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Sovereignty & its enemies

by John Fonte

On transnational progressivism and the forces abetting it.

In my book *Sovereignty or Submission* (Encounter, 2011), I argued that we needed to reconfigure the global chess board of world politics. The sovereign democratic nation-state faces two adversaries, one hard and one soft: authoritarian regimes such as China, Russia, and Iran; and also the oligarchical forces of global governance emanating from within the democratic world itself.

Transnational progressives, or globalists, represent a major challenge to democratic nation-states because they seek to transfer political decision-making from democratic nations to supranational authorities and institutions. The decades-long trajectory of the European Union is an example of this phenomenon.

These globalists include the leadership of the United Nations and the European Union; bureaucrats from the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund; judges from the European Court of

Human Rights and the International Criminal Court; career officials in the U.S. State Department, the British Foreign Office, and the German Foreign Ministry; American ceos of major global corporations; employees of ngos such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Greenpeace; and prominent American international relations specialists and international lawyers including the leadership of the American Bar Association.

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But another anti-sovereignty force is simultaneously at work: the American democracy promotion network. What role, if any, do the promoters of democracy play in the worldwide ideological conflict between democratic sovereigntists and globalists?

The American democracy promotion network is based in organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy (ned) and Freedom House and includes an array of prominent writers.

Created by the U.S. Congress in 1983 to “strengthen democratic values and institutions around the world through nongovernmental efforts,” ned is a tax-exempt, non-profit private corporation. It is funded annually by Congress and achieved prominence during the Cold War. Freedom House was founded in 1941 by Wendell Willkie and Eleanor Roosevelt to be a “clear voice for freedom and democracy around the world.” After the Cold War, its private funding dried up. Freedom House is now almost entirely dependent on the federal government. For years, both ned and Freedom House have been considered non-partisan. But the world has changed.

The current front in this conflict is the struggle over Brexit. The ned’s daily online journal, the *Democracy Digest*, declared on August 28, 2019, “Nakedly Populist move jolts world’s most stable democracy” and linked to an article by the Harvard liberal Yascha Mounk stating that Boris Johnson’s decision to suspend Parliament temporarily is “the most blatant assault on democracy in Britain’s living memory.” Mounk (a major contributor to ned journals) continued, “the big question I’ve heard asked about Boris Johnson is whether it’s right to characterize him as an authoritarian populist in the mold of America’s Donald Trump or Italy’s Matteo Salvini.” A week later, on September 4, 2019, *Democracy Digest* linked to an essay by Ian Buruma asserting that “Boris Johnson poses the same dangers to liberal democracy that populist agitators did to the Roman Republic.” In fact, the ned journal continuously links to anti-Brexit articles day in and day out. They rarely, if ever, link to Brexit supporters such as Daniel Hannan or Douglas Murray.

Freedom House also disparages the Brexiteers: its influential annual report in 2018 stated, “The Brexit campaign . . . brought widespread concerns of rising anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment in the country with the Council of Europe expressing concerns about hate speech among politicians and in popular tabloid newspapers.” Is Freedom House implying that political speech should be restricted?

It’s not just Brexit that has been a focus for these institutions. For the past several years, the democratically elected conservative governments in Poland and Hungary have been under continuous assault from ned, Freedom House, and the global governance movement generally. They are accused of so-called “democratic backsliding.”

For instance, the ned’s print magazine, the *Journal of Democracy*, in October 2016 published a special section on “The Specter Haunting Europe.” Eight pro-EU authors attributed the success of patriotic, culturally and religiously conservative democratic political parties to the dark forces of “authoritarianism,” “democratic regression,” and “populism” (which always has a negative connotation). Typical was an essay declaring that “the 2015 victory of Poland’s Law and Justice Party is an example of the rise of contemporary authoritarian populism.”

Another special section in the *Journal of Democracy* of July 2018, “Explaining Eastern Europe,” argued that “populist” (as opposed to democratic sovereigntist) electoral success relied on “the willingness of politicians to use fear and anxiety,” most often about “mass migration and

terrorism.” ned authors tell us that “nativist parties that thrive on fears regarding immigration and continuing European integration” must be “contain[ed].”

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In other words, ned essayists are saying that democratic nation-states that oppose further EU integration and that wish to determine their own immigration policy are somehow “undemocratic” and thus require lessons on “democratic values” from a political entity (the European Union) in which laws are initiated by an unelected bureaucracy rather

than by an elected legislature.

Poland and Hungary are often charged with undermining an independent judiciary—the rule of law. In both countries since the fall of communism, judiciaries were self-perpetuating oligarchies with little input from elected officials. New judges were chosen by sitting judges and committees of lawyers, leading to widespread nepotism and corruption. Imagine if in the United States federal judges were chosen by the American Bar Association, or if judges on the Ninth Circuit chose their own successors. This is not “the rule of law,” but the rule of lawyers.

In fact, the conservative governments in Poland and Hungary are essentially reforming their judiciaries, making them more in line with democracies like the United States, in which democratically elected officials are part of the process of choosing judges.

Poland and Hungary are not, however, the only conservative governments that are seen as problematic. Freedom House downgraded Israel’s civil liberties rating in 2018 because the conservative Likud government passed the ngo Transparency Law. The law required non-profit organizations that received more than half their funding from foreign sources (mostly from the European Union and individual European states) to disclose this information. Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that “the purpose of the law is to prevent the absurd situation in which foreign countries intervene in Israel’s internal affairs without the Israeli public even being aware of it.” For Freedom House, the law constitutes “intolerance of dissent.” In the same annual report, Freedom House declared that Denmark’s right-of-center government deserved “special scrutiny” because its parliament considered legislation that would “restrict immigrant rights.” Specifically, the Danish government reduced cash welfare benefits for refugees and required affluent migrants to pay for their own support rather than use government welfare funds. For Freedom House, this **I** apparently constitutes “setbacks for freedom.” s there a pattern here? The “illiberals,” “populists,” and “nativists” always represent conservative democratic sovereigntist political forces (usually friendly, one might add, to traditional Christianity and Judaism), whether in Great Britain, Poland, Hungary, Israel, or Denmark. And, of course, in the United States.

