

The Deep State and the Myth of Democracy

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1 Introduction

A lot of people are talking about the deep state these days, either to deny that it exists or to claim that it is attempting to overthrow the elected government of the US. I have been criticized for talking about such a crazy conspiracy theory. So be it. I do believe in the existence of the deep state, although I don't think it is run by reptilian Illuminati or grey aliens, or whatever. I think it consists of people who cooperate in covert ways to control the government.

One reason why I believe in the deep state is that I don't believe in the myth of democracy. Before we can have an intelligent discussion of the way social power actually works, the myth of democracy must be debunked. The myth of democracy is that the government acts on behalf of the people because it is elected.

First, let's review how democracy works. The people elect the top level of government, by choosing one politician versus another. The elected government has two main functions: to make laws and policies and to enforce laws and policies. The elected government delegates its power to a bureaucracy of unelected officials in various agencies. The unelected government includes police, military, regulatory agencies, the judicial system, and various other institutions. Those agencies directly execute state power. They govern the members of society and they project power onto the external world.

All power ultimately comes from the people, including state power. There is no independent source of power. Given that, why do we need government? To do things on a large scale. The function of government is to coordinate the actions of individuals. Ideally, the government uses the power of the people to act on their behalf.

2 The Myth of Democracy

According to the myth of democracy, the people control the elected government and the elected government controls the unelected government agencies. The government is an instrument of the people. The people impose their will on the elected government via the democratic process, and the elected government imposes its will on the unelected government via a hierarchy of authority. Thus, the government acts on behalf of the people. In an undemocratic society, the government oppresses the people, but in a democratic society, the government is controlled by the people through the electoral process.

There are several things wrong with this myth.

One is that democracy itself doesn't work very well as a way of aggregating individual preferences into a "will of the people". Most people don't have the knowledge to evaluate proposed laws and policies, and even if they had the knowledge, they don't have the incentives to make choices that are good for society. One vote has almost no effect on the outcome of an election, so people don't have a personal incentive to vote wisely. There is no incentive for people to even form accurate models of how society works on a large scale. Instead, their political views are mostly used as virtue-signaling devices. I have explained elsewhere how this makes democracy a tragedy of the commons.

Another problem is that public opinion can be influenced by the media. We all know the importance of the media in a modern society. People's views are highly influenced by the information that they consume. This allows a democratic system to be captured by a minority faction with ownership of the media. If a society has state-owned media, the state can control the people through the media.

Also, the electoral process can be rigged in various ways. Some government agency has to oversee the electoral process. That is an obvious opportunity for corruption. But that is not the only way to rig an election. Another weak point of democracy is that it requires some kind of political party system. The process by which a person becomes a candidate in an election is usually complex and less democratic than the election itself. Democracy has to be bootstrapped in two ways: state power is required to have an election, and some political process has to select candidates.

Any government agency that exercises power over the people can also be used to subvert democracy. The police, for example, have the power to enforce the law. By enforcing the law selectively, the police can benefit one faction over another. A state police force, such as the FBI or the KGB, can be used to take down internal opponents of a regime, for real or fabricated crimes. The military can prevent an uprising or carry out a coup d'etat.

Another problem with democracy is that politicians are not necessarily motivated by the desire to please the electorate. They may need to appeal to the electorate to get elected, but they can be controlled by other incentives. They can be blackmailed or bribed. Government agencies such as the CIA, FBI, or NSA have the power to threaten or punish politicians. Rich individuals or foreign governments can promise politicians financial rewards in exchange for political favors. Influence-peddling is so common in democracies that we mostly take it for granted, as long as it isn't too blatant. Politicians are individuals, and as individuals they are a weak point in the democratic system: a point at which pressure can be applied relatively cheaply to control the system.

I think that covers the major problems with democracy:

- The public are not motivated to vote for good social policies, and so democracy becomes a virtue-signaling tragedy of the commons.

- The media can control public opinion with propaganda and selective reporting.
- Political candidates have to rise up through a complex process that can be rigged in various ways.
- Elections can be rigged to favor certain candidates over others.
- Politicians can be bribed or threatened, before or after attaining political power.

