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# Democracy's Destroyers

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Let me start with a historical note. Shortly after its founding (and before the Cold War started), UNESCO began an ambitious project defining "democracy." The report was edited by the distinguished philosopher Richard McKeon. The most interesting overall conclusion was that no one rejected "democracy" anymore. Not even the Soviets. No one from among the UN members! There were (however!) enormous differences in the meaning imputed to the term. In the USSR it was claimed that "economic democracy" was paramount, while the Westerners highlighted "political democracy." Rereading that volume today, one is struck by this irony-and cautioned about easy definitions and terminologies.

As we are writing these papers, the naive assumptions of many of our leaders and neighbor-citizens regarding the desirability of democracy are becoming frighteningly clear. All humans do *not* want it, nor does it readily emerge from the ashes of war-shattered cultures. Nor can it be imposed by force. Nor will it emerge from rootages in many of our world's traditional religions. Nor can we assume that all citizens of democracies, when on military and colonial ventures, will act democratically. Case histories? Iraq, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, North Ireland, Angola ....

The historic record of Christianity is little more encouraging. As

A. D. Lindsay carefully argued many years ago, democracy at most emerged from the tradition of left-wing Calvinism-not from any mainstream version of Christian faiths.<sup>2</sup>

Even more important for our consideration is the new UN Development Program report "Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizens' Democracy." Only the Spanish text was available at the time of this writing, but it presents a devastating review of the status of democracy in that part of the world where US hegemony, since the creation of the Monroe Doctrine, has ruled supreme. Not only have we typically been content to support and deal with oligarchies and dictatorships in the Latin world, we have failed to give real support when these authoritarian rules were effectively overthrown.

Our fiascoes go way back. Occupations of Haiti. Invasions of Nicaragua. Support of Batistaism in Cuba so strong that we failed to prevent Castro turning to the USSR in despair-to list only recent misadventures. Overtly and covertly we blocked democratic changes in almost every country south of our borders. We armed and financed right-wings, winked at pseudo-democracies in Argentina and Mexico. Even today we covertly undermine elected leaders in Venezuela and Haiti. This bi-partisan failure to encourage and support democracies in "our part of the world" surely renders suspect most of the present rhetoric. Our behaviors do not show that we believe in and want to foster democracy or that we believe it to be the universal human birthright.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in hailing the UNDP report, said:

Opinion polls tell us that today only about 50 percent of Latin Americans prefer democracy to authoritarian rule. That is very sad. More important, it is wrong. The solution to Latin America's ills does not lie in a return to authoritarianism. It lies in a stronger and deeper-rooted democracy.

This report again reminds us that democracy is a very fragile and recent human development and one that can never be taken for granted. The official UN summary describes this in more detail:

Just 43% of Latin Americans are fully supportive of democracy, while 30.5% express ambivalence and 26.5% hold non-democratic

views, according to opinion surveys conducted for the report in 18 countries in the region; more than half of all Latin Americans—54.7 percent—say they would support an "authoritarian" regime over "democratic" government if authoritarianism rule could "resolve" their economic problems.

Since 2000, four elected presidents in the 18 countries studied were forced to quit before the end of their terms following steep drops in public support.

The first generation of Latin Americans to come of age in functioning democracies has experienced virtually no per capita income growth and widening, world-record disparities in the distribution of national income; in 2003, 225 million Latin Americans had incomes below the poverty line.

59% of the political leaders consulted for the report said political parties are failing to fulfill their necessary role.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of political alienation, whether a new thing or a regression to historic cultural patterns reflective of the medieval European heritage, further illustrates the need to attend to the deeper cultural factors that are necessary to sustain democracy.

"This shows that democracy is not something that has taken hold of people's minds as strongly as we had thought it would," said Enrique Berruga Filloy, Mexico's ambassador to the United Nations.

The report says that while unhappiness with political leadership has a long history in Latin America, the people now complaining are faulting democracy itself.

