THE DEMOCRACY THAT LOST ITS COMMON REALITY

Postmodernism, the Inflation of Language, and the Tragedy of Proto-Democracy

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I. I Have Lived in Different Worlds

I grew up between languages.

Dutch was my first language, but childhood took me to German-speaking Switzerland, back to the Netherlands, and eventually to French-speaking Switzerland. By the age of fifteen, I had experienced several cultural worlds from within.

German, Swiss German, French, Dutch and, increasingly, English were not simply different ways of saying the same things.

They were different ways of experiencing and organising the world.

German seemed particularly suited to philosophical thought, capable of constructing elaborate concepts from smaller, recognisable components. French carried an extraordinary sense of cultural continuity, with distinctions of register and expression inseparable from the civilisation in which the language had developed. Swiss German revealed something else: a language of remarkable local character, where expressions and meanings could change over surprisingly short distances.

Even Dutch, my native language, carried the traces of its encounters with other cultures, including the substantial influence of French.

I was not studying linguistics. I was simply living among people who thought, spoke and interpreted the world differently.

And I began to understand something that has stayed with me ever since.

Language does not merely describe the world we inhabit. It helps organise the world we perceive.

That does not mean language creates reality. The mountains of Switzerland remain mountains whether described in German, French or Dutch. Gravity does not change at a linguistic border. Biological processes do not depend upon the vocabulary we use to explain them.

But language shapes how human beings communicate about reality, distinguish concepts, transmit knowledge and coordinate their lives.

A word is never merely a collection of letters. It carries meaning accumulated through experience, culture, history and use.

For a society to function, its members must share enough of those meanings to understand one another.

They may disagree about almost everything else.

But they must know what they are disagreeing about.

Today, I fear we are losing precisely that capacity.

And I believe the consequences are far more serious than most political commentators recognise.

II. When Words Lose Their Meaning

In September 2021, I developed an early WAIT diagram entitled The Need for Democratic Revival & Rebalancing of Power.

It attempted to illustrate two developments that troubled me.

The first was the growing imbalance between concentrated institutional power and the individual citizen.

The second was philosophical.

Point four stated:

“Postmodernism killed objective Truths and ushered in a Pandemic of anti-scientific opinions and an Age of Madness.”

Point five followed:

“Lacking a common language and objective map by which to navigate our common journey, society fragments into Tribalism.”

I wrote those words years before completing the Proto-Democratic Papers.

They were not derived from a sophisticated academic investigation of postmodern philosophy. They reflected a growing conviction based upon my own observations of society.

I believed that something fundamental was happening to our relationship with truth.

Five years later, I am more concerned than ever.

The problem is not disagreement. Disagreement is normal, necessary and often productive.

The problem begins when words cease to possess sufficiently stable meanings across the communities using them.

Consider what happens when the meaning of truth itself becomes contested.

For one person, truth means a proposition corresponding to reality, whether convenient or inconvenient.

For another, what society calls truth is primarily an expression of interpretation, identity or power.

These positions cannot be reconciled merely by presenting additional evidence, because the disagreement concerns the authority of evidence itself.

Now extend that problem across society.

Words such as freedom, justice, equality, democracy, violence, extremism, oppression and rights increasingly acquire meanings shaped by the ideological communities using them.

The same word can signify a moral imperative to one group and an instrument of domination to another.

The disagreement is no longer simply about the application of a shared concept.

It concerns the concept itself.

And when political institutions adopt one contested meaning as authoritative, the problem becomes constitutional.

A disagreement about language becomes a disagreement about legitimate coercion.

This is where I locate the destructive cultural influence of postmodernism.

Not in the reasonable observation that human knowledge is imperfect, or that language influences interpretation. Both propositions are worth taking seriously.

But in the radical extension of those observations into the belief that objective truth is inaccessible, irrelevant or ultimately subordinate to competing constructions of meaning.

Postmodernism is not a single doctrine, and not every philosopher associated with it advocated such a conclusion. My criticism concerns the cultural consequences of radical relativism: the tendency to treat

truth as inseparable from interpretation and interpretation as inseparable from power.

If every interpretation is merely subjective, by what standard can one interpretation be challenged?

