DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS[1]

Philippe C. Schmitter

European University Institute

[This is a think-piece – a stringing together of concepts and arguments, none of which is adequately explicated or explored. I am circulating it for comment and criticism to friends and colleagues – and they are welcome to pass it on to others.]

CONTEXT:

To put it colloquially, democracy[2] is being "dissed." Its citizens are increasing discontent, disillusioned, and disgruntled with it and distrustful, despairing and deprecating of it. Why this situation exists and what might be its consequences provide the twin foci of this essay.

There is nothing new about RED being in crisis or about its rather extraordinary capacity for dealing with the consequences. It has repeatedly managed to cope with two challenges that are intrinsic to it: (1) that its core principles of political equality, citizen participation and ruler accountability have never been fully realized in practice and, hence, that it is doomed to be regarded as a perpetually unfinished product; and (2) that its very mechanisms of free expression, competition and representation ensure that it will constantly have to be adjusting

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[1]   I have taken the title of this essay from Sigmund Freud even though he is not responsible for anything in it.

[2]   In this essay, democracy does not refer to the real semantic thing, i.e. "rule **by** or **of** the people," but to the closest practical approximation of this, namely, "Real Existing Democracy" (RED). Elsewhere, I have argued that it should be called "Politocracy", i.e. rule by politicians who claim to be ruling **for** the people.

to changing imperatives and demands and, hence, that its institutions can only do so belatedly and against the resistance of those who presently benefit from them.

I am convinced that the present crisis is particularly serious because it involves a number of simultaneous challenges, rather than the usual historical pattern whereby REDs have confronted and adjusted to them sequentially and gradually. If this were not enough, REDs face no threatening enemy or plausible alternative. They can no longer be justified by what they are not or by what might replace them. Their legitimacy, henceforth, will depend almost exclusively on their conformity to those unattainable principles of the perfect equality of influence of its citizens, their extensive civic-minded participation in making all decisions and their assured and comprehensive capacity to hold all of their rulers accountable. The democratic emperor may be even more firmly ensconced on his throne (and in more places) than ever before, but he (or, more frequently, she) is increasingly seen as naked by his or her subjects.

The previous liberal, constitutional, representative, national history of democracy may have ended – as predicted by Francis Fukuyama – but a new period of history has begun and this one will be even more tumultuous and uncertain that the one that has just ended.

The new specter haunting 'real-existing democracy' is definitely not 'potentially threatening communism' (*pace* Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin), but something much more insidious and subversive, namely, *amonie.*[3] Generically, it has been

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[3]   The concept was introduced into modern social science by Emile Durkheim where it was initially used to explain suicide – especially its "altruistic" version. Whether its intrusion into contemporary political analysis will lead to the conclusion that RED will destroy itself altruistically remains to be seen.

defined as a condition in which individuals feel alienated and purposeless because they lack shared standards, values and/or ideals. To put it into political terms, it is a condition in which citizens have lost their sense of belonging to a specific and meaningful political group and gained the impression of being exploited by privileged groups that impose their own – self-serving – rules and values. In short, the anomic citizens of REDs are both rootless and resentful. When they act politically (if they do at all), it will be due to a sense of momentary allegiance or a confluence of disparate factors.

This condition is especially subversive of REDs since they depend on the competition and cooperation of stable and predictable collectivities with clearly defined (if conflicting) interests – mainly, as expressed through political parties and interest associations. Anomic individuals have much weaker incentives to respond in conformity to established norms and much greater difficulty in doing so collectively.[4] What is especially disconcerting about this situation is that established political elites (and those who benefit from them) have a good reason in the short run to welcome this state of affairs, namely, *divide et impera. Anomie* divides citizens from each other and makes it easier for their rulers to ignore or manipulate their sources of dissatisfaction. It also makes it much less likely that these dissatisfied citizens/subjects will be capable of mounting a counter-

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[4]   Perhaps not coincidentally, this description of the anomic citizen/subject almost perfectly tracks the "model of individual behavior" postulated by rational choice theorists. He or she is postulated to act only according to his or her own preferences without regard for any collective social identity or historical memory, to seek opportunistically to maximize only his or her own immediate marginal gain, and to regard all other participants as hostile competitors, i.e. acting with similar self-regarding motives.

challenge to their hegemony. The best that one can expect from *anomie* are sporadic rebellions or revolts. They raise the cost of ruling, but not enough to provoke a change in the rules.

