it is able, as Habermas points out, to influence the holders of the political power to prioritise its interests rather than the ones of the people who conferred that political power. Predominant social forces enjoying big capital have the capability to corrupt the liberal democratic system exercising control over communication (like the ownership of media), financing political campaigns, lobbying and even blatantly buying elections as it has been the case for the greatest owner of capital as of 2025, the king of oligarchs, the richest man on earth (and possibly Mars), Elon Musk.

Section 2b : Elon Musk and MAGA

Before analysing Elon Musk, his actions and his role in American and global politics both as an extremely rich and influential private individual and as a public figure covering governmental roles, it is advisable and recommendable to spend a few words on the general framework in which this figure is framed and declines itself.

MAGA, the acronym for Make America Great Again, is an American political movement whose leader is Donald Trump born at the time of Trump's first candidacy for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination in 2015. It was born within the Republican party but it soon proved to be distinct in nature and character from the classical conceptions of politics advocated by the Republicans⁹³ taking on a life of its own and being characterised by personalistic traits⁹⁴. The movement founded by Donald Trump leverages on the idea that the United States of America was once a "great" country that, overtime, inexorably lost its power and influence due to foreign influence both within its borders (via immigration and multiculturalism) and without (via globalisation). Trump and his political affiliates believe that they are able to make America great again and reverse the downwards trend by implementing "America first" policies, protecting American industries, companies, markets and workers through protectionist policies like imposing tariffs⁹⁵ on foreign economies to shield America from external influences and restricting illegal immigration and stifling multiculturalism and diversity to protect the traditional American values from internal threats.

Many of MAGA's policies involve blatant racial or religious discriminations at odds with the liberal democratic ideals of tolerance and equality, for instance in 2015 Trump called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States"⁹⁶.

⁹³ The nativist and populist stances of the MAGA movement along with policies such as economic protectionism diverge from the more traditional Republican focus on free-market economics, limited government and international engagement.

⁹⁴ Trump's persona is at the core of the MAGA movement, there is no MAGA without Trump and his confrontational and combative approach.

Volle, Adam. "MAGA Movement | Meaning, Beliefs, Origins, Donald Trump, & Facts | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, 21 July 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/MAGA-movement.

⁹⁵ The White House. "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Declares National Emergency to Increase Our Competitive Edge, Protect Our Sovereignty, and Strengthen Our National and Economic Security." *The White House*, 2 Apr. 2025, www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-declares-national-emergency-to-increase-our-competitive-edge-protect-our-sovereignty-and-strengthen-our-national-and-economic-security/.

⁹⁶ Johnson, Jenna. "Trump Calls for "Total and Complete Shutdown of Muslims Entering the United States."" *Washington Post*, 7 Dec. 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/12/07/donald-trump-calls-for-total-and-complete-shutdown-of-muslims-entering-the-united-states/.

Other characteristic traits of Trump's political movement MAGA are its particularly combative⁹⁷ character, controversial rhetoric often involving homophobic, sexist and racist statements accompanied by violent tones. MAGA supporters are also especially vulnerable to false news and they seem to have a tendency to be charmed by conspiracy theories like the one asserting that former US President Barack Obama would not be a native-born US citizen, or that immigration policies carried out by the Democrats aim to replace white Americans with immigrants, or that the 2020 presidential elections that saw their leader Donald Trump lose against Joe Biden was stolen by this latter through a massive voter fraud, or again that the 2021 January the 6th attacks on Capitol in Washington were staged and facilitated by elite left-wing forces in power⁹⁸.

MAGA undeniably has a strong populist, anti-system character, believing that the federal government in Washington is controlled by corrupt Democratic elites that would disregard the interest of the people and only care about their own interests. This is why they see no contradictions with their own leader and founder of the movement being a billionaire member of the top wealthiest elite.

Trump's victory at the 2016 presidential elections and his taking office in January 2017 was marked by a frequent resort to executive orders⁹⁹ to maintain the promises made to his MAGA supporters. One very controversial executive order (whose content was just mentioned above) issued by Trump at the beginning of his term aimed at banning immigration from seven Muslim majority countries¹⁰⁰, although presented as needed on grounds of national security concerns the ban clearly featured discriminatory traits on the basis of race, culture and religion as demonstrated by the legal challenges¹⁰¹ that the executive order faced following its issue.