If truth is merely power, why seek truth rather than power?

And if language no longer carries common meaning, how can citizens cooperate in governing a common society?

We cannot maintain a shared civilisation while progressively abandoning the possibility of a shared description of reality.

III. The Age of Madness

Let me make this less abstract.

Consider the contemporary conflict surrounding sex and gender.

What troubles me is not that individuals choose to live differently, reject social conventions or describe themselves in ways I find unusual. Their freedom to do so is not in question.

But freedom to believe something is not the same as an entitlement to have everyone else affirm it as reality.

A person may identify as a cat. That person is free to do so. But identifying as a cat does not make that person a cat. No amount of personal conviction, social affirmation or institutional accommodation changes that biological fact.

Why should such an elementary distinction require courage to articulate?

Yet this is precisely the problem I see emerging in contemporary society: the growing expectation that subjective self-description must not merely be respected as personal expression, but accepted by others as an objective account of reality.

Consider the demand that a medical professional answer a question about male and female reproductive biology according to a preferred political vocabulary rather than the biological distinction the question concerns.

Male and female reproductive roles are not inventions of political ideology. They describe biological realities. A person's subjective identity does not alter the reproductive function of their body.

We should be able to state this plainly.

Instead, the very act of insisting upon the distinction can become grounds for moral accusation, professional pressure or demands for institutional sanction.

And that is where I believe we have crossed a dangerous boundary.

An individual may adopt ten pronouns, reject conventional categories or construct an entirely personal understanding of identity. That is their freedom.

But the moment that freedom is transformed into a demand that other people surrender their own judgement, use language they believe to be false, or face punishment for refusing to affirm a contested proposition, we are no longer discussing individual liberty.

We are discussing compelled conformity.

There is a fundamental difference between treating someone with dignity and requiring others to endorse that person's understanding of reality.

Respect does not require intellectual surrender.

Tolerance does not require agreement.

And freedom of expression cannot mean that one person's preferred vocabulary becomes another person's compulsory belief.

This is what I meant by the Age of Madness.

I am not using that phrase to diagnose individuals. I am describing what I regard as an increasingly irrational public environment in which institutions can become more concerned

with enforcing ideological expectations than maintaining the distinction between subjective conviction and objective fact.

There is another irony here, one that captures the predicament in which I believe we now find ourselves.

We have become so preoccupied with avoiding judgements that might offend someone's subjective understanding of reality that even questioning whether a belief is rational, irrational or potentially pathological can itself become socially unacceptable.

But why should that question be forbidden?

Human beings are capable of extraordinary insight. They are also capable of delusion, self-deception, irrational conviction and profound errors of judgement. These possibilities are part of the human condition. They do not disappear because contemporary sensibilities make discussing them uncomfortable.

Nor does recognising them diminish anyone's inherent dignity.

A person's freedom to believe something does not establish that the belief is true. Their right to express it does not make it rational. And society's obligation to respect their rights does not create an obligation to suspend critical judgement.

That includes the freedom to question whether a particular belief reflects reality, psychological distress, ideological conditioning or something else entirely.

Such questions must themselves remain subject to evidence. We cannot responsibly diagnose individuals merely because their convictions seem strange or mistaken to us.

But neither should the fear of giving offence prevent us from examining irrationality where we believe it exists.

A free society must protect the right to hold unconventional beliefs without surrendering the right to question their rationality.

And it must distinguish between protecting individuals from mistreatment and protecting ideas from criticism.

I fear we are increasingly confusing the two.

When the demand for tolerance becomes a demand for intellectual affirmation, and the refusal to affirm becomes grounds for professional or institutional punishment, tolerance has ceased to function as a principle of mutual freedom.

It has become an instrument of conformity.

That is the tension I see at the centre of our present condition.

We are told to respect the subjective reality of others, yet may find our own understanding of objective reality treated as morally impermissible.

A society that protects the freedom to believe must also protect the freedom to disbelieve. Otherwise, it protects neither.

IV. The Inflation of Political Language

There is another development that illustrates the same problem.

Political language is suffering from inflation.

In economics, inflation diminishes the purchasing power of money. A unit of currency progressively loses some of its capacity to represent value.

