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THE PROBLEM OF DEMOCRACY IN THE TIME OF TRUMP

When most people think of democracy, the image that comes to mind is national democracy — that is representative democracy, political parties, and elections rooted in a nation state. In 2017, the Polity Project reported 96 out of 167 countries (57%) were considered democracies of some kind and 21 countries (21%) were autocracies. Forty-six (28%) of countries exhibit some blend of both democracy and autocracy. Thus, 85% of countries have some elements of democracy.¹

The number of democratic countries are at a modern-day high.² Despite this trend, people who live in democratic countries are not necessarily happy with democracy in action, indeed dissatisfaction with democracy is trending upward. In a 2018 global survey conducted by Pew Research Center, 51% of people said they were dissatisfied with how democracy was working in their country. Sweden and the Philippines were among those with the highest levels of popular satisfaction with democracy; Indonesia, South Korea and the Netherlands were not far behind. At the other end of the scale, people in Mexico, Greece, Brazil and Spain expressed the most dissatisfaction with the state of democracy. The source of this discontent has been linked to concerns about the economy, individual rights, as well as anger at political elites.³

1 This data is from Center for System Peace, The Polity Project, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html>. Freedom House rates 86 out of 195 countries (44%) as “free,” using criteria that include both political and civil rights. And though nearly half of the 167 countries in the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index are considered to be some form of democracy, only 12% (20) are rated as “full democracies”; nearly a third (55 countries) are counted as “flawed democracies” — including the U.S.

2 D. Deseliver, *Despite global concerns about democracy, more than half of countries are democratic*, in “Pew Research Center”, Washington, DC May 14, 2019, url: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/14/more-than-half-of-countries-are-democratic/>

3 R. Wike, L. Silver and A. Castillo, *Many across the globe are dissatisfied with how democracy is working: Discontent is tied to concerns about the economy, individual rights and out of touch elites*, in “Pew Research Center”, Washington, DC April 29, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/29/many-across-the-globe-are-dissatisfied-with-how-democracy-is-working/>

At the same time, it is impossible to ignore democratic electorates voting autocrats into positions of national leadership. Many democrats have tried to explain away the illiberal results of liberal-democracy by pointing to the rise of so-called “right populism” and people voting for the “wrong” candidate. Right populism is often presented as an opposition to democracy and as a result the remedy to the election of authoritarian politicians — such as Bolsonaro, Duterte, Erdogan, Orban, Salvini, Trump, et al., — is perceived to be more democracy. The problem with this remedy is that Liberal-democracy is actually the source of so-called ‘right-populism’.

I have a long held a strong commitment to the idea of democracy in my work as an educator and activist. And while I retain a strong belief in the first principle of democracy — providing means for giving power to the people, not to an individual or to a restricted class of people — I am losing confidence in the concept of democracy, indeed what I will argue here is that national democracy as an idea and practice have become so deformed that it is possibly unsalvageable and that, as the political form of capitalism, democracy should be abolished.

But first, I’ll speak as a democratic apologist, in defense of a unique vision of democracy to which I have long subscribed.

DEWEYAN DEMOCRACY AS UTOPIAN IDEAL

I have always offered a resounding “Yes!” to the suggestion that the solution to many of societies’ ills and inequities was more democracy. As a social studies educator (teaching history, geography and citizenship), I have spent my career teaching that democracy was much more than a system of government providing a set of rules that allow individuals wide latitude to do as they wish. Following from philosopher John Dewey, I have taught about democracy as a way of living and working with others.

In Dewey’s 1939 essay “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us”, he argued that democracy is a way of life, an experience based on faith in human nature, the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and working with others. In his view, democracy is a moral ideal that requires everyday effort to create. For Dewey, democracy is not an insti-

tutional concept that exists outside of us. “The task of democracy,” he wrote, “is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and which all contribute.”⁴

A Deweyan conception of democratic life requires us to pay attention to the multiple implications of our actions on others. The primary responsibility of democratic citizens is a concern with the development of shared interests that lead to a sensitivity about repercussions of their actions on others. In his magnum opus *Democracy and Education*, Dewey characterized democracy as a force that breaks down the barriers that separate people and creates community.