To try to better understand the nature of MAGA it is interesting to take a look at Trump's approach to the January the 6th attack on Capitol, it is in fact striking to see how the attack, an illegal criminal act of violence that shamed America in front of the world, disrespected its institutions and its values, was later publicly celebrated by Trump himself at rallies in front of his supporters¹⁰² thus showing, arguably, the real set of values and principles that inspire him in one of the many circumstances in which his anti-liberal and anti-democratic soul was revealed. A man, Trump, utterly compromised both in his private¹⁰³ and public life who has been president of the greatest and oldest democracy of the world.

After having lost the 2020 presidential elections and made a huge fuss about it¹⁰⁴, Trump

⁹⁷ Volle, Adam. "MAGA Movement | Meaning, Beliefs, Origins, Donald Trump, & Facts | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, 21 July 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/MAGA-movement.

⁹⁸ Volle, Adam. "MAGA Movement | Meaning, Beliefs, Origins, Donald Trump, & Facts | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, 21 July 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/MAGA-movement.

⁹⁹ Volle, Adam. "MAGA Movement | Meaning, Beliefs, Origins, Donald Trump, & Facts | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, 21 July 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/MAGA-movement.

¹⁰⁰ BBC. "Trump Travel Ban: What Does This Ruling Mean?" *BBC News*, 26 June 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39044403.

¹⁰¹ BBC. "Trump Travel Ban: What Does This Ruling Mean?" *BBC News*, 26 June 2018, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39044403.

¹⁰² Feuer, Alan, and Maggie Haberman. "Inside Donald Trump's Embrace of the Jan. 6 Rioters." *The New York Times*, 13 Apr. 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/04/13/us/politics/trump-jan-6.html.

¹⁰³ As proof of his compromised private life stand the many scandals he has been subject to in the years, one for all, the Stormy Daniels one, a n adult film star who claimed Trump's lawyer gave her 130.000 US dollar in exchange for her silence about a sexual encounter Trump and Daniels would have had. Bubalo, Mattea, and Robin Levinson King. "How the Trump-Stormy Daniels Saga Unfolded." *BBC News*, 11 Mar. 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64920037.

¹⁰⁴ Claiming Joe Biden had stolen the elections and inciting the attack on Capitol of the 6th of January 2021

presented himself at the 2024 elections winning again and securing the White House for another, at least¹⁰⁵, 4 years.

Ever since his assassination attempt on the 13th of July 2024 during a rally for his presidential campaign one figure has been increasingly supportive of his race to the White House, as anticipated, that person is Elon Musk. Musk spent over 280 million US dollar¹⁰⁶ on Trump's 2024 campaign, and his strong support for the leader of MAGA secured him a top-ranking role as governmental official in Trump's government. Trump's second term in office is seeing Elon Musk as the de facto head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) and senior advisor to the president. Government efficiency for Musk essentially means cutting spending, closing down agencies and departments, firing and sending people home. But the main concern the world richest man represents for liberal democracy is not only linked to the way in which he carries out his office within the US Government, the threat he poses to the wellbeing of liberal democratic values, principles and practices comes from the immense power and influence this man can exercise thanks to his wealth and closeness with American and global politics.

The danger represented by Elon Musk for liberal democracy stems from his faulted approach to politics due to his lack of deep knowledge (or utter disregard) of the history of the development of the conception of political power and its limitations¹⁰⁷, and is essentially facilitated from two factors; his immense wealth, and his recent involvement into politics, which mean not only that he wants to influence global politics, but also that he has the means to do it. In 2022 he acquired the social media platform Twitter, who he later renamed X. Ever since his endorsement of Trump began in summer 2024, he has been using his ownership of X to influence the political discourse in his and Trump's favour amplifying his right-wing political views, shaping political narratives to advantage Trump and aligned political figures¹⁰⁸. The day before Trump's second election to the Oval Office an article of the Independent came out with, as title: "Elon Musk appears to have tweaked X's algorithm to promote Trump, study claim"¹⁰⁹. The study mentioned in the article found out how Musk's posts, after he began endorsing Trump for president, started to enjoy a sudden increase in views and engagement, and an analysis of these posts shows how they were for the most part either supporting Trump or undermining his rival Kamala Harris. Not only these posts enjoyed increased views, but also higher rates of retweets compared to other prominent accounts on the app.

In the study's words: "These findings underscore a distinct pattern that may indicate an algorithmic shift that disproportionately favoured Musk's account, contributing to a

¹⁰⁵ When asked about a future possible third term as president of the United States, Trump let slip that, although not allowed by the constitution, there could be ways he could exercise the powers of president for another 4 years.