Something similar can happen to words.

When a term carrying serious moral or historical significance is used increasingly loosely, its ability to communicate a precise distinction deteriorates.

Consider fascism.

The word identifies a recognisable historical and ideological phenomenon associated with authoritarian nationalism, the subordination of individual liberty to the political collective, the suppression of opposition and the glorification of concentrated political power.

It should be possible to examine whether a contemporary movement exhibits such characteristics.

But when the term becomes a general-purpose accusation against political opponents, its analytical meaning begins to dissolve.

A conservative is not necessarily a fascist.

A nationalist is not necessarily a fascist.

A critic of immigration policy is not necessarily a fascist.

Equally, a movement does not become immune from scrutiny merely because it describes itself as conservative or patriotic.

The point is not to protect any political movement from accurate classification.

It is to insist that classifications retain meaning.

The same applies to extremist, radical, far-right, far-left, terrorist and other terms capable of transforming public perception.

These words are not interchangeable. They describe different positions, behaviours and legal categories.

Yet political discourse can employ them as instruments of association rather than description.

A position is described as extreme. Extreme becomes associated with dangerous. Dangerous becomes associated with anti-democratic. Anti-democratic becomes associated with a threat requiring institutional intervention.

The progression can occur rhetorically long before the underlying evidence has been established.

I think of this as adjectival escalation.

An adjective becomes a moral verdict.

A moral verdict becomes a political classification.

A political classification can eventually become a justification for institutional restriction.

That possibility should concern everyone, regardless of political allegiance.

There are genuine extremist movements. There are genuine threats to democratic constitutional order. Political violence and organised intimidation are not inventions of partisan language.

Precisely because those dangers exist, the words used to describe them must retain their meaning.

Otherwise we arrive at a peculiar situation.

The accusation becomes so commonplace that it loses its force.

People who might once have been politically destroyed by an association with fascism increasingly dismiss the term as routine political abuse.

The accusation no longer identifies a danger.

It identifies the accuser's political allegiance.

That is not merely rhetorical deterioration.

It is a loss of society's ability to distinguish degrees and kinds of political threat.

When every opponent becomes an extremist, the word extremist eventually tells us more about the speaker than the person being described.

And when such vocabulary enters institutions possessing coercive authority, the consequences can extend far beyond language.

V. The Disappearance of the Referee

The third example brings us to democracy itself.

An election produces a result.

A political movement disputes the result.

An electoral authority certifies it. A court examines a challenge. Investigators assess allegations of irregularity.

Under ordinary constitutional conditions, these mechanisms are supposed to provide a means of distinguishing legitimate grievance from unsupported accusation.

They need not be infallible.

They must be open to scrutiny, independent examination and correction.

But what happens when the parties no longer recognise any common standard by which the dispute can be resolved?

One side treats the result as unquestionably legitimate because the recognised institutions certified it.

The other treats the certification itself as evidence that those institutions are compromised.

One side sees a democratic procedure being defended.

The other sees an institutional order defending itself against democratic correction.

Both may possess reasons for their positions. The evidence must decide what those reasons establish.

Yet the more fundamental problem emerges when neither side is willing to recognise evidence that might contradict its original conclusion.

The referee becomes another participant in the conflict.

Brazil's October 2026 presidential election offers a contemporary illustration.

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva defeated Flávio Bolsonaro in the second round, receiving approximately 51.8 per cent of the valid vote against 48.2 per cent. Bolsonaro initially refused to concede, questioning the result following a judicial decision extending voting hours. His party subsequently accepted the outcome, while he departed Brazil for the United States.

The election result, the judicial intervention, the allegations concerning the process and the subsequent political reactions are distinct matters. Each requires its own evidence.

The official result establishes who won the election. The existence of an allegation does not establish electoral fraud. Nor should the legal authority of an institution make its decisions immune from examination.

For some observers, the events demonstrate functioning electoral institutions and the importance of respecting certified results. For others, the judicial intervention and subsequent dispute raise questions about procedural confidence and the treatment of political opposition.

The competing interpretations do not become equally credible merely because they exist.