The most immediate evidence for increasing *anomie* in REDs is likely to be reflected in electoral behavior. Anomic citizens, by definition, have weak or non-existent identification with any party (or even with all parties as such). Therefore, they are less likely to vote and, when they do, more likely to change their vote from one election to another. Without a strong overriding social identity to structure their preferences, they will be inclined to shift their political attention frequently from one issue to another and/or from one candidate to another. They are also less likely to remain loyal to the candidate they chose, even if he or she wins and takes office.[5]

Aggregating these individual probabilities into hypotheses about the future of collective electoral behavior in REDs, one should expect much less predictable outcomes, much more rapid decline in satisfaction with whomever wins, and much more frequent rotation of party or parties in power. The more or less predictable consequences of cleavages based on class, status, gender, religion, center-periphery location will have declined and been replaced by a simplified dynamic of competition between insiders and outsiders and one in which the incumbents will have much less of an advantage than previously. The winners will not remain as long in office and, therefore, be less capable of stabilizing and reinforcing collective political identities. In other words, RED elections will

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[5]   In other words (those of current political discourse), anomic citizens are more likely to support **populist** candidates and fringe "non-party movements"

become more competitive and uncertain in outcome, but less meaningful to those who participate in them and significant for the viability of the regime.

Several of the above hypothesized behaviors seem to be increasingly empirically in many (but not all) contemporary REDs. They figure prominently among the "morbidity symptoms" I will discuss below. But I know of no convincing evidence that proves that it is precisely those individual citizens who are most anomic who are most responsible for these negative tendencies. My hypothesis is that this is the case, and my prediction is that an increasing proportion of the citizens in REDs will become certifiably anomic in the future, and that their behavior will threaten the viability of that type of regime – without, however, offering a plausible alternative to it.

CAUSES:

Durkheim identified the generic causes of *anomie* with incremental transformations in the division of labor and the rapid changes in the nature of social solidarity that accompanied it. In today's terms, we could blame it on the **globalization** of the division of labor and the **individualization** of life experiences – both occurring with unprecedented rapidity. What these two macro-processes have in common is that they produce together an inexorable increase in **complexity** and a proliferation of **externalities.** The emergent properties and unpredictable outcomes produced by their interaction have made it cognitively difficult to understand what is happening and operationally difficult to measure what they have produced.

Due to the former, the tried and tested scientific formula of relating primary causes (independent variables) to secondary effects (dependent variables)

according to some predictable formula is vitiated by the intervention of unforeseeable contingencies (prior and intervening variables) – not to mention by unique combinations of all of them. In the social sciences, one can no longer divide a problem into its sub-components, analyze them separately and later recombine them into a synthesis that explains the whole. The "fallacy of aggregation" – the capacity to explain a given level of aggregation by simply adding up the behavior of actors at the micro-level or by inferring down from behavior at the macro-level -- gets stronger the more complex the set of relationships.[6]

By their very nature, externalities cannot be measured by the classic mechanisms of pricing and budgeting since the costs are passed (often invisibly) on to others and the benefits (positive and negative) are enjoyed/suffered without effort by him, her or them. And, to make matters worse, globalization is a fearsome producer of externalities. The removal of political barriers, as well as the dramatic decrease in physical costs, has generated an unprecedented increase in the variety and penetration of exchanges – whose ultimate impact is obscure and virtually impossible to calculate. If that were not enough, these side effects tend to cross long-established, previously restricted and highly valued political and cultural boundaries – which certainly contributes to feelings of powerlessness and resentment.

Due to the combination of complexity and externalities, it has become much more frustrating for the normal citizen to identify the nature of social relations, to

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[6]   Elsewhere, in my essay, "Politics as a Science (aka Politology)," I have discussed more extensively the impact of these changes upon the study of contemporary politics.

assign responsibility for them and to intervene in order to change them. No wonder that so many of them withdraw from politics or react to it erratically.

CONSEQUENCES:

The surface manifestations of contemporary political anomie are well known, if not always well understood. And they are surprisingly widely distributed across both archeo- and neo-REDs.