3 Power

Political power (the elected government) can be controlled by other kinds of power:

- Persuasive power (the media, the academy).
- Financial power (rich individuals, large corporations, foreign governments).
- Institutional power (unelected bureaucrats in government institutions or political parties).

People who have these other kinds of power can use them to control the electoral process and the elected government.

Social power is circular. It does not simply flow from the people to the government because there is a democratic process. Any concentration of power can be used to pull society in one direction or another. Every society, democratic or not, will have a power structure in which different nodes of power cooperate to perpetuate themselves. Behind the scenes, there will be a power exchange. People with different kinds of social power (persuasive, financial, institutional) will work together for their mutual benefit. The psychological weakness of the masses allows them to do this.

4 Government Power

The government agencies, such as the military and police, have the power to directly punish people, or simply kill them. Government agencies in general have the power to reward corporations with government contracts and favorable enforcement of laws and regulations. The elected government has the capacity to reward corporations with favorable laws and regulations – with tax loopholes, for example. Corporations have the power to reward politicians and unelected government officials with highly paid private positions, or with direct bribes. Corporations also have the ability to influence public opinion through the media. The intelligentsia can craft narratives to persuade the public, and media corporations can reward the intelligentsia with money, publicity and credibility. The potential exists for a network of corruption to emerge, and it inevitably does. Corruption is cooperation. People with different kinds of power can often benefit by working together.

For example, the government could start a war that benefits military contractors and people in high positions in the military. The corporations that benefit from the war could reward the politicians and high-ranking members of the military with lucrative jobs and donations to “charitable” foundations that employ members of their families. Media corporations can tell a pro-war narrative and suppress opposing views. The owners of the media corporations have access to the circles of political and financial power. As wealthy men, they own stocks and other assets whose values can be manipulated as a way of transferring wealth. Lower-level players can be rewarded in various ways. Shell corporations (often “consulting” companies) are great ways to transfer wealth for apparently legitimate reasons. There are lots of little details, but the basic exchange is financial power for state

power. The state acts on behalf of the major owners of capital, and they pay off the politicians and high ranking bureaucrats with a percentage of their gains. Everyone in the arrangement benefits from it. The people lose.

That scenario is an example of an exchange of power. Each can do something that the other cannot do, and they can cooperate for their mutual benefit but to the detriment of society as a whole. Society is a power structure of incentives, and nothing else. The explicit laws and policies of society have no force by themselves. They have to be enforced to mean anything. The actual structure of social power is never quite the same as the theory of how society is supposed to work. The reality is never quite the same as the myth.

5 The Deep State

Now, what is the deep state? The deep state is a conspiracy between individuals with different kinds of social power to control society. The concept of the deep state is similar to the concept of the establishment, but narrower. The establishment includes a lot of people who are not consciously aware of their roles in it. The establishment is not a conspiracy. It is a tacit arrangement of quid pro quos between large sectors of society. The deep state is the core of the establishment, and it is a conspiracy. The members of the deep state are conscious of their roles.

Is there a deep state in the US? I think so, but I don't know what is actually going on in the inner circles of power. There are reasons to believe that the US has a deep state that includes people wielding financial, institutional and persuasive power.

Many presidents, including Obama, apparently had connections to the CIA before they were elected. The CIA is a government agency with the power to change foreign governments by covert operations. Why not use that power at home to control the US government? What if the unelected leadership of the CIA decided to use their power internally to choose the president or to assassinate a president? Could they do it? Probably. Other government agencies, such as the FBI and NSA, have the power to bring down elected officials, not by killing him, but by arresting them or by leaking information that would discredit them. Government agencies can threaten politicians and other powerful people, to keep them in line. An IRS audit here and an FBI investigation there works wonders.

The deep state also consists of financial and persuasive power, wielded by the big owners of capital, including foreign governments. They pay off politicians, bureaucrats and private individuals who go along with the game. Play along, and your future is ensured. The Clinton Foundation is a blatant example of "pay to play", and there are many others. State power is the stick and financial power is the carrot that are used to control individuals in the scheme. Persuasive power, wielded by media corporations, creates and sustains a narrative that hides the scheme from the public and promotes the status quo. Financial power is important to control specific individuals, while persuasive power is important to control the masses.

I don't know exactly how the power structure works in the US, but I am sure it does not fit the myth of democracy.