But the episode illustrates the constitutional problem that concerns me: how can a society restore trust when political actors and their supporters increasingly disagree about which institutions, procedures and evidential standards deserve recognition?

An election is not made illegitimate merely because the defeated candidate alleges fraud.

Nor is every action taken by a court or government legitimate merely because it has legal authority.

The distinction must remain open to evidence.

When that distinction disappears, democracy loses the capacity to distinguish correction from persecution, accountability from retaliation and lawful opposition from threats to the constitutional order.

This is the danger I increasingly perceive across Western political life.

And it is precisely the danger that Proto-Democracy was intended to confront.

VI. The Constitutional Answer I Tried to Build

Proto-Democracy begins from a simple proposition.

The individual does not exist for the institution. The institution exists for the individual.

Political authority is not originally possessed by governments, courts, agencies or supranational organisations.

It is derivative.

Within my philosophical understanding, the human person possesses moral standing prior to political institutions. Authority can therefore be delegated, but the sovereignty from which legitimate authority derives cannot be alienated to the institution receiving it.

This gives us a constitutional hierarchy:

Person → Consent → Institution.

But delegation is not enough.

Democratic legitimacy requires that authority remain continuously corrigible and ultimately recoverable.

That is the purpose of the Proto-Democratic Corrective Circuit.

Consequential public power must remain attributable, justified, contestable, effectively reversible where possible, capable of producing proportionate consequences for serious abuse, and ultimately recoverable in its delegation.

The circuit is designed to prevent institutions from converting borrowed power into something resembling original sovereignty.

It is an attempt to make democratic correction a normal constitutional function rather than an extraordinary remedy available only after institutional legitimacy has catastrophically failed.

I continue to believe in the coherence of that architecture.

But I am increasingly troubled by something I may have underestimated.

A constitutional mechanism for correcting power cannot work when the people operating it no longer recognise the meaning of correction.

Imagine that a citizen challenges an institution.

The institution explains itself. Evidence is examined. An independent authority reviews the decision.

The citizen loses.

If the citizen accepts that an adverse conclusion may nevertheless be legitimate, the corrective process retains meaning.

He may continue to disagree. He may seek further lawful remedies. He may campaign to change the law.

But if the adverse conclusion is automatically interpreted as proof that the reviewing authority belongs to the enemy, correction becomes

impossible.

Now reverse the roles.

A government loses before a court.

If the government treats that judgment as illegitimate merely because it obstructs its objectives, the same failure appears from the opposite direction.

The consequences are more serious because government possesses coercive authority.

Yet the underlying problem is identical.

Neither participant recognises a standard capable of legitimately contradicting its own convictions.

The constitutional procedure still exists.

But its meaning has been destroyed.

Attribution becomes accusation.

Justification becomes propaganda.

Contestation becomes ideological warfare.

Reversal becomes victory or defeat.

Consequence becomes retaliation.

Recoverability becomes the struggle to seize control of institutions rather than restore their legitimate subordination to the people.

The Corrective Circuit has not necessarily failed as constitutional theory.

It has encountered a problem that constitutional theory alone cannot solve.

VII. What Postmodernism Has Made Possible

I recognise the objection to my argument.

Postmodernism is not a single philosophy, and it would be intellectually careless to attribute every contemporary political failure to it.

Economic interests matter. Institutional misconduct matters. Political incentives matter. Digital media can reward outrage and certainty. Human beings have always been capable of tribalism, self-deception and intolerance.

All true.

But these observations do not resolve the philosophical question.

What happens when a culture increasingly abandons the conviction that truth exists independently of our preferences?

The consequences of that abandonment can operate across every political and institutional conflict.

An ideological movement no longer needs to demonstrate that its interpretation corresponds to reality. It needs to establish that its interpretation is morally authorised.

An institution no longer needs to persuade through evidence alone. It may increasingly rely upon the authority of its classifications.

A political tribe no longer needs to examine the strongest argument against its position. It can dismiss the argument by identifying the alleged interests of the person making it.

This is not the inevitable conclusion of every postmodern philosopher.

It is the cultural consequence of radical relativism that I believe has become increasingly influential.

And there is an irony here.