Baker, Peter. "Trump's Third Term Talk Defies Constitution and Tests Democracy." *The New York Times*, 6 Apr. 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/04/06/us/politics/trump-third-term-constitution.html.

¹⁰⁶ Thadani, Trisha, et al. "Elon Musk Donated \$288 Million in 2024 Election, Final Tally Shows." *Washington Post*, The Washington Post, Feb. 2025, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/01/31/elon-musk-trump-donor-2024-election/.

¹⁰⁷ I would advise him to read this thesis

¹⁰⁸ Ortutay, Barbara. "How Elon Musk Uses His X Social Media Platform to Amplify Right-Wing Views." *PBS News*, 13 Aug. 2024, www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/how-elon-musk-uses-his-x-social-media-platform-to-amplify-right-wing-views.

¹⁰⁹ Cuthbertson, Anthony. "Elon Musk Appears to Have Tweaked X's Algorithm to Promote Trump, Study Claims." *The Independent*, 4 Nov. 2024, www.independent.co.uk/tech/elon-musk-trump-x-algorithm-bias-b2640976.html.

considerable engagement advantage¹¹⁰. According to the study Musk's views counts increased by 138% and the retweets of his posts increased by 238%¹¹¹.

Musk's targeted use of his X platform to shape political discourse and influence users (voters) can be seen also in other context aside from Trump's endorsement. During the 2025 German election campaigns Musk openly supported the far-right anti-immigration AfD party also increasing its visibility on X. For instance X posts by the AfD leader Alice Weidel enjoyed significantly higher engagement metrics¹¹² such as likes, shares and views than other German politicians, and an interesting phenomenon was also the fact that English language accounts, after Musk active involvement in supporting Alice Weidel, represented a staggering 40% of AfD post shares, whilst before his public endorsement they only accounted for less than 20%¹¹³ thus showing the way in which Musk can influence X's users about what they see on their screens, since this increase in the post shares of English language accounts could not but reflect the influence Musk had on US users to have them see what he wanted (AfD and Alice Weidel's posts).

We have seen how Elon Musk can sway the political discourse both in the United States and beyond his national borders, and this massive influence is indeed a danger in liberal democratic societies.

In today's world Musk is clearly at odds with many of the values, ideals and principles that have been described so far in their origin and development. Musk raises questions on whether he really is equal to the rest of the ordinary people for example. Equality, as Tocqueville observed as early as 1835¹¹⁴, is one of the fundamental values underpinning liberal democracy, and even though in theory we are all equals (at least in front of the law) many times in practice we do witness problems and incongruencies for what concerns accountability. It can happen, unfortunately, in any liberal democracy, that some corrupt individuals (often times politicians, industrials or entrepreneurs) by corrupting others and benefitting from a omertous system manage to dodge justice and avoid accountability, and for as despicable, serious and grievous these events can be, many times the effects of this miscarriage of justice only have a limited reach thus aggravating the injustices of a few in a well determined and defined context. Musk is not the first to be at odds with the principle of equality, but he certainly is the one on which the principle of equality cannot fail, because the consequences of his actions are not limited to a defined context, but affect millions of people globally. One example of failed accountability regarding Musk has to do, again, with Trump and the 2024 presidential campaign. In the last month of the campaign Musk organised a 1 million giveaway lottery where each day he would give a one million dollar check to one individual that signed his petition supporting the first and second amendments¹¹⁵. This event can be considered as an egregious infringement of the free and fair election principle core to liberal democratic values (in order not to remain in mere

¹¹⁰ Cuthbertson, Anthony. "Elon Musk Appears to Have Tweaked X's Algorithm to Promote Trump, Study Claims." *The Independent*, 4 Nov. 2024, www.independent.co.uk/tech/elon-musk-trump-x-algorithm-bias-b2640976.html.

¹¹¹ Cuthbertson, Anthony. "Elon Musk Appears to Have Tweaked X's Algorithm to Promote Trump, Study Claims." *The Independent*, 4 Nov. 2024, www.independent.co.uk/tech/elon-musk-trump-x-algorithm-bias-b2640976.html.

¹¹² DFRLab. "The Musk Effect: Assessing X's Impact on Germany's Election Discourse." *DFRLab*, 20 Feb. 2025, dfrlab.org/2025/02/20/the-musk-effect-xs-impact-on-germanys-election/.