Voter turnout is falling across the region, especially among the young, while civil unrest is on the rise.<sup>4</sup>

This dismal kind of public opinion has emerged even as the "objective" conditions for democracy had been expanding enormously

Democracy's progress is reflected in the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI),<sup>5</sup> a compound measurement prepared for the report that combines four variables: the right to vote, fair elections, free elections, and elections as a means of access to public office. The average EDI (whose value ranges between zero and one, where zero indicates the complete absence of electoral democracy and one the maximum) for

Latin America rose rapidly from 0.28 in 1977 to 0.69 in 1985 and 0.86 in 1990, climbing further to 0.93 in the year 2002.

Important as these structural possibilities are for developing and sustaining democracy, the turnout percentages must also be noted. Some Latin countries had once viewed voting as legally mandatory—to be proved via a card stamped at a polling place. But now even that dubious law can be circumvented when dictatorships fold. Disappointment with the results of democracy, as indicated in the UNDP statistics, leads to a drop-off in actual voting. Putting this more politically, cynicism trumps democracy.

The report also sets out broad goals for developing Latin democracy:

- Democracy implies a certain idea of the human being and of the nurturing of citizenship;
- Democracy is a form of organization of power that implies the existence and proper functioning of the State;
- While the electoral system is a key element of democracy, the latter cannot be reduced to the mere holding of elections;
- Democracy requires full civic participation, that is to say, the full recognition of political, civil and social citizenship;
- Democracy in the region is a particular historical experience that must be understood and judged in terms of its specific characteristics.

## **THE MILLENNIUM PROJECT**

This Latin American study grew out of a too-little publicized UN project aiming at certain world standards to be achieved by 2015:<sup>6</sup>

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Goal4: Reduce child mortality

Goal5: Improve maternal health

Goal6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Goal7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Goal8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

These UN goals, with all the negotiating and compromising that they necessarily embody, clearly move beyond the simple functional meanings of democracy into social and economic and scientific realms that are structurally basic.

## THE RULE OF LAW

While it is almost a commonplace among scholars that the rule of law and judiciary independence are essential to democracy, these have been low on the priority lists of most advanced nations when they deal with the less-developed world. Cultures differ widely upon the contents of any "natural" law—some seeing it as directly flowing from a divine law and some seeing it more as a part of a nature to be scientifically studied and understood.

## ACCESS TO INFORMATION

A much more ambiguous factor is the role of information and the functions of media. Jefferson, in 1787, said,

This basis of our government being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.

But he said that in a situation where literacy was widespread,

reading newspapers was common, and the competition among news sources lively. Our times are different. Many more of our US neighbors learn whatever they learn about their society and world from TV rather than newspapers. And network TV, having trivialized its audience, can become even more trivialized in its future programming. Our college students (the "leaders of tomorrow") do little better.

## TRANSFORMATIONS OF MEDIA

Moreover, it has been clear for some time that TV is an entertainment medium, not an educative one. Less obvious are the ways in which corporate values affect content. Expenses must be met, and this is only by advertising. The audiences served by public television and radio are minuscule. The dominating networks both create and serve their markets and very effectively lobby legislatures to eliminate barriers to their increased consolidation. Periodic attempts to allocate public interest segments typically fail.

Media students have noticed interesting changes over time. Sports involvement, of course, is the most obvious. Some older readers may remember pre-TV times when about the only sport that was really professionalized was baseball. Younger viewers can be captivated by a wide variety of sports, including wrestling-that have finally, by now, even opened to women participants.

"Celebrity" covers a myriad media attractors-film, pop music, TV, sports. Networks evolve to cater to these wants-E, MTV, BET, VHI, ESPN.

"Reality" is the newest genre competing for attention. Labor costs drop, of course, when ordinary persons replace actors and stars.

Events leading up to the Iraq invasion, the war itself, and the early stages of occupation made this quite overt misinformation quite clear. If journalism depends upon access, then access depends upon currying favor. The Pentagon creation of "embedded" reporters (and its rejection of those few journalists who attempted independence) was a new step in controlling the news. The censorship of images of dead bodies, friend or foe, was a clever advance on the grisly images shown during previous military encounters.

The rationale for that war (weapons of mass destruction) was little probed by journalists and certainly was not subjected to widespread media attention. Even when they were not found, continuing searches for them persist.

