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### May 17, 2014: The End of Democracy

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Title: The End of Democracy

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5/17/2014—What did the German philosopher Martin Heidegger mean when he said that democracy might not be possible in a technological age? Here is the famous quote on democracy, from an interview in *Der Spiegel*, a German weekly newsmagazine, in 1966:

“[T]he last 30 years have made it clearer that the planet-wide movement of modern technicity is a power whose magnitude in determining [our] history can hardly be overestimated. For me today it is a decisive question as to how any political system -- and which one -- can be adapted to an epoch of technicity. I know of no answer to this question. I am not convinced that it is democracy.”

Can we see what Heidegger saw 48 years ago, especially since we are now in the habit of celebrating the role of social media in political movements? People are closely connected, beyond the power of dictatorial regimes to suppress them. We have many stories of twitter and facebook spreading information that helps bring down dictatorships. And we have nascent projects of technology and democracy, for example the Center for Democracy & Technology.

Maybe Heidegger was just dark and continental, in the way Americans sometimes think about philosophy--that it is abstract and irrelevant.

To see the technological threat to democracy, think about nature. Bill McKibben's 1989 book, *The End of Nature*, made the point that human civilization was rendering the non-human world non-natural. In a way, whether we acted for good or ill, whether humans intervened to destroy or save, the non-human world was no longer autonomous. It was no longer nature. The whole world had become a human construct. Global warming just confirms that not much happens on this planet that is not affected by human activity.

The political equivalent of the natural in the environment is the will of the people. The point of democracy—its founding myth—is that the will of the people be expressed in political activities such as elections.

But what if there is no such will? What if the outcome of elections, in all but the most extreme cases, can be determined not by overall shifts in social sentiment concerning important issues, but instead can be manipulated by techniques of voter turnout and political gerrymanders? The increasingly sophisticated use of data in politics, backed by large money on all sides, makes the simple notion of the will of the people seem quaint and irrelevant, just as there is really no longer any nature. This is the effect of technology on democracy.

This is not a partisan observation. Neither political Party cares one bit for the will of the people. In the 2012 election, the Republican use of the political gerrymander allowed that Party to control the House of Representatives against all expressions of national sentiment. In North Carolina, for example (Pennsylvania was similar), Sam Wang reported in the New York Times on February 2, 2013, “the two-party House vote was 51 percent Democratic, 49 percent Republican, the average simulated delegation was seven Democrats and six Republicans. The actual outcome? Four Democrats, nine Republicans — a split that occurred in less than 1 percent of simulations. If districts were drawn fairly, this lopsided discrepancy would hardly ever occur.”

On the Democratic Party side, turnout has become the science. Democratic analysts understand the problem with non-Presidential year elections, such as the upcoming 2014 fall elections is that elderly white voters always vote, whereas “their” groups—the young, minorities, poorer people etc.—do not. They have recast the narrative of the 1994 “Contract With America” election from a negative popular referendum on President Clinton to an off-year election with a turnout of only 39% of eligible voters. In response, the Democratic Party is putting resources into the Bannock Street Project in which \$60 million spent on getting out the vote in ten states might turn the tide in the Senate elections.

I am not criticizing anybody here. The point is that no election outcome is now natural, just like nature is no longer natural. In a technological age, we know too much to consider events as just happening. But if democracy is no longer simply the will of the people, if it is now the result of sophisticated techniques on both sides, backed by big money that makes that possible, what is democracy’s legitimacy? Why should anyone care what the result of an election is—beyond its direct effect in giving power to somebody? In a technological age, democracy is no longer ours. It is theirs. Like everything else. Heidegger may have known what he was talking about.