The aim of a democratic society from this perspective is the production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality. In this light, it is nearly impossible to think about or teach democracy without placing the pursuit of social justice and a critical examination of existing social, economic, and political inequalities at the center of the endeavor.

Dewey identified the principal obstacle to achieving democracy as the powerful alliance of class privilege with philosophies of education that sharply divided mind and body, theory and practice, culture and utility.⁵

Based upon this foundation, I have long argued that the best way to achieve democracy is to initiate children in a form of social life characteristic of democracy: a community of full participation. The aim of education in general and social studies education in particular should not be merely preparation for living in a democracy. Rather, our aim should be to create a curriculum that fosters broad participation in a community of inquirers, a community reflective of framework that:

- empowers all;
- includes all;
- engages its members in meaningful, real-world activities and that accommodates learners with diverse needs, interests, and abilities;
- intentionally builds learning support strategies; and

⁴ J. Dewey, *Creative democracy: The task before us*, in *John Dewey: The later works, Volume 14: 1939-1941: Essays, reviews, and miscellany*, edited by J. A. Boydston, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, IL, pp. 224-230. (Originally published in 1939)

⁵ R. B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1991.

- fosters partnering and builds real collaboration within the school and with families and the community.⁶

Dewey's conceptualization of democracy and democratic education retains an appeal for me, but at the present moment it is an anachronistic philosophical concept sometimes at odds with the philosophical foundations and practices of existing liberal-democracy. At other times Dewey's vision provides a protective cover against criticism of democratic institutions and practices by articulating an attractive possibility of a democratic utopia — muting criticism of existing democratic practices, with much the same effect as Churchill's supposed aphorism “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

The hegemonic idea and practice of national democracy is so far removed from Dewey's notion of democracy as a way of life as to be almost completely unrelated and Dewey's work doesn't provide a sustained critique of the inherent problems at the heart of liberal-democratic theory and practice, which is the source of the crisis of illiberal democracy we are now experiencing.

LIBERAL-DEMOCRACY, A CONTRADICTION OF TERMS

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama declared the “end of history,” arguing the collapse of the Soviet Union, end of the Cold War, and universalization of liberal-democracy was the end point of the humankind's ideological evolution.⁷ Since then we've seen a continued retreat of civil rights, a massive rise in inequality, and liberal-democracy has now delivered a string of illiberal authoritarian, nationalist leaders in The Philippines (Rodrigo Duterte), Hungary (Viktor Orban), Israel (Benjamin Netanyahu), Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil) and, of course, the racist, misogynist, xenophobic, narcissist in the White House — the “orange mother of all assholes” to use Paul Street's description — Donald Trump. Individualism is at the heart of classical liberalism and as such is the root of the democratic crisis that is represented the rise of so-called “populism.” As

6 R. Gibson & M. P. Peterson, *Whole schooling: Implementing progressive school reform, in Aa. Vv., in The Social studies curriculum: Purposes, problems, and possibilities (Revised Edition)*, edited by E. W. Ross, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 2001.

7 F. Fukuyama, *The end of history?*, in “The National Interest” 16, 1989, pp. 3–18.

Ian McKay recently reminded us, the structural flaw that defines liberal-democracy and that provides the roots cause for the current democratic crisis is individualism. In a discussion of democracy and utopia, Furet and Costopoulos describe the philosophical and practical problem of democracy this way:

Since the eighteenth century, democracy has presented itself to the modern individual as a promise of liberty, or more precisely, of *autonomy*. This is in contrast to earlier times when [people] were viewed as subjects, and consequently were deprived of the right of self-determination, which is the basis of the legitimacy of modern societies.⁸

Theorists of democracy — from Hobbes to de Tocqueville — have continually wrestled with but never resolved the central questions of democracy:

