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Vox Populi Non Est Vox Dei

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Vox Populi Non Est Vox Dei

Abstract

When determining where the meaning of truth lies in this world, the first question to ask is this: what truth is the world looking for? For medical scientists, they look for the truth to longevity. For philosophers, they look for moral truths. For political scientists, they look for the truth of power. What does power do, and how is it used are questions to ponder when investigating this truth; however, one must first answer the question of where does power lie. Some political scientists, such as Francis Lieber, reminds us how history relates the concept of power with God, the all-powerful, all-knowing creator through the phrase "Vox Populi Vox Dei" – the voice of the people is the voice of God (1877). The historical phrase presumes that the power of God, and therefore power itself, exists within the people. However, both Lieber, Dahl, and Ford will show that the voice of one God, aka the power, cannot lie with the voice of the people.

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Francis Lieber analyses the meaning of Vox Populi Vox Dei as used throughout history. He recognizes that there existed periods where “an impulse from on high had been given to whole masses” to bring about comprehensive change (1877), such as the European crusades during the middle ages. However, with a modern era lens, such actions cannot be perceived to be ‘the voice of God’ but rather “unceasing petty feuds” (Lieber, 1877). The question for Lieber now becomes: how to know that anything is the voice of the people, let alone the voice of God?

Lieber suggest that probably unanimity, where “only a very large majority” makes a decision, could be a good indicator to be the voice of the people; unfortunately, as he rightly points out, it cannot be the voice of God, and therefore the source of power, because it is “the

best opinion at which erring and sinful men at the time are able to arrive” (1877). An agreement by all people, or the overwhelming majority of people, cannot be the source of all power because the decision is constricted to the best opinion. A source that has all power cannot also be restricted, for that means that something else more powerful than that one is the true source of power and not the people, defeating the Vox Populi Vox Dei message. Therefore, ‘the people’ must mean something else.

In periods of time when the phrase is called upon to the masses, it is when “panic, fanaticism, revenge, lust of gain, and hatred of races” is profound between two or more groups (Lieber, 1877); during times when emotions are quick to judge instead of taking it slow to discover the truth of a situation. Both sides in their respective majorities cannot evoke the same voice of God while calling opposing voices at the same time. The voice of God, and therefore the truth of power, will blur and confuse political scientists from finding their truth. However, because “truth [of power] travels slowly” (Lieber, 1877), it exists with people who are not following the large masses, but rather generally follows the path of truth. In other words, this truth exists “with small minorities, ... which [ultimately] rises above the masses” (Lieber, 1877). Therefore, Lieber suggests that ‘the people’, and therefore the source of power, lies within the minority, for they are inherently questionable to the emotional actions of the masses.

Robert Dahl will agree with Lieber with the fact that unanimity is insufficient to determine what the voice of the people is, but will also question Lieber’s argument that truth lies within the minority, for all societies are ruled by many minorities instead of a majority ruling over a minority. In an election with two candidates who disagree in three different policies, three different minority groups could help candidate A win with 75 percent of the votes while each

policy is opposed by 75 percent of the voters (since each minority group has an important reason to support the candidate over the other). This polyarchal election system allows different minority groups to use their voice of the people to dictate policies, for the newly elected official(s) “must [take their preferences] into account” (Dahl, 2006). Therefore, although an election that ideally encompasses two candidates may produce a majority result, it is practically unified minorities backing a decision for their own reasons.

If Dahl’s minorities rule theory is correct, then Lieber’s assumption that the people refer to a minority cannot be correct, for no one minority exists. Under Dahl’s analysis, many minorities exist within a society, spreading their truths to those who either do not belong in a minority group (which is in itself a minority group) or are in another minority group, forever competing to become the dominant majority. Besides, those truths could conflict with another group’s truth; accepting Lieber’s assumption under this case will lead to conflicting truths. If political scientists are to accept that there exists only one voice of God, and therefore one source of power, then that one source cannot have conflicting origins. They may have to either look for another source or abandon the theory in its entirety. Before doing the latter, there is one more source to look at.

Perhaps Lieber did not mean to say a minority with many people within that group, but rather a minority with only one individual; a true minority. Whom would this be? It must be an individual who can be a “spokesman for the national majority” (Dahl, 2006), for then that individual, being the representative of the society, can quite possibly speak with one voice, and therefore pertains to the voice of God and all power. That person, as Dahl suggests, is the President, “who is the policy-maker [and] the creator of legislation” (2006) for all of society. As

subject to a political system in which “all the active and legitimate groups in the population can make themselves heard” (Dahl, 2006), the President’s actions and decisions will be legitimate, for he argues that the majority of voters (or the majority of minority groups) chose his platform over the other candidates. If this individual does hold all power, then he may be said to have the voice of God!

Unfortunately, Henry Ford enlightens us that the president’s powers are dictated by other individuals and, therefore, not the source of power. Under Ford’s analysis of the constitution, “it is the business of the President to run the government” (1898). Congressional parties cannot execute their legislative policies unless they are “accepted by the President and sustained by the influence of his office” (Ford, 1898). Many times since President Jackson, the political issues of the time were all decided by an executive policy of the president, not the Congress; from the independent treasury system under President Van Buren to the annexation of Texas by President Tyler, they were all shaped by executive policies.

However, that presidential power does not exclusively exist with the individual; rather “it is the product of political conditions which dominate all the departments of government” (Ford, 1898). Its legitimacy is tied mainly to the will of those who voted the individual into office, primarily, under Dahl’s interpretation, various politically active minority groups. Also, the power that the president uses under the political conditions, of which did not exist before the political conditions were met, are now “regarded as belonging to the ordinary functions of the office (Ford, 1898). This means that the president did not hold all the power from the start, but rather was given to him to carry out the political climate established by the minority groups. Therefore,

the “spokesman for the national majority” cannot be the representative of the voice of the people, and therefore not the source of all power.

Perhaps the power belongs to the minority groups, for the president is given powers that only occur when the minority groups create the political conditions that make it necessary to execute those powers, such as during an economic depression or war. But that theory was already disproven earlier with Dahl for the fact that the voice of one almighty God, and therefore the source of all power, cannot exist within multiple sources. If the voice of the people does not refer to a majority, a minority, nor an individual, then the phrase must be mistaken. There are two possibilities to make sense of the source of power, either power exists within multiple sources (hence the phrase “Vox Populi Vox Deorum” – the voice of the people is the voice of Gods) or power does not exist within the people (hence the phrase “Vox Populi Non Est Vox Dei” – the voice of the people is not the voice of God). Lieber very likely asserts the latter phrase, for he admits that the original phrase has been used “either hypocritically or when people have misgivings that all may not be right” (1877), times when an established group wishes to legitimize their views by proclaiming that Vox Populi Vox Dei even though “he knows very well that it means nothing but the despotic power of insinuating leaders” (1877). If this historical phrase misleads political scientists from discovering the truth of power, then they must search the truth somewhere else, for neither the majority, the minority, nor the leader has it.

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