Random surveys of public opinion in REDs and NEDs routinely "discover" that an increasing proportion of respondents do not think that their vote counts, or that their rulers are paying attention to them. Most dramatic has been the decline in trust in core democratic institutions: elected politicians, political parties and legislatures. But these same surveys often show that the decline also affects non-elected authorities: military, police, public administration, even scientists and physicians. Skepticism, in other words, has become a general characteristic of public opinion – even if it tends to be more focused on the political process. Interestingly, these surveys also tell us that interest in politics and the sense that politics affects one's life-world has also been increasing. So, the gap between expectations and performance exists, but so does the awareness of it and the desire, presumably, to narrow it.

Scholars have observed a litany of "**morbidity symptoms**" in contemporary political behavior. At the top of the list, one usually finds increasing distrust of elected politicians and representative institutions – especially political parties. This is followed by declining levels of electoral participation and party membership or identification, and a rise in electoral volatility and problems in forming stable governments. Previously dominant centrist parties find their

ideologies are no longer credible to the public and are losing vote share to newly emerging marginal ones on the populist Right or Left. Parliaments have become less central to the decision-making process, having been displaced by greater concentration on executive power and a wider role for so-called "guardian institutions" dominated by (allegedly) independent technocrats. Governing cabinets have more and more members who have not or never been elected and who have often been chosen for their "supra-party" affiliations. Membership in and conformity to class-based intermediaries – trade unions and employers' associations – has declined and this has had an especially negative influence on the influence of the former. Meanwhile, large firms (especially financial ones) have increased their direct access to the highest circles of decision-making. It should come as no surprise that income inequality in REDs has increased at a rate not seem since mass enfranchisement began.

Summarizing a very diverse set of morbidity symptoms, REDs have lost their historical center of gravity, i.e. class-based parties located along a stable Left-Right ideological continuum that competed centripetally for the allegiance and vote of citizens in the center. The core dynamic of political competition has become increasingly centrifugal to the benefit of "populist" fringe parties of neither the right nor the left – without having (yet?) coalesced along enduring and predictable lines of cleavage.

PROSPECTS:

How long can an RED suffer from growing anomie among its citizens/subjects without changing its rules and practices and, thereby, becoming another version of itself or alternative type of regime? As we have suggested above, there does

not seem to be any immediate danger. "Dissing" will only result in sporadic and isolated revolts that make it more uncomfortable and expensive for rulers, but not provide a sufficient incentive for reform. Indeed, in the short run, anomie is of benefit to entrenched rulers. It divides and incapacitates their potential opponents – as long as the rulers remain sufficiently coherent in their collective response and do not become anomic themselves.

Nevertheless, the threat may be less acute (and less focused on specific social groups) than in the past, but pressure for reform is bound to increase. If nothing else, it is simply embarrassing to have so many dissatisfied citizens/subjects around. And, now that they are all more deeply embedded in a web of complex institutional and ideational interdependence, once some RED begins to reform itself and is successful in doing so, its example will be much more contagious than in the past.

As we mentioned in the introduction, democracy has been there before and survived – by redesigning its institutions. Three elements have combined to produce this outcome: (1) a collective **agent** that was willing to bear the costs of transformation; (2) an **ideology** that presented a credible alternative future regime; and (3) a convincing **strategy** for bringing about the transformation.

Unfortunately, none of these seems to be immediately available in most REDs. The old ones no longer exist in most old and new REDs, e.g. the disenfranchised, the proletariat, the racially excluded; are no longer credible, e.g. imperialism, socialism, communism; or no longer available, e.g. coup d'état, mass mobilization, revolution.

But, to the extent that history repeats itself – whether first as tragedy and then as farce remains to be seen – these elements may eventually come together. But will they produce a different type of democracy or something else?

