



A Diploma on Democracy

Athens Greece

13-14 July 2020



Workshop I: Democracy, Isocracy & Isegoria

Speaker: Dr Max Stephenson, Professor of Public and International Affairs and Director, Institute for Policy and Governance, Virginia Tech – Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, USA.

Title: “Deep Stories,” Democracy and Agency.

Summary

The United States, Brazil, Poland, India and Britain, among other democratic nations, are today characterized by authoritarian populist leaders. To varying degrees and in different ways, each of these individuals has provided a share of voters in these countries a story that purports to “explain” why those individuals are feeling insecure socially and/or economically. In each case, these leaders have offered would-be supporters narratives that secure a special status in the social hierarchy for each and that also identify groups—always vulnerable minorities of various sorts—as a key source of their perceived woes. In nearly all of these nations, too, these leaders have offered some form or facet of democratic governance to voters as a companion source for their felt concerns as well. In the United States, for example, that target is Democrats serving in the national government who have been tarred as willing to provide special privileges to “undeserving” immigrants, refugees and minorities under an “other” (African American) President, Barack Obama. In Britain, the governance institutions of the European Union in the abstract have been targeted in this way. In these cases, as they offer governance as a scapegoat to voters, these leaders also undermine democratic legitimacy as they do so. In short, these stories matter as they erode the agency and human and civil rights of those groups or individuals identified as the cause of a share of the population’s perceived woes, and undercut democratic norms and values by imposing social cruelties on innocents and attacking governance norms and institutions. It is therefore critical to identify these “deep stories” and to counter them in the public square with fact-based counter narratives, not merely “facts” that can be rationalized away, and to do so in ways that dignify these misled and misguided citizens as one does so. This must occur so as, paradoxically, to honor the freedom of those otherwise visiting cruelties on their fellow citizens—an exceptionally difficult and practical political task. If this challenge to democracy is not addressed successfully, we may expect the continued erosion of self-governing democratic norms and institutions in these nations and growing peril for a portion of their populations. I hope in this brief talk to highlight this central source of democracy’s current trial and describe its use as a mobilization tool, as well as suggest some ways the phenomenon of the “deep story,” the power of which is ingrained in the human psyche, may be addressed.