The intellectual tradition that questioned claims to objective authority in order to expose hidden power can, in its popularised and dogmatic forms, provide a justification for imposing new orthodoxies.

If all truth claims are expressions of power, then the contest becomes one of securing sufficient power to establish one's preferred interpretation.

The result is not liberation from dogma.

It is competition between dogmas.

I have found intellectual reassurance in the work of Gad Saad, particularly The Parasitic Mind and Suicidal Empathy. His account of destructive ideas, ideological conformity and the displacement of reason by moral sentiment intersects with concerns I had articulated before reading his work.

That does not establish that either of us is correct.

But it matters to me that these concerns are not confined to my personal experience.

They can be examined through philosophy, psychology, evolutionary reasoning and institutional analysis.

I do not claim the academic authority of scholars who have devoted their careers to these disciplines.

My argument arises from observation, philosophical reflection and an attempt to understand why the societies in which I have lived appear increasingly incapable of reasoning together.

And my conclusion is not comforting.

The crisis is not merely that we disagree about what is true. It is that we are losing agreement about what it means for something to be true.

VIII. The Tragedy of Proto-Democracy

This brings me back to my 2021 diagram.

Its central image was a balance of power.

On one side stood governments, corporations, institutions and other concentrations of organised authority.

On the other stood the individual citizen.

The imbalance troubled me because democratic legitimacy requires more than formal representation. Citizens must possess meaningful mechanisms through which institutional power can be challenged and corrected.

That concern eventually developed into Proto-Democracy.

But the diagram contained another warning.

Point four concerned the destruction of confidence in objective truth.

Point five concerned the resulting fragmentation into tribalism.

At the time, I understood these developments as related threats.

I now wonder whether I sufficiently understood their relationship.

Perhaps the philosophical crisis is not merely another problem alongside institutional imbalance.

Perhaps it is the problem that makes institutional imbalance increasingly impossible to correct.

What use is a mechanism for restoring accountability when the meaning of accountability itself has become ideologically contested?

What use is an independent court when independence is recognised only by those who approve of its judgments?

What use is democratic representation when political opponents increasingly regard one another as illegitimate participants in public life?

And what use is a constitutional theory of recoverable authority when recovering authority is understood not as restoring legitimate delegation, but as defeating an enemy?

I have no satisfactory institutional answer to these questions.

That admission is difficult because Proto-Democracy represents a considerable intellectual investment.

I believe its foundational proposition remains sound.

Authority is derivative.

The person precedes the institution.

Delegated power must remain corrigible.

But I am no longer confident that establishing these principles, however carefully, can meaningfully address the scale of the crisis I perceive.

A constitution can establish procedures.

It cannot restore a shared understanding of truth.

It can define rights, distribute authority and establish mechanisms of accountability. It cannot compel people to recognise the same meaning in the words upon which those rights, authorities and mechanisms depend.

It can protect freedom of expression. It cannot ensure that expression remains intelligible across ideological boundaries.

It can demand evidence. It cannot make evidence persuasive to those who have already decided that truth is determined by allegiance.

It can provide for correction. It cannot guarantee that correction will be recognised as anything other than defeat, persecution or betrayal.

And therein lies the dilemma.

Democracy requires more than the peaceful coexistence of competing opinions. It requires a common language through which disagreement remains meaningful, a recognition that reality exists independently of our preferences, and a willingness to submit even our most cherished convictions to standards that do not change according to who benefits from their application.

When those foundations deteriorate, constitutional procedures risk becoming empty forms. The same words remain in our laws, our institutions and our public discourse, but the meanings attached to them increasingly diverge.

Freedom becomes oppression.

Dissent becomes extremism.

Accountability becomes persecution.

Democracy itself becomes whatever a particular political community believes it must defend against its opponents.

The words survive. Their common meaning does not.

George Orwell understood that the corruption of language was not merely a symptom of political domination. It could become one of its essential instruments.

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, the Party's slogans invert ordinary meaning. War becomes peace. Freedom becomes slavery. Ignorance becomes strength. Newspeak is designed to restrict the possibilities of thought itself, while doublethink permits contradictions to coexist under the authority of political necessity.