¹¹³ DFRLab. "The Musk Effect: Assessing X's Impact on Germany's Election Discourse." *DFRLab*, 20 Feb. 2025, dfrlab.org/2025/02/20/the-musk-effect-xs-impact-on-germanys-election/.

¹¹⁴ In his "De la démocratie en Amérique"

¹¹⁵ Iribarren, Marta Iraola. "Elon Musk's Million Dollar US Election "Lottery" given Green Light." *Euronews*, Euronews.com, 5 Nov. 2024, www.euronews.com/2024/11/05/elon-musks-million-dollar-us-election-lottery-given-green-light. Accessed 6 Apr. 2025.

philosophical speculation and also take a more pragmatic legal stance on the matter, the principle of free and fair elections is enshrined in the US constitution and US federal law prohibiting paying or offering to pay individuals for voting or registering to vote in federal elections, 52 U.S. Code §10307(c)¹¹⁶).

In fact the lottery was organised specifically in swing states (key for the election outcome), and although Musk later said that the 1 million checks only represented “payments” to individuals that were spokespersons for conservative causes, we can interpret this as an attempt to influence voters to support Trump, the message was clear: if you support Trump you are eligible to effectively win a 1 million dollar check.

In that way Musk has proved to be able to, in essence, buying votes, buying the presidency, violently stamping on and crushing liberal values and ultimately buying democracy itself.

The same 1 million dollar lottery strategy to influence voters was employed by Musk again in March 2025 to try to sway the electoral result concerning the Wisconsin Supreme Court¹¹⁷. In this context Musk, again, tried to buy voters by promising them million checks to support his causes and have a conservative judge appointed instead of a liberal one.

Despite legal suits¹¹⁸, Musk has not yet been stopped in his corruption of democracy, on the contrary he was left to do, to continue buying and undermining liberal democracy.

The Musk phenomenon has proved how the system of values, principles and ideals that shaped our western societies for the last centuries are under attack, probably also because the members of these societies take their freedom, political autonomy and rights for granted and cannot see how supporting figures like Trump and Musk can be dangerous to the wellbeing of liberal democracy and, ultimately, to their wellbeing.

Elections in the United States might still be free, but they certainly are not fair since the world richest man gives monetary incentives to people to vote what he wants. By doing so another core liberal value is put at risk, that of individualism. Individualism, as already mentioned, does not mean selfishness but rather a tendency to focus on one’s own personal sphere without denying the importance of society. Individualism means that individuals are autonomous in making their own decisions, free from any constraint. Individualism asserts the moral primacy of the person against any societal or religious claims. And indeed, it also asserts the moral primacy of the person against any financial claims. Leveraging on money and the personal interest of possibly winning 1 million dollar, Musk compromises the genuine political participation of individuals oriented towards the common good. People vote for money and not for the common good. Musk has taken away from individualism the acknowledgment of the importance of society and managed to turn it into selfishness. In Rawlsian terms, Musk erodes reasonableness and public reason undermining the foundations of a rational and just society, because if for Rawls political discourse and decision-making should be based on arguments understandable and acceptable to all citizens irrespective of their personal beliefs, using financial incentives to sway votes and public opinion goes against these ideas, and is instead an appeal to self-interest rather than reasoned deliberation as Rawls conceived it.

Wealth with Musk can translate into disproportionate political power, creating an uneven playing field where the voices and choices of ordinary citizens are overshadowed and influenced by financial incentives. We can recognise in this phenomenon the philosophy of

¹¹⁶ Hasen, Rick. “Elon Musk Veers into Clearly Illegal Vote Buying, Offering \$1 Million per Day Lottery Prize Only to Registered Voters #ELB.” *Election Law Blog*, 20 Oct. 2024, electionlawblog.org/?p=146397.

¹¹⁷ CBS News. “Elon Musk Gives out \$1 Million Payments to Wisconsin Voters after State Supreme Court Refused Legal Challenge.” *Cbsnews.com*, CBS News, 30 Mar. 2025, www.cbsnews.com/news/elon-musk-wisconsin-supreme-court-rally-1-million-giveaway/.

¹¹⁸ CBS News. “Elon Musk Gives out \$1 Million Payments to Wisconsin Voters after State Supreme Court Refused Legal Challenge.” *Cbsnews.com*, CBS News, 30 Mar. 2025, www.cbsnews.com/news/elon-musk-wisconsin-supreme-court-rally-1-million-giveaway/.