Can the Internet fill this gap between information and entertainment? That has been the dream of some reformers, and the information-sharing success of Web sites such as MoveOn have been cited as examples. Supporters of this theory may note that more than half of US adults have broadband access either at home or at work.

This pluralization of potential sources of information may be hopeful in preserving a democratic society, but the issue of dissemination still remains. How will the word get out to the general populace in ways that catch attention and invite critical reflection? Paul Krugman coined a great phrase to describe this lag between discovery of information and the time and processes that ensure before the information gets "traction with the broad public."?

There are, alas, already signs that profitable computer games attract more viewers than do the information sources. This suggests that commerce will trump progress once again. Is the main lesson that people will get what they want? And that competition for changed wants is an arena where the lure of profits trumps education?

## **VOTING AND NON-VOTING**

Media alone cannot be blamed for the fall-off of political participation. The relative satisfaction of basic needs is certainly a factor. Satisfied citizens may well become less concerned about perceiving or feeling the need for changes. And the vocalization of an educational system, from kindergarten through university, must bear some of the blame.

The comedian Mort Sahl has recently taken to the stage again and sees changes here within his own lifetime:

[T]hrough it all, Mr. SaW has maintained optimism. That's what he worries is now in short supply, especially among young people.

"You can see it in the movies," he said. "Their movies resonate with people disappointing them, parents, lovers, children, as if the

net result of all your effort will be disappointment. Sometimes they think I'm conning them when I talk about justice and true love. They think they're slogans. But in the last analysis, people are sustained by believing in something."

For Mr. Sahl, the crucial distinction is between cynicism and skepticism. "It's the noncourageous among us who become cynical and say nothing is possible," he said, "which gives them a convenient out, because if you're a cynic your heart can't be broken."<sup>8</sup>

The rise in cynicism is, of course, not limited to Latin America. It is commonplace to view recent US voting drop-offs as similarly caused. "We the People" becomes "We the Few (and Fewer)." Until recent years, lowered voter turnout always played into the hands of conservatives and incumbents. Today, this may no longer be the case for reasons that we will be examining.

## ROLES PLAYED BY WEALTH

I want to emphasize now the roles played by wealth in shaping and undercutting democracy. My focus is on "wealth" rather than "income" for the same reason that economists use-it is a truer measure. And it makes more sense semantically than "poverty"-although in many ways that term refers simply to its inverse.

Some time ago sociologists began exploring the components of "class" as it functioned in actual societies. In our society, for instance, income based on gambling does not move one as high in the perceived class structure as would income based on salary. Even those lines begin to blur when recent corporate shenanigans are taken into account.

## FREEDOM AND EQUALITY

Enlightenment thinking focused on two values--equality and freedom. Particularly in the United States and France, the term "citizen" referred to persons declared to be politically equal. Those with this new status would be able to determine their own destinies by voting, freed from

any domination by church or crown. To be sure, large numbers were excluded on the basis of gender or slave status and by variations of economic discrimination in the thirteen states. Even for those groups, there came to be a certain amount of equality before the law. Freedom included freedom to speak and to assemble. But certain forms of freedom, for instance, religious freedom, were sharply restricted by local and state customs and laws. Sabbath laws restricted Sunday activities; blasphemy rules restricted speech and publication.

Especially in the United States (where one could claim the "practical Enlightenment" took root), the abilities to change presidents, governors, judiciaries, and legislatures made the expansion of initial democratic values possible.

The forms of representative democracy that emerged in the US experiment persist to complicate the present. From the beginning the Senate was based upon equal representation for each state, while the Congress was based upon equal representation for each citizen—more populous states having more representatives. The hard fact of regionalized slavery complicated this since each slave counted as three-fifths of a human but had no vote. That Orwellian solution meant that all residents were equal but Southerners were "more equal."

As political democracies of England and the US shifted to capitalist economies, the tensions between these values became much more apparent. Industrialization came to involve urbanization. And that meant not only the loss of small-town rootings that constrained so much of human behavior. In the US, the immigrations resulting from political crises in Europe and the labor needs of new industries created potential Catholic voting blocs in formerly Protestant cities. And the exercise of individual freedom not only created middle classes but enormously expanded the gaps between rich and poor. That trend continues into our own time—and not only here but throughout the developing world as well.