I used to think (and published) that the eventual outcome would be one of three types of reformed RED: (1) pre-liberal, (2) more liberal, or (3) post-liberal. Normatively, I was attracted to the first; objectively, I presumed the third and, reluctantly, I had to admit that the astonishingly persistent hegemony of neo-liberal ideology – despite repeated failures to deliver –has probably ensured the greater likelihood of the second for the foreseeable future. [7] .[8]

But what if the future were to be something other than some version of liberal democracy? It may be worthwhile to consider a potential third alternative and it

[7]   "Democracy's Future: More Liberal, Pre-Liberal or Post-Liberal?", Journal of Democracy, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January 1995), 15-22. Reprinted in L. Diamond & M. Plattner (eds.), The Global Resurgence of Democracy, 2nd. Ed. (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 328-335. Also published as "Perspectivas da Democracia no mundo contemporâneo: Mais Liberal, Pré-Liberal ou Pós-Liberal?" in Silvia Gerschman and Maria Lucia Werneck Vianna (eds.), A Miragem da Pós-Modernidade (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Fiocruz, 1997), 31-42.

[8]   "Post-Liberal Democracy: Does It Have a Future?", in Karlheinz Bentele, Bernd Reissert and Ronald Schettkat (ed.), Die Reform-fähigkeit von Industriegesellschaften (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 1995), pp. 47-63; "The Prospect of Post-Liberal Democracy", in Karl Hinrichs, Herbert Kitschelt, Helmut Wiesenthal (Hg), Kontingenz und Krise. Institutionenpolitik in kapitalistischen und postsozialistischen Gesellschaften. Claus Offe zu seinem 60. Geburtstag (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2000) pp.   and "Un esbozo del posible aspecto de una democracia 'post-liberal'", in J. F. Tezanos (ed.) Clase, Estatus y Poder en Las Sociedades Emergentes. Quinto foro sobre tendencias sociales (Madrid, Editorial Sistema, 2002), pp. 587-598.

already has a name: **Meritocracy**.[9] It would creep unobtrusively into the practice of REDs through two interrelated processes.

The first would involve a thorough **de-politicization** of previous citizens, converting them into grateful subjects. Its ideological appeal as an alternative regime form might begin with the following questions/assertions: Why do you want to spend so much time, money and emotional energy participating in politics? There are much more rewarding things to do in life. And, moreover, if you will just sit back and not interfere, the meritocrats will provide you with much better and more reliable benefits than a bunch of squabbling and self-regarding politicians. Its advent could be just the sort of collective altruistic suicide that Durkheim predicted for anomic individuals.

The second transformation process is also already well underway: the spread of so-called (by Robert Dahl) "**guardian institutions**." Over the past twenty or more years – indeed, much longer in the case of the United States – REDs have ceded authority to specialized agencies of the state – usually regulatory bodies – that have been assigned responsibility for making policy in areas which politicians have decided are too controversial or complex to be left to the vicissitudes of electoral competition or inter-party legislative struggle. The *locus classicus* in the contemporary world is the central bank, but earlier examples would be the

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[9]   And it also has a (small-scale) prototype: Singapore. The People's Republic of China also makes a claim to being a meritocracy, although is hardly credible as a democratic one. For a discussion of this concept and its practice, see Daniel A. Bell & Chenyang Li (eds,), <u>The East Asian Challenge for Democracy. Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). My skeptical chapter, "Reflections on Political Meritocracy: Its Manipulation and Transformation" can be found there on pp. 363-374.

general staffs of the military, anti-trust agencies or civil service commissions. The ideological justification is obvious and convincing to many: Why should we entrust policy-making to a bunch of squabbling, self-serving politicians when there exists a group of experts who can do a much better job – and do so in an unbiased, non-partisan way? Why should you as a citizen with many other things to worry about choose to interfere with decisions about issues that are too complicated for you to understand?

The net effect of combining de-politicization and guardianship upon REDs is rather obvious, if often concealed behind rhetorical claims to "Pareto-Optimality," i.e. to providing public goods to everyone without additional costs for anyone. At the same time that their policy-makers are being deliberately and increasingly deprived of discretionary action over issues that have a major impact upon their citizens, these citizens are being convinced that "partisan" intervention by elected politicians would only be counter-productive and make things worse. Even more potentially alienating is the fact that some of these guardians are not fellow-nationals, but regional or global supra-nationals, *vide* the 'conditionality' imposed by the IMF or the EU.

Moreover, the task of legitimating these two trends has been greatly facilitated by the diffusion (and apparent acceptance) of a novel normative theory of how public policies should be made and justified, namely, that of **governance**.