Jurgen Habermas and his fear that the big capital could potentially influence the world of system into not representing the interests of the world of life, but those of the big capital. Musk even managed to take a step further with respect to what Habermas had theorised, because we do not (only) have the capital trying to influence the world of system, with Musk the capital is directly influencing the world of life, the ordinary people and voters. This feature perfectly aligns with the populist traits of MAGA and Musk political culture. Elon Musk is undermining the liberal democratic notion that political competition should be based on ideas and popular support and not on financial might.

At the same time Musk is endangering, on top of the principle of equality, free and fair elections, individualism and political participation, also the sacred principle of free speech and access to information. As demonstrated above, Musk holds significant power over public discourse as owner of X, and is able to leverage on the popular social media platform to disseminate and amplify his information and opinions and set the standards for what he says freedom of expression has to be.

Another core tenet of liberalism is the distinction between the public and the private spheres, liberalism focused in fact on limiting the reach of government interference in personal matters, today Musk is infringing this view and even reversing it. By blending the two spheres, Musk is reversing the relations liberalism had focused on, having the private sphere now influencing the public one. Maintaining vast private wealth like, first and foremost, the ownership of X, but also Tesla¹¹⁹, SpaceX¹²⁰ or Starlink¹²¹, and also covering governmental offices (and more broadly speaking having an active and partisan role in politics) poses questions about the distinction between public and private, especially if those private tools are actively used and leveraged to influence the political life of the country¹²² (and beyond, as seen by Musk's support for far-right anti-immigration parties in Europe).

Liberal democracy relies on the separation of public and private spheres to prevent the concentration of power and potential conflict of interests, but it is hard to imagine how governmental policies adopted by a man who has such great and so many private interests would not be influenced by these latter, prioritising personal and corporate gains over the public good.

After having described some of his actions (already partially revealing his psychological categories) and the way in which he has converted, primarily by acquiring Twitter, organising lottos and setting up Starlink, his wealth into global political influence, it is advisable to embark on an attempt to discover what lies behind Elon Musk's psychology. He can be interpreted as a libertarian¹²³ quasi-anarchist wanting to reduce to the bare minimum the functions of the state as well as individual responsibilities in favour of freedom and in the name of meritocracy. A meritocracy seen as a Darwinian law of the strongest and a hyper-individualistic conception of freedom that denies the interconnectedness of social existence, a freedom conceived as a private entitlement rather than a shared societal condition¹²⁴. These radical conceptions of freedom and meritocracy that made him thrive as a businessman, when taken out of the private sphere of business

¹¹⁹ Musk's car company

¹²⁰ Musk's space company

¹²¹ Musk's satellite communication company

¹²² Not only the influence Musk can exercise over American and non American voters through X, but also the influence he can exercise thanks to his Starlink satellite system in Ukraine for example, where the system is crucial to carry out military and civilian operations, and it is completely in Musk's hands, meaning that he can decide to let the Ukrainians continue to use it or just turn it off from one day to another.

¹²³ Amlinger, Carolin, and Oliver Nachtwey. "In Elon Musk, Libertarianism and Authoritarianism Combine." *Jacobin.com*, 2025, jacobin.com/2025/01/musk-authoritarianism-libertarianism-afd-trump.

¹²⁴ As a libertarian Musk holds certain conceptions of freedom and meritocracy

Boaz, David. "Libertarianism | Definition, Doctrines, History, & Facts | Britannica." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/libertarianism-politics.

and applied to the public one of politics (with his involvement into politics marked by his endorsement of Donald Trump) turned him into the leading exponent of libertarian authoritarianism¹²⁵ wanting to abolish the democratic state because seen as restricting individual freedoms. Musk's somewhat childish¹²⁶ enthusiasm and disturbing behaviour have made him into a main agitator of the kind that Leo Lowenthal described in his 1949 "False Prophets"¹²⁷. A dangerous individual whose paranoid brooding and projection of conspiracies will eventually end with suggestions for acts of violence¹²⁸ (let us think for example of paranoid realities described by Musk where migrants threaten the white majority).

