

Exit democracy?

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When the eighteen-year-old Bill Gates and the two years older Paul Allen made a phone call to the producer of the MITS self-build computer (the Altair 8800) in 1973 stating that they had a basic interpreter for the Altair, they still had to start building. In 1975 they actually sold the interpreter and Micro Soft (now Microsoft) was a fact. Then they bought the operating system 86-DOS for \$50,000, converted it to MS-DOS and managed to install the system on IBM computers by default in 1981.

This small history contains the most important components of my last two columns: a (small) lie and the illusion of knowledge. There is no progress without rule violation, although violation can only be achieved if most people behave en masse in a predictable (regulatory) way. Moreover, if we could only act from what we really understand (so without illusion of knowledge), we would go through the world as mentally retarded. We, normal people, however, do what is called overclaiming in psychology: self-enhancement based on people's ratings of their knowledge of various products, concepts, persons, events, and so on. But through hard work Bill Gates and Paul Allen transformed their over-claimed knowledge ("we have a basic interpreter" and later "we have an operating system") into real knowledge. That is one of the reasons that they - and with them many other multinationals - have actually become powerful in the world in which we now live. They rule the world, much more than politicians do. What's up with that?

Eroded from the inside

Politics is being eroded from the inside by populists who, in order to win votes, "over-claim" entire worlds of illusory knowledge. Apparently they advocate "the ordinary man", arguing that the common man is the victim of the elite (or multinationals, or foreigners etc.). They pose incorrect assumptions and claim that if they were in charge, the interests of ordinary people would finally be met. Populism often forms a variation on the theme of the 1980s Dutch comedians Van Kooten and de Bie: "no shit, everyone rich". Despite the utter impossibility of deriving actual policy from overclaimed knowledge, populists and their parties do indeed get votes and thus undermine serious politics. Limiting air traffic, for example, is translated by the populists as depriving of the right to holiday abroad from the common man. So we just continue flying, 3.33 litres of kerosene per Airbus per second, thousands of aircraft continuously in the air.

An important political decision with a view to the medium or even long term can always count on undermining by populists. Unless the shareholders form a majority, companies like Microsoft do not suffer from this. If we do not want democracy to be hijacked by populists, we should take measures. One possibility is the abolition of democracy. In China, for example, a railway can be laid over hundreds of kilometers in a short time, or housing can be arranged for many thousands of people. But if we want to preserve democracy - less drastically - we have to make demands on populist behavior of politicians. Strict demands are made on various professionals, but the most important thing we have - public administration - is to be hijacked by populist.

We don't accept a doctor to be stupid. Populism is a form of stupidity, and stupidity is the biggest plague of contemporary democracy. We could have every populist statement analyzed by a jury of both professionals and laymen. It is an expensive means, but if we leave complex issues such as European unification or climate measures to the public, we can be sure that many cannot follow the discussion. Populists make use of this by giving the public the feeling that they are being understood. They then explain it "delicately" from their over-claimed and therefore illusory knowledge. And a party without populism is chased away and voted out. No exit democracy!