Elsewhere, I have defined this exceedingly polysemic and fuzzy concept as follows:

> **Governance is a method/mechanism for dealing with a broad range of problems/conflicts in which actors regularly arrive at mutually satisfactory and binding decisions by negotiating and deliberating**

with each other and cooperating in the implementation of these decisions.

Its core rests on **horizontal forms of interaction** between actors who have conflicting objectives, but who are sufficiently **independent** of each other so that neither can impose a solution on the other and yet sufficiently **interdependent** so that both would lose if no solution were found.[i] In modern and modernizing societies the actors involved in governance are usually non-profit, semi-public and, at least, semi-voluntary **organizations** with leaders and members; and it is the embedded-ness of these organizations into something approximating a **civil society** that is crucial for the success of governance. These organizations do not have to be equal in their size, wealth or capability, but they have to be able to hurt or help each other mutually. Also essential is the notion of **regularity**. The participating organizations interact not just once to solve a single common problem, but repeatedly and predictably over a period of time so that they learn more about each other's preferences, exchange favors, experience successive compromises, widen the range of their mutual concerns and develop a commitment to the process of governance itself. Here, the code-words tend to be **trust** and **mutual accommodation** -- specifically, trust and mutual accommodation between organizations that effectively represent more-or-less permanent social, cultural, economic or ideological divisions within the society. Note also that governance is not just about **making decisions** *via* negotiation, but also about **implementing policies**. Indeed, the longer and more extensively it is practiced, the more the participating organizations develop an on-going interest in this implementation process since they come to derive a good deal of their legitimacy (and material resources) from the administration of mutually rewarding programs.

Good governance is quite simply the outcome or net effect of these mechanisms when they produce results that individuals in a society believe are superior to those which they would have enjoyed/suffered as the result of political competition. In this sense, it is deemed to be self-legitimating.

In meritocratic governance arrangements, citizens will have been replaced by two presumably cooperating sets of agents: (1) **experts** who provide the necessary information and policy suggestions; and (2) **stakeholders** who have a special, functionally defined, relation to the policy arena and can, therefore, be counted upon to take judicious decisions and to hold experts accountable. The (decadent) notion that all citizens are equal stakeholders and should be counted equally regardless of the intensity of their interest in or knowledge about the matter at stake is discarded as unrealistic and potentially desruptive.

The experts on the basis of their shared disciplinary knowledge presumably form an epistemic community that knows what has to be done and will act in an un-self-interested fashion when providing the necessary information and advancing proposed solutions. They are supposed to be uniquely competent in identifying and measuring those "un-priced" externalities that are such an obstacle to good performance in the context of complex interdependence. Stakeholders are selected because they are presumed to be particularly concerned with resolving problems in the specified functional arena at stake and, while they are manifestly self-interested in the outcome, they have an intrinsic interest in negotiating or deliberating a solution – otherwise, everyone would lose. And they are sufficiently well-informed that they can recognize, react to malpractice by the experts and sanction them accordingly.

The fact that collective identities persist and are attached to a particular territory and/or culture poses a problem for meritocratic governance – since the functional problems to be resolved do not respect such boundaries. This, however, is considered only to be a problem of the transition from RED and will be resolved eventually when subjects recognize that their security and well-being is much better guaranteed by these new regimes.[10]

Meritocratic governance also has its distinctive ordering principle, namely, **subsidiarity.** The distribution of *compétences* for making policy in arrangements for functional governance should be distributed according to the level of aggregation that is most efficient, effective or efficacious for resolving the issue at stake. Existing "sovereign national states" are usually too big for resolving some issues and too small for others. They will have to be combined or undermined according to functional necessity – and the passive subjects who presumably benefit from such increased efficiency will be appropriately grateful.

Citizens previously grouped in territorial constituencies will have been transformed into stakeholders embedded in functional constituencies; the mechanical counting of votes will be replaced by a deliberative process of weighing the intensities of preference among stakeholders; and the subjective motives of self-interest or collective passion will be replaced by objective calculations based upon specialized knowledge according to the issue at stake.

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[10] This is mindful of the work of David Mitrany and his "functionalist" assumption that, eventually, national territorial and cultural identities would be displaced by what he called a "Working Peace" system of trans-national functional problem-solving institutions that would subsume these previous identities.