In 2014, before there was a President Trump, Freedom House condemned voter identification laws as Republican attempts to suppress minority voting. Since Trump's election, we have seen the emergence of a grand narrative of a rising illiberalism in the West, which is allegedly now aligned with authoritarianism. The narrative runs along these lines: Putin equals Erdoğan equals Orbán equals Kaczyński equals Netanyahu equals Brexit equals Trump. As one ned essay put it, "Europe" [i.e., the European Union] faces "Islamism to the south, Putin to the east, Brexit and Trump to the west."

But it's not just Europe that's purportedly entering a parlous state. In 2019, Michael Abramowitz, President of Freedom House, declared that "the pillars of freedom have come under attack here in the United States." He cited the Trump administration's "harsh attack on immigrants [n.b. failing to distinguish between illegal and legal immigrants] and asylum seekers [that] have restricted their rights." Apparently, these rights include that of entering a democracy without the consent of the citizens of that democracy.

Larry Diamond of Stanford is the co-editor of the ned's *Journal of Democracy*. He has studied democratic development around the world for decades. And he wrote a book suggesting that the Trump administration poses a worse threat to democracy than Watergate and that "Hillary Clinton would almost certainly have won" the presidency if not for Russian interference.

Clearly, in the West, ned, Freedom House, and their stable of writers are highly partisan, anti-conservative, anti-sovereignty, militantly secular, and more supportive of oligarchical elites than democratic majorities.

Robert Kagan of the Brookings Institution is a close associate of the democracy promotion network. His wife Victoria Nuland (who was a key player in the Obama State Department under Hillary Clinton) has served on the board of ned. On the issue of sovereignty, Kagan declared in 2008 that the "United States . . . should not oppose, but welcome a world of pooled and diminished national sovereignty."

The ned, quite clearly, is not adhering to its congressionally mandated mission of strengthening democratic values in a non-partisan manner. Neither is Freedom House faithful to its strategic vision of being a clear voice for freedom and democracy around the world. To be sure, there is a difference between the work of these organizations in places beset by genuine authoritarian regimes such as Venezuela, Cuba, China, Iran, and North Korea—work that is sometimes commendable—and their activities in North America and Europe.

Clearly, in the West, Freedom House, and their stable of writers are highly partisan, anti-conservative, anti-sovereignty, militantly secular, and more supportive of oligarchical elites than democratic majorities. They single out for criticism Denmark's immigration policy, Israel's transparency approach to foreign-funded NGOs, and Poland's restrictions on abortion because they are allied with transnational progressives on crucial democratic and social issues.

When examining Brexit, the European Union, or mass migration in Europe and the United States, the democracy promoters quote and link to *The Guardian*, George Soros's Open Society Foundation, Yascha Mounk, Fareed Zakaria, and Robert Kagan, not to *The Telegraph*, Roger Scruton, Christopher Caldwell, or John O'Sullivan. In sum, they are not balanced.

There is little or no criticism of the European Union's long-recognized "democracy deficit" along the lines of the former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's famous Humboldt University speech in May of 2000. Generally, there is no criticism of the European Union's blatant illiberalism. (By illiberalism I mean gender and ethnic quotas and highly restrictive hate speech measures which distort the debate in the public square on issues related to mass migration, immigrant criminality, and radical Islamic terrorism.)

There is no criticism of Angela Merkel for pressuring Mark Zuckerberg to censor online denunciation of her immigration policies. Indeed, German illiberalism surpasses anything going on in Poland or Hungary, where the opposition recently carried Warsaw and Budapest in free and fair elections. Why does the United States rate lower than Germany in Freedom House's rankings?

Mark Plattner, the deputy editor of the *Journal of Democracy*, asked whether American conservatives are giving up on liberal democracy. The answer is of course not. Conservatives are embracing democratic sovereignty and rejecting undemocratic transnational governance. They are saying that the forty-fifth president of the United States was right to tell the United Nations that "Sovereign and independent nations are the only vehicle where freedom has ever survived, and democracy ever endured."

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Plattner himself, in his book *Democracy Without Borders?*, conceded that the European Union had a "democracy deficit" while at the same time writing (somewhat ambiguously),

"I am not arguing that European unification as such is hostile to democracy, or that the only way to preserve democracy in Europe is to reaffirm the sovereignty of the EU's member states. I am not a 'Euroskeptic.' " But, of course, reaffirming the national sovereignty of democratic nation-states is the only way to preserve democracy in Europe or anywhere else in the world.

It is worth focusing our attention on the American democracy promotion network because in a practical, operational sense, this network is a key asset for the global progressives in their

campaign against democratic sovereignty.

The democracy promotion network continues to be influential because it retains support among Republicans in Congress and in the foreign policy establishment. Old habits die hard. Many Republican politicians think we are still living in Francis Fukuyama's dream-world in which there is a unified democratic West, instead of today's reality—a world playing host to a global struggle between democratic sovereignty and transnational progressivism.

The democracy promotion network needs to be called out and demystified. At the very least, these actors are not doing what they are being paid to do with taxpayer dollars.

John Fonte is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and the author of *Sovereignty or Submission: Will Americans Rule Themselves or be Ruled by Others?* (Encounter).

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