- What kind of society should we form if we think of ourselves as autonomous individuals?
- What type of social bond can be established among free and equal people, since liberty and equality are the conditions of our autonomy?
- How can we conceive a society in which each member is sovereign over self, and which thus must harmonize the sovereignty of each over self and of all over all?⁹

As Furet and Costopoulos remark “the gap between the expectations that democracy arouses and the solutions that it creates for fulfilling them is striking.”¹⁰

Canadian political scientist C. B. Macpherson, and many others, have pointed out the key contradiction within liberal democracy is not merely individualism, but “possessive individualism.”¹¹ Liberal democrats have long argued for the rights of the individual, but in theory and practice the only individuals

8 F. Furet and P. J. Costopoulos, *Democracy and utopia*, in “Journal of Democracy” 9, 1998, pp. 65-79.

9 Ivi.

10 Ivi.

11 C. B. Macpherson, *The political theory of possessive individualism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, England 1989.

that matter were those that owned property. Property is the key and in liberal democratic theory and practice “society [is] little more than an agreement among the privileged to respect each other’s property.”¹²

From the very beginning, liberal democrats worked to make the world safe for property. The conflict between protecting private wealth and creating a democratic society is conspicuous throughout US history, for example. The framers of the US Constitution were keenly aware of the threat of democracy. According to James Madison, the primary responsibility of government was “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority.” Madison believed the threat to democracy was likely to increase over time as there was an increase in “the proportion of those who will labor under all the hardships of life and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessing”.¹³

In crafting a system giving primacy to property over people, Madison and the framers were guarding against the increased influence of the unpropertied masses. As Noam Chomsky describes it,

[The unpropertied] might gain influence, Madison feared. He was concerned by the “symptoms of a leveling spirit” that had already appeared, and warned “of the future danger” if the right to vote would place “power over property in the hands without a share in it.” Those “without property, or the hope of acquiring it, cannot be expected to sympathize sufficiently with its rights,” Madison explained. His solution was to keep political power in the hands of those who “come from and represent the wealth of the nation,” the more capable set of men,” with the general public fragmented and disorganized.¹⁴

The first US political party, The Federalists — who appealed to business and to conservatives who favoured banks, national over state government, manufacturing, and opposed the French Revolution — expected that the public would remain compliant and deferential to the politically active elite, and for the most part that has been true throughout US history. Despite the party’s demise in the 1820s, their conception of democracy

12 I. McKay, *The democracy alarm*, “The Vancouver Sun”, May 29, 2019.

13 Madison quoted in N. Chomsky, *Profit over people*, Seven Stories Press, New York, NY 1999, p. 47.

14 Ivi, 48.

prevailed, though in a different form as industrial capitalism emerged. Their view of democracy was most succinctly expressed by John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court, who said “the people who own the country ought to govern it.”¹⁵ Jay’s maxim is the principle upon which the US was founded and is obviously one of the roots of today’s neoliberalism.

So-called democratic politicians and theoreticians have railed against a truly participatory democracy, which engages the public in controlling its own affairs, for over two hundred years. For example, Alexander Hamilton warned of the “great beast” that must be tamed. In the 20th Century, Walter Lippman warned of the “bewildered herd” that would trample itself without external control, and the eminent political scientist Harold Lasswell warned elites of the “ignorance and stupidity of the masses” and called for them not to succumb to the “democratic dogmatism about men [sic] being the best judges of their own interests.”

These perspectives have nurtured a neoliberal spectator democracy, which deters or prohibits the public from managing its own affairs and resolutely controls the means of information. At first this may seem an odd conception of democracy, but it is the prevailing conception of liberal-democratic thought, and one that has been fostered by traditional approaches to political education in schools. In spectator democracy, a specialized class of experts identify what our common interests are and think and plan accordingly. The function of the rest of us is to be “spectators” rather than participants in action.