While hardly a utopian vision, this combination of de-politicization and guardianship might just be sufficiently appealing to induce the citizens of contemporary REDs to commit mass altruistic suicide in order to rid themselves of the uncertainty, inefficiency, short-sightedness and sheer messiness of their increasingly discredited regime type. It might not suffice to rid them of most of their sense of rootlessness and resentment – that seems more embedded in social inequity and economic exploitation – but it could make them more tolerable than it would be if they were to choose collectively to reform their existing institutions in a "pre-liberal," "more liberal," or "post-liberal" direction. Moreover, nothing would prevent them from retaining the entertainment value of periodic electoral competition – provided, of course, that those elected did not interfere with the serious business of guardianship.

DEFECTS AND DEFICIENCIES:

There do, however, exist some serious defects and deficiencies in this scenario. Whether they strong enough to preclude actors from shifting their reform efforts to meritocracy remains to be seen.

If one cannot assume that all regimes will evolve in this direction and, even more disturbing, if one should assume that many autocratic regimes will persist, then the delicate issue of how to resolve conflicts – especially those that could lead to violent aggression or predation – has to be addressed. Once the equivalent to the "democratic peace hypothesis" has to be discarded – i.e. that all neighboring or interdependent polities have similar meritocratic governance regimes and can, therefore, be expected to resolve their inevitable conflicts of interest peacefully by negotiation or adjudication – then, these "brave new" regimes will have to find

some way to defend themselves physically. Is it safe to assume that the military and police can be simply regarded as just another specialized functional agency of guardianship that can be governanced by its own stakeholders and experts? Or, will it be necessary to create some more comprehensive, supra-functional, body to accomplish this? And, if so, will this body not require a more inclusive basis of legitimation – especially since it will have to draw its (considerable) material resources from many different functional constituencies?

And there is the sensitive issue of resolving eventual disputes between the meritocracies governancing different internal functions. Unless one is prepared to assume that functional interdependencies are naturally complementary and self-equilibrating, then, some authoritative agent capable of exercising coercion (if necessary) to resolve these conflicts will have to exist. Could this task be safely delegated to an *über-functional* juridical agency deciding according to pre-established rules and precedents? Or does this Brave New Regime not require a more political body that can decide in situations when the rules or precedents are ambiguous or non-existent? How about a "Senate of Meritocrats" – composed of the heads of the respective functional agencies?

Finally, the eternal conundrum: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*? Who shall guard the guardians? If we assume that de-politicization can never be completely accomplished and that guardianship can never be completely self-legitimating, what can meritocratic governance do to control its own excesses and miscalculations? And who or what should do the job? How are we supposed to know that the Meritorious Emperor has lost the "Mandate from Heaven?" And, even if this has become apparent to the relevant stakeholders, how is the

Emperor going to be dethroned without destroying the regime that put him or her there?

The standard responses seem inadequate to a task of this importance. Giving the meritocrats periodic examinations to measure their competence and acquisition of new knowledge seems pathetically inadequate. Polling public opinion for information about perceptions of the quality of their performance vitiates one of the main assumptions behind the change in regime, namely, that the public is not sufficiently well-informed to make such judgments. Needless to say, entrusting the task to representatives competitively electing in territorial constituencies would seem even less appropriate. At the macro-level, we have just suggested that something like a Senate of Meritocrats might provide a credible solution when the controversies cut across functional domains. At the meso-level, in each of the functional arenas of authoritative decision-making and implementation by meritocratic specialists, one could imagine the formation of real or virtual assemblies, randomly selected from among the relevant stakeholders, that might periodically decide whether to promote, demote or remove their respective meritocrats.

CONCLUSION:

Nothing conclusive. Just some big questions.

1. Will the new history of democracy be more tumultuous and uncertain than the one that has just ended?
2. Is *anomie* now the greatest threat to the persistence of 'real-existing democracy'?
3. Are the sources of *anomie* to be found primarily in the economic trend toward globalization, or in the social trend toward individualization, or in the combination of both?

4. Is it the case that an increase in complexity generates an increase in externalities?
5. And does this explain why citizens and their rulers are less capable of understanding what is happening and what, if anything, can be done about it?
6. Is meritocracy (or, better, meritocratic governance) a potential alternative to RED – even a more probable one that pre-liberal, more liberal or post-liberal versions of itself?

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