Elon Musk's approach to politics, as noted by prof. Quinn Slobodian¹²⁹, mirrors his engagement with video games and the online culture. It is as if the richest and arguably most influential man on earth played with the joysticks of global politics deciding who to give visibility to on X, who to reward with 1 million dollar checks or how a war's outcome should look like thanks to Starlink (for instance the Ukraine war, as we'll see in a short while). This raises concerns about whether this man really understands the consequences of his actions, or even more, whether it is possible for anyone of such power and influence, and with at his disposal such technological tools, to understand the consequences of their actions. It is a question of Promethean Gap as the austro-german philosopher Gunter Anders theorised in his 1956 book "The Obsolescence of Man"¹³⁰. For Anders the Promethean Gap exemplifies the condition in which human beings find themselves in modern times regarding technology, Anders identifies two dimensions; the sphere of imagination (what individuals can imagine and think of) and the sphere of praxis (the technological ability of individuals to materially produce things), and explains the gap as the difference between these two spheres. The Promethean Gap is the discrepancy between human productive capabilities and their capacity to emotionally and morally comprehend the consequences of what they create.

Musk has, as an individual, enormous technological capabilities with which he can shape discourses, influence people and ultimately dictate lives. Such technological capability raises the Promethean question of whether the consequences of acting through this technology lie outside the sphere of those actions which Musk, or anyone, can visualise and towards which he can take an emotional position. Does Musk really understand the consequences of his actions, and can anyone with such influence due to technological means really understand the consequences of their actions? It is the enormous power deriving from his technological capabilities that makes Musk a central figure in the 21st century.

In addition to X and his immense amount of money he can allow himself to spend to buy literally anything, Musk also wields an enormous power over satellites and internet connectivity, two core elements for anyone living in this century, two essential elements for

¹²⁵ Amlinger, Carolin, and Oliver Nachtwey. "In Elon Musk, Libertarianism and Authoritarianism Combine." *Jacobin.com*, 2025, jacobin.com/2025/01/musk-authoritarianism-libertarianism-afd-trump.

¹²⁶ Nichols, Tom. "The Childish Drama of Elon Musk." *The Atlantic*, 16 Dec. 2022, www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/12/the-childish-drama-of-elon-musk/672496/.

¹²⁷ Lowenthal, Leo. *False Prophets*. 1949. Routledge, 5 July 2017.

¹²⁸ Amlinger, Carolin, and Oliver Nachtwey. "In Elon Musk, Libertarianism and Authoritarianism Combine." *Jacobin.com*, 2025, jacobin.com/2025/01/musk-authoritarianism-libertarianism-afd-trump.

¹²⁹ "Slobodian Analyzes Elon Musk's Global Political Influence on Democracy Now | the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies." *Bu.edu*, 2025, www.bu.edu/pardeeschool/2025/01/08/slobodian-analyzes-elon-musks-global-political-influence-on-democracy-now/.

¹³⁰ Anders, Günther. *The Obsolescence of Man*. 1956.

people fighting for their lives in a war. Elon Musk, thanks to Starlink, can turn the digital tap on and off at will for millions of people and shape the outcomes of wars like the current one in Ukraine, where Ukrainian soldiers heavily rely on his Starlink satellite system to carry out military and civilian operations¹³¹. He can decide, at will, of the destiny of millions of people and the most disturbing thing about it all is his total lack of accountability for it. Relying on the classic idea of the tragedy of the commons, he has enclosed a share social good (the space) launching into orbit thousands of his satellites effectively privatising the basic foundations of global conflicts¹³² and becoming a war-lord with the capacity to shape the outcomes of wars on nothing else than his personal whims and tantrums. Such a tremendous accumulation of power in the hands of one single person who is not even accountable in front of society for any of his whims is dangerous, extremely dangerous, and not only for Liberal Democracy. Musk has become both passively (through the enormous accumulation of wealth and power) and actively (through his entry into politics and his ill-conception of it) the chief agitator of a disruptive rebellion against liberal democracy wanting to “destroy socially regulated democracy¹³³” and liberate the individual from the chains and “interventionist power of modern statehood¹³⁴”. To respond to this increasing concentration of power in the hands of one individual, it should be the enterprise of liberalism to set some limits to Elon Musk’s influence, just like it put limits starting from the 17th century to the power of the political authority. We are witnessing with Musk today what we saw at the times of Charles I and the Roi Soleil, Elon Musk is increasingly becoming like an absolute monarch holding absolute powers, and just like liberalism limited the powers of the monarchs more than 300 years ago, liberalism should work to limit the powers of Elon Musk today.