Dewey warned of the anti-democratic effects of the concentration of private power in absolutist institutions such as corporations. He was clear that as long as there was no democratic control of the workplace and economic systems that democracy would be limited, stunted. He emphasized that democracy has little content when big business rules the life of the country through its control of “the means of production, exchange, publicity, transportation and communication, reinforced by command of the press, press agents and other means of publicity and propaganda.” “Politics,” Dewey said, “is the shadow cast on society by big business, the attenuation of the shadow will not change the sub-

15 F. Monaghan, *John Jay*. Bobbs-Merrill, New York, NY 1935, p. 323.

stance.” A free and democratic society, according to Dewey, is one where workers are “masters of their own industrial fate.”

But liberal-democratic thinkers have always struggled to reconcile their assumptions about “free-standing individuals who own property with the democratic demands of the exploited and excluded.”¹⁶ The rise of the welfare state created a gentler liberalism, preserving privileges of the wealthy in exchange for a social safety net, education, unions, health and housing programs. But as we all know, ultimately liberals resolved the internal contradiction within liberal-democracy by working to make the world safe, not for democracy, but property. Neoliberalism does not merely challenge liberty and democracy but subjugates both to the acquisitive drive of unfettered capitalism.

The crisis of democracy emerges where capital is unregulated; profits and property are valued over people; unfathomable gaps in wealth exist between workers and the elite; and everyday life of the vast majority of people is precarious because of insecure employment, social instability, and the attacks on reason, while the media, the state and universities are remade in neoliberal terms. As McKay argues, “this very precariousness is represented, not as culturally or psychologically damaging, but as freedom itself.”¹⁷

C. B. Macpherson’s left-leaning neo-Helgelian Canadian idealism aimed to “work out a revision of liberal-democratic theory, a revision that clearly owed a great deal to Marx, in the hope of making that theory more democratic while rescuing that valuable part of the liberal tradition which is submerged when liberalism is identified as synonymous with capitalist market relations.”¹⁸ Is it a fool’s errand to look to liberal-democracy as a source for solving the problems it is responsible for creating? McKay argues we should take up Macpherson’s challenge to liberate democracy from its neoliberal chains “by rethinking property relations right down to their foundations.”

16 McKay, *The democracy alarm*, cit., p. E2.

17 Ivi.

18 D. Morrice, *C. B. Macpherson’s critique of liberal democracy and capitalism*, “Political Studies”, 42, 1994, pp. 646-661.

TRUMP, DEMOCRACY AND FASCISM

McKay explains the paradox of electing of authoritarians — who only offer more hardships to a global army of precarious, angry and disenfranchised citizens — as resulting from a desire for solace of an imagined national community within a culture of militarism.

On the other hand, Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen sees national democracy as the political form of capitalism and proposes that we should demolish it as it slides into fascism. In his book *Trump's Counter-Revolution*, Rasmussen key arguments are:

1. (*Counter-revolution*) Trump's election was a protest against neo-liberal globalization — a response by the electorate to the 2008 financial crisis, bailing out the banks, and the ensuing spending cuts and foreclosures that fueled a dramatic rise in discontent that is manifest as nationalism (similar to Brexit). But Trump's election was also a protest against protests (e.g., Occupy, Black Lives Matter). Trump's ultra-nationalism is an attempt to derail the articulation of alternatives to neoliberalism.
2. (*Image politics*) Following Debord and the Situationists, Rasmussen argues Trump's election and presidency is the final confirmation of politics' transformation into image politics. Trump's political messages are not just put into images, but emerge as genuine image events. It doesn't make sense to try and prove Trump is lying and contradicting himself. His politics is a virtual politics that is purposefully self-contradictory, silly, and violent.
3. (*Fascism*) Trump is a temporary solution that simultaneously promises to continue the neoliberal program, but also increases neoliberalism's racist solutions, giving them an explicitly fascist dimension. The program is the reestablishment of a fictive former greatness — Make America (not the US) Great Again ... where all 'real' Americans are white Americans. Trump's racism, misogyny and Islamophobia are the ingredients of a postmodern, pastiche fascism that uses systematic lies and attacks on the mainstream press, ultra-nationalism, and the mobilization of an outraged white petty bourgeoisie.

