
REFLECTIONS

Merdecocracy



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The strategy and tactics that propelled healthcare legislation through the United States Senate unashamedly exposed the worst aspects of Congress's inner workings. The legislative process long has been likened to sausage making but, until recently, concerted cries of “fraud” and “corruption” rarely arose from within the beast. Then again, never before have the power of lobbies and the self-interest of individual politicians been on such ostentatious display. Ordinary Americans who can still believe that their government is “about them” simply aren't paying attention.

The public-choice program in economics identifies and quantifies the private, entrepreneurial incentives that have transformed into a rent-seeking miasma a government that once was described glibly as being “of,” “by,” and “for the people.” But no single term aptly characterizes today's distorted form of government.

I propose a neologism that characterizes the vulgar essence of fraudulent and corrupt legislative practice—*merdecocracy*. Merdecocratic government is defined with reference to the three legs of a metaphorical “milking stool” (allusions intended). One leg is *bullshit*, whose precise meaning has been defined. The other two legs—*horseshit* and *chickenshit*—have lacked analytical meaning until now. The metaphor's overall reach extends far beyond this essay's limited context.

Bullshit

The moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt has ascribed analytical meaning to the term *bullshit*. It now characterizes the sort of assertions that lack a “connection to a

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concern with truth,” reflect an “indifference to how things really are,” and yet are not grounded “in a belief that [what is said] is not true, as a lie must be. . . . Convinced that reality has no inherent nature, which [the individual] might hope to identify as the truth about things, he devotes himself to being true to his own nature. It is as though he decides that since it makes no sense to try to be true to the facts, he must therefore try instead to be true to himself” (2005, 33–34, 61–66). According to Richard Rorty, bullshit also can be described as being employed whenever “the idea of truth as correspondence to reality [is] gradually replaced by the idea of truth as what comes to be believed in the course of free and open encounters” (1989, 68). *Bullshit* is related to *eumerdification*, a term coined by the philosopher Daniel Dennett to characterize “impenetrable nonsense” (2006, 405 n. 12). It is only distantly related to *truthiness*, a term meaning “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true” (American Dialectic Society 2006).

Bullshit is the essence of assertions about the consequences of proposed legislation. The notion of “consequences” connotes uncertain future events. Uncertainty, in turn, implies the absence of objective truth. Merdecratic rhetoric may accordingly be vacuous, but it is not wholly meretricious. Where objective truth is lacking, merdecrats are free to expound without limit upon the “spirit” and “intention” of legislative proposals.

Bullshit is ineluctable. It fosters support among voters and fellow merdecrats by providing what the librettist W. S. Gilbert described as “corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative” ([1885] 1932, 390). It also provides the input from which government agencies speculate fecklessly about prospective costs and benefits.

Analysts of all stripes stress the GIGO concept—Garbage In, Garbage Out. When speaking about merdecracy, however, the best acronym is BIBO—Bullshit In, Bullshit Out. As Edmund Burke observed two centuries ago, “The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded” ([1790] 1960, 387).

Horseshit

Horseshit has no specific analytical meaning. I propose the following definition:

Horseshit—Self-serving moral, sophistic, false, and otherwise intentionally misleading assertions.

Horseshit is the essence of merdecratic pragmatism. Unlike bullshit, it is not “indifferent” to how things really are. Instead, horseshit is “whatever works” or otherwise is necessary for persuading others to acquiesce in a particular course of action. Sophisms, false inferences, and lies are well-defined and easily recognized

forms of horseshit. Moral horseshit, by contrast, paints assertions as being metaphysically *just*.

The Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel is renowned for his popular lectures, PBS series, and textbook *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (2009). The foundation of his work is moral reasoning, through which he examines justice from three canonical perspectives: maximizing welfare; promoting individual freedom; and promoting virtue and the good life (19–20). Candor nevertheless compels him to admit that he is playing a weak hand:

Some of our [political] debates reflect disagreement about what it means to maximize welfare or respect freedom or cultivate virtue. Others involve disagreements about what to do when these ideas conflict. Political philosophy cannot resolve these disagreements once and for all. [It can only] give shape to the arguments we have, and bring moral clarity to the alternatives we confront as democratic citizens. . . . If a just society involves reasoning together about the good life, it remains to ask what kind of political discourse would point us in this direction. I don't have a fully worked out answer to this question. (2009, 19, 261)

Moral virtue is small beer to all but professional philosophers. By contrast, the instrumental value derived from manipulating moral concepts to “shape arguments” and ostensibly to create “moral clarity” is incalculably large. Sandel shows that merdecrats have wide latitude to justify on valid moral grounds any fraudulent, corrupt, and self-interested legislation. Just as courthouse lawyers pound alternately on the law, the facts, and the table, merdecrats pound alternately on the “right” (à la Kant and Rawls) and on the “good” (à la Aristotle and modern communitarians). The proper blend of moral criteria for any situation depends on the relative payoffs. Sandel notes that “[j]ustice is not only about the right way to distribute things. It is also about the right way to value things” (2009, 261). Indeed, it is, although this implication clashes with Sandel's intended meaning.

Chickenshit

When bullshit and horseshit bring a plan of action to life, they decompose into the third leg of merdecracy—*chickenshit*.

Chickenshit—Rules and interpretations through which the last bits of private advantage are extracted.

Chickenshit is petty and often silly, but it does clear everything of value from the table.

Tocqueville described chickenshit's essential structure:

After having thus successively taken each member of the community into its powerful grasp and fashioned him at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate, to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is shepherd. ([1840] 1945, 337–38)

Chickenshit's effectiveness is gauged not only by the induced timidity and industriousness of the individuals who have been manipulated by bullshit and horseshit, but also by the amount of blood and treasure that is subsequently extracted.

Pace Tocqueville, however, merdecratic chickenshit ineluctably fosters tyranny. Health care legislation is a case in point, fitting Tocqueville's description almost perfectly. Its breathtaking size, scope, and detail camouflage from public view myriad new rent-seeking opportunities for public officials and their patrons (health care providers, insurance carriers, drug companies, device manufacturers, consumer groups, and so forth). Moreover, it necessitates an increasingly destructive degree of state involvement in individuals' private lives. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., writing for the Supreme Court, established the constitutional basis for this involvement: "We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices, often not felt to be such by those concerned, in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence" (*Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. [1927], 200, 207). Holmes was a Kantian moralist in private life. His judicial philosophy, by contrast, buttressed the progressives' Machiavellian social agenda. His decision in *Buck v. Bell* upheld the movement's eugenics program, which by that juncture had blossomed to include involuntary sterilization. (The victim of Holmes's ruling, Carrie Buck, was wrongly diagnosed as an imbecile and sterilized.) American enthusiasm for eugenics waned after the Nazis demonstrated its full logical entailment. The constitutional reasoning of *Buck v. Bell* nevertheless remains apropos. National health care *assurance* (it is not *insurance*) tacitly requires that private behavior be superintended lest the state's financial strength be sapped by legions of newly "incompetent" citizens.

Conclusion

Merdecra­cy arose as the American system of limited and constrained republican government was creatively destroyed over time by entrepreneurial politicians, bureau­crats, and private-sector interests. Political chivalry in the United States is now dead. The task of restraining merdecra­cy and preventing it from deteriorating into abject tyranny now requires an uncharacteristically attentive and responsible electorate. American democracy cannot function when (as Rousseau argued) citizens ask only, “What difference does it make to me?”

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