Orwell imagined a totalitarian state seeking to impose its own reality upon society.

What troubles me today is a different, though potentially related, development.

We no longer require a single Ministry of Truth for language to lose its capacity to describe a commonly recognisable world. Competing ideological communities can progressively empty words of their shared meaning, while political and institutional power determines which interpretation carries consequences.

When freedom can mean coercion, dissent can mean extremism, and disagreement can be interpreted as evidence of moral wrongdoing, language is no longer merely communicating political conflict.

It is becoming part of the machinery through which that conflict is conducted.

This does not mean that every disputed definition is an Orwellian manipulation. Language necessarily evolves, and sincere disagreements about meaning are part of intellectual life.

My own experience of growing up between languages taught me that different linguistic traditions can illuminate reality in different ways. I do not seek a world in which everyone speaks alike, thinks alike or

interprets every concept identically.

The danger begins when definitions cease to be open to reasoned examination and become instruments of ideological enforcement.

There is a profound difference between the richness of linguistic diversity and the deliberate destruction of common meaning.

The first expands our capacity to understand one another.

The second can destroy it.

Orwell's warning was not that objective reality had ceased to exist. It was that political power could demand that human beings surrender their independent capacity to recognise it.

That distinction matters.

Reality does not disappear because we disagree about it.

The physical world does not change because our language changes. Biological processes do not obey political classifications. Historical events do not become different events because their interpretation becomes inconvenient.

But our collective ability to recognise, describe and reason about reality can deteriorate.

And when it does, political power acquires an opportunity that should alarm anyone concerned with freedom: the opportunity to determine not merely what citizens may do, but which descriptions of reality they are permitted to regard as legitimate.

The result need not resemble Orwell's totalitarian state. It may emerge through competing institutions, ideological movements, cultural pressures and political incentives, without any single authority directing the process.

That makes it no less consequential.

A society cannot defend its freedom through words whose meaning no longer provides a common standard against which power can be judged.

And that returns me to the most troubling limitation of Proto-Democracy.

I have attempted to construct a constitutional architecture through which delegated authority can be challenged, corrected and ultimately recovered.

But every element of that architecture depends upon language.

We cannot demand justification without a shared understanding of what constitutes a reason.

We cannot demand accountability without some agreement about responsibility.

We cannot distinguish legitimate correction from political retaliation if the meaning of justice changes according to who exercises it.

And we cannot defend freedom if the word itself can be made to signify whatever those exercising power require it to signify.

Before a people can recover authority from its institutions, it must retain the capacity to distinguish reality from the language used to govern it.

This is why I increasingly fear that Proto-Democracy, however coherent its constitutional architecture, may be attempting to repair the machinery of a civilisation that has lost the common language necessary to operate it.

I do not regard that possibility as a reason to abandon its principles.

Their validity does not depend upon their immediate political prospects.

But I can no longer confuse the intellectual coherence of a constitutional remedy with the likelihood that society will recognise, accept or implement it.

Perhaps that is the most difficult conclusion of all.

We may know how democratic authority ought to be organised, yet no longer possess the shared understanding of reality necessary to organise it that way.

I do not know whether the philosophical damage can be reversed. I do not know whether societies that have fragmented into competing ideological realities can recover sufficient common ground to reason together again.

And I will not pretend that another constitutional principle, another institution or another declaration of democratic values can answer those questions.

If anything, that would repeat the mistake I am beginning to recognise: believing that institutional design can compensate for the disappearance of the philosophical foundations upon which institutions depend.

The question is no longer merely how power should be distributed.

It is whether we still possess the common understanding necessary to judge its distribution legitimate.

The crisis is therefore no longer merely one of democratic institutions.

It is a crisis of meaning itself.

Until we recover the distinction between what is true and what we merely wish to be true, between disagreement and hostility, and between the meaning of a word and its usefulness to an ideology, no constitutional architecture—however elegant, however principled, however necessary—can guarantee the restoration of democratic self-government.

Proto-Democracy was conceived to restore the proper relationship between the individual and institutional power.

I now fear that the more fundamental task is to restore the relationship between language, meaning and reality.

For without that relationship, we cannot even agree on what it means to be free.