When Rasmussen asks “whether democracy after Trump?” His response is neither Trump, nor democracy.

In a situation of deep economic crisis for the state, Trump’s American fascism offers an unstable solution, in which racism and protectionism are combined in a strange fascism. ... Political democracy is not doubt a lesser evil than Trump’s late-capitalist fascism, but it is an evil nonetheless. An evil that made possible the election of Trump and his racist and exclusionary policies.¹⁹

In many ways, Trump appears as a democratic coup — democracy is hijacked when people vote the “wrong” way. Trump is presented as a right-wing, nationalist threat to democracy. But Rasmussen argues that “there is no populist, totalitarian or fascist excess, if by that we understand something essentially different from national-democratic normality.”²⁰ The argument that populism/fascism is in opposition to democracy is a “short circuit” that excludes revolutionary alternatives by invoking the status quo — cops murdering Black Americans or migrants turned away or detained at US and European borders illustrate this.

The populism analysis — which argues that Trump’s populism appeals to the people in a suspect manner, his nationalist rhetoric undercuts representative democracy and clears the way for racist, misogynist, Islamophobic policies — is problematic because it affirms mainstream national democracy as the “infallible norm.” Populism is bad. Democracy is good and must be defended, even though it is national democracy that delivered the orange asshole to the White House as well as his cronies across the globe.

Here Rasmussen is following the lead Giorgio Agamben²¹ and Karl Korsch²² who have illustrated the intimate relationship between democracy and fascism.

Agamben points out that democracy depends on a founding ambiguity, by which it means both the power of the people as well as government,

19 M. B. Rasmussen, *Trump’s counter-revolution*, Zero Books, New York, NY 2018, p. 4.

20 Ivi, p. 81.

21 G. Agamben G., *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA 1998.

22 K. Korsch, *The workers fight against fascism*, “Living Marxism”, Winter, 1941, url: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1941/fascism.htm>

the form through which power is legitimated and exercised — democracy is a movement between these poles. Democracy carries bioclass struggle, which often threatens to break out, and does (e.g., the refugee crisis). For most people, democracy as a concept references national democracy — representative democracy, political parties, and elections rooted in a nation state, with all the racist, classist, sexist, heteronormative, an national security state politics and policies that we have witnessed for years — cops murdering Black citizens, huge wealth inequalities, border regimes, government exercising control over women’s bodies, rolling back civil liberties — all of this happens in perfectly respectable democracies. For Korsch there is no essential difference between bourgeois democracy and fascism, rather there is an internal connection — bourgeois democracy has inherently fascist dimensions. Defending democracy to avoid authoritarian rule doesn’t work, it never has and the recent national democratic elections of Trump, Bolsanaro, Duterte, Orban, Netanyahu et al. speak to this truth.

As Rasmussen points out, the analyses of Agamben and Korsch make it clear that “it is a mistake to put democracy opposite fascism or suggest a popular front to defend democracy against Trump’s fascism is to misunderstand the founding ambiguity of national democracy, in which fascism is an immanent possibility, not an external threat.²³ In a state of emergency it is standard practice for national democracies to shut off civil and political rights and intensify nationalist, exclusionist logic (e.g., colonies, internment of citizens, border regimes, etc.). This, Rasmussen argues is what is happening with Trump.

CONCLUSION

Given what we know about the state of democracy in the world today, is it even possible to teach for a democracy that is not dominated by capital and internally linked with fascism?

Do we want to teach for liberal/capitalist democracy? Is there an alternative?

Is the concept of democracy bankrupt?

23 M. B. Rasmussen, *Trump’s counter-revolution*, cit., p. 83

Is democracy as a concept and practice even salvageable?

If democracy is salvageable, then teaching about and for democracy in contemporary times cannot be done without engaging the complexities and contradictions that have come to define what really existing (or non-existing) democracy is and its relationship with capitalism, populism/fascism.

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