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely¹³⁵”

Section 2c : Possible Solutions to Illiberal Drifts

Liberal Democracy paired with all that it entails is, as we have seen, under attack from many fronts, the most obvious one represented by external powers like Russia, China or Iran. One less obvious and straightforward aspect of the siege of liberal democracy is perhaps the internal threats which arguably represent the most serious danger. Our political system, which is ultimately the place that permits us to live peacefully in a more or less free, fair and just way, is facing a major internal crisis and one of the most prominent menaces is represented by the world richest man.

For what concerns the external threats, one envisageable solution could entail the strengthening of the unity of those that are considered the liberal democratic societies of the western world. Having a stronger and more powerful and united Europe for instance, capable of defending itself, its values and its principles not only through economic growth, but also through an effective military might could represent a sensible way to resist to illiberal attacks from the part of countries like China and Russia. Today the European Union represents the second biggest market of the world with a GDP of 20.29 trillion

¹³¹ Vaidhyathan, Siva. “Elon Musk’s Real Threat to Democracy Isn’t What You Think.” *Www.thenation.com*, 11 Dec. 2023, www.thenation.com/article/society/elon-musk-democracy-threat/.

¹³² Nowadays, satellite systems

¹³³ Amlinger, Carolin, and Oliver Nachtwey. “In Elon Musk, Libertarianism and Authoritarianism Combine.” *Jacobin.com*, 2025, jacobin.com/2025/01/musk-authoritarianism-libertarianism-afd-trump.

¹³⁴ Amlinger, Carolin, and Oliver Nachtwey. “In Elon Musk, Libertarianism and Authoritarianism Combine.” *Jacobin.com*, 2025, jacobin.com/2025/01/musk-authoritarianism-libertarianism-afd-trump.

¹³⁵ Lord Acton

dollars¹³⁶, followed by China (19.53) and behind the US (30.34137), but the Europeans cannot allow themselves to be a colossus without claws, an economic giant with no defensive and military capabilities.

For what concerns the internal threats, the enterprise seems to be that of protecting what the last 400 years of European and American history have painstakingly achieved through decapitations, revolutions and compromises first and foremost from ourselves.

We have to combat the taken for granted and make sure that all those values, principles and ideas this thesis has sought to describe in their origin and development be not taken for granted.

The crisis of liberal democracy starts as a crisis of the liberal part of the duo, this is why strengthening this former part of liberal democracy seems like a sensible thing to do to reverse the ominous trend and save democracy as we have known it in these last decades. To strengthen liberalism and protect it from illiberalism there are more democratic and less democratic ways, amongst the less democratic ones features a solution already taken into consideration by Plato 2500 years ago, according to which not everyone should have the same saying on political matters. This would mean putting in place a sort of license for voting where only people that have passed a specific exam concerning the main mechanisms that drive and constitute the modern liberal democratic state could gain the right to express their choices, participate to the political life, and vote. This solution raises questions about its democraticity, and is indeed at odds with the principle of equality. If under the philosophical aspect it is an interesting solution and could be certainly deemed valid to give birth to endless philosophical elucubration, a voting license is more likely to remain a philosophical tool than anything else, and this is probably for the best.

One more democratic and more philosophically (and most of all legally) justifiable solution to the crisis of democracy is instead the fostering and development of political culture amongst the citizens from a young age throughout all of their lives. Enhancing the study of history and civic education in schools could be a first step, up until the re-introduction of a (if not military) mandatory civic service where young adults about to become fully fledged citizens entitled to vote make themselves available to help the society they live in through disparate tasks (not only learning how to shoot a target, but also helping in hospitals, care-homes, schools). Carrying out social work for a short but significant amount of time can enhance social cohesion and the sense of belonging to a community and can make young people realise that they make part of something bigger than themselves, that goes beyond the mere aspects related to one's life. Hopefully in this way individuals will be facilitated to comprehend what the common good looks like and why it is so crucially important for our wellbeing, and when corrupting influences will come to compromise their civic sense, this latter will be stronger than any potential temptation, and figures like Musk or Trump will not be left to do as they please.

One thing is certain, and it was already stated at the end of the previous section, namely that liberalism ought to carry out its task and limit, as it did already with absolute kings holding absolute powers, the power and influence of Musk and people like him.

This liberal endeavour, having a philosophical character, does not aim to find a definitive clear-cut solution, but it limits itself at pointing out potential problems and making reflections on them and on their possible solutions. To find a definitive solution to the problems relating the crisis of liberal democracy is the task of politics, not of philosophy, which only aims at generally pointing out intriguing phenomena, and hopefully inspire good ideas.

¹³⁶ IMF. "<https://www.imf.org/External/Datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/EU/CHN/USA>." *Wwww.imf.org*, www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/EU/CHN/USA.

CONCLUSION

There is one thing that we all do every day. No matter our age, no matter how rich or how poor we are, we all breathe. And yet I doubt that in the confusion of our hectic days anyone ever stops for a second and thinks: I am breathing. Breathing, like many other things in our lives, belongs to those aspects of life which we take for granted and on which we rarely stop to dwell about. Just like breathing, every day we think, express our opinions, talk about what we like and what we want. Just like breathing, every day we know we will go back at home to see our family and enjoy our house without fear that anyone might set fire at it or profit from our absence to make himself comfortable in it. Just like breathing, every day we might be called to vote and cast a preference for someone that will represent us in parliament or as president of our nation. Sometime that president or that member of parliament is us, because just like we can vote and express our choices, we can also actively participate to the political life of our country. Just like breathing, every day we often forget all of those things, and even worse, sometimes we even forget the importance and real significance of all those things. That is because, just like breathing, the fact that we live in relatively tranquil and fair societies where we can freely express ourselves belongs to those aspects of life which we take for granted.

This thesis shed light on the taken for granted in an attempt to give it value, to valorise those principles and ideals that today, because neglected and taken for granted, are in danger.

In the first half of the thesis we delved into the historical evolution of liberal democracy, whilst the second half was devoted to highlighting the contemporary challenges that it faces. We have seen how the development of democracy from the Greek notion of power of the people to a more sophisticated and institutionally embedded system that we know today is strictly linked to the development of the conception of political power. Political power was at first conceived to stem from God, then in the course of history, disparate voices have started to question this notion until in the 17th century thanks to liberal thought the divine origin of political power was finally put aside favouring a more earthly origin of it. This has lead us to understand how democracy bears an inherent duality between the raw unmediated power of the people (the bloody chaos), and the corrective force of liberalism which offers a more ordered framework thanks to, first of all, the rule of law.

Liberal democracy can be explained as a tension between full participation and the necessity for checks on the excesses of the majority.

Building on democratic and liberal ideals, political philosophers like Rawls and Habermas have contributed to a deeper understanding of western liberal societies thanks to the addition of concepts like reasonableness, public reason or communicative action.

They also highlighted the importance of communication and dialogue based on arguments that everyone is able to comprehend in order to achieve a just society.

The second half of the work concentrated on describing the main threats that liberal democracy faces in today's world, from the external ones represented by illiberal countries like China or Russia, to the internal ones like populism and the growing influence of resourceful actors like Elon Musk.

We have learnt how democracy does not only mean the rule of the majority, but also and most importantly, the protection of the minority. Politicians today openly attack the liberal part of our western democracies on the idea that election is the ultimate form of legitimisation. This is what Trump did when asked about the possibility of running as

president for a third term¹³⁸ despite it being against the constitution, his bottom line reasoning was that “if the people want it...”, this reasoning although in theory very democratic in the strict sense of the term, is also very illiberal since it goes against the US constitution.

Another worrying example of erosion of liberal democracy in the western world is that of Hungary, in a 2014 speech Viktor Orban, president of Hungary openly criticised liberalism and praised instead illiberalism saying: “the new state we are building in Hungary is an illiberal state, not a liberal state. It does not deny the fundamental values of liberalism, such as freedom, and I could mention a few others, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization, but it contains a different, specific, national approach.”¹³⁹

These phenomena must have us reflecting on the importance of liberal democracy and prompt us to actively engage to seek to protect it and enhance its resilience in order never to take it for granted and leave it to decay and decline in the hands of few overly powerful and influential individuals.

Should this be permitted to become true, those who will suffer the greatest will be us.

¹³⁸ Green, Erica L. “Trump Says He’s “Not Joking” about Seeking a Third Term in Defiance of Constitution.” *Nytimes.com*, The New York Times, 31 Mar. 2025, www.nytimes.com/2025/03/30/us/trump-third-term.html.

¹³⁹ Orban, Viktor. “English and Hungarian Transcripts of Victor Orban Illiberal Democracy Speech (Text-Video).” *Americanrhetoric.com*, 2015, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/viktororbanilliberaldemocracyspeech.htm.

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