Democratic equality has never meant the absence of all differences. What it meant initially was equal access to the law and to the change processes of society. This was a significant development from the Protestant Reformers' idea that sinners stood equally damned in their distances from a perfect divine judge. The Enlightenment doctrine of Progress created the difference. Instead of inhabiting a world

of rigid divine orders, humans were now seen to be the shapers of their societies along rational lines, based upon the reasons that were their universal possessions as humans.

What must be pointed out repeatedly (and from metaphoric rooftops) are the ways that democratic societies have expanded their awareness of barriers to equality. "Equal opportunity" theorists have focused on discriminatory uses of gender, age, race, origin, religion, region, language, class, wealth, health, sexual orientation, and from such studies have come changes embodying those expanded moral visions, thus enlarging the meanings of Equality. The Millennium goals of the UN cited previously are a good illustration of the present state of this process.

Past democrats have found ways to reduce the polarizations of wealth that emerged with some exercises of human freedom-progressive taxation, encouragement of philanthropy, inheritance taxes. On a deeper level, societies need to valorize other uses of freedom than entrepreneurship. Public servants, scientists, scholars and teachers, health workers, environmentalists, artists of all kinds are essential to the common good.

## MASSES AND ELITES AND EXCELLENCES

I have been calling naive those who think that humans automatically want freedom and self rule. Readers of Dostoevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor will know what I mean. And those journalists who worry about opinion on "the Arab street" are saying the same thing. With the UNDP Report mentioned above, we need to add "the Latin American street." And we had better not ignore "the US street."

The risk, of course, is that societies at every level of development are open to trivialization, what Alan Riding calls "massification":

Since World War II, however, has come the massification of culture. In response Europeans have tried to reinforce national and regional identities, to hold onto their languages, foods and folkloric traditions. But given the option of American-style entertainment, they show little interest in one another's arts. It may simply be lack of

information: European newspapers offer poor coverage of their neighbors' art scenes, and television is not much better, with the exception of the French-German network Arte. Whatever the reason, artistic endeavors that do cross borders today reach few people.<sup>9</sup>

To describe the alternative as "elitism" conjures up too many unsavory past associations. So too "expertism." Perhaps we should try "excellences," keeping the term pluralized. Critics and innovators of all kinds are essential to the development and sustenance of democracies. Even pop culture makes its lists of "top tens." We need to help persons do the same in all fields of endeavor—both as a motivating theme and as an educating theme.

## **DE·UNILATERALIZING-AND GLOBALIZING-THE US**

The naivete of defining democracy simply as voting, and assuming that everyone wants the same thing, is daily exploded by events around the world. The desires for religious conformity are too strong to ignore—whether described as theocratic society, a Muslim state, Hindutva, a Jewish state, a Buddhist state. And those labelings are misleading since they overlook the extreme pluralisms within most religious traditions. How significant is a "Christian" label that must include Protestants of a variety of persuasions, Catholics, Orthodox, plus growing and independent sects?

Democracy, strictly speaking, designates the "shift in power downward," to use Fareed Zakaria's widely read designation.<sup>10</sup> The significant issues, of course, are the comparative sets of values held by those "formerly above" and those newly empowered. Replacing an arbitrary monarchy with an educated but repressed underclass is one thing; replacing a benevolent oligarchy (not necessarily an oxymoron) with a revolutionary fundamentalism is quite another. In many recent cases, the choices have been yet grayer. How should one compare the Pahlavi shah with mullah Khomeini? Or Soviet dictators with the Afghan Taliban? Or the Saudi principedom with whatever Osama bin Laden would substitute?

This process could, less admiringly, be described with Alan Riding's "massification" or simply "vulgarization." Whatever the chosen term, democratization seems inevitable in the long run. The real

question is what can hedge it. I have suggested that equality needs to be balanced with excellence. On mass levels, this is obviously recognized in sports, pop music, and cinema. The youngest child can come up with his or her list of "ten best." What education should be doing is to widen the exposures to all human genres of achievement. Top scientists, top poets, top architects, top statespersons, top diplomats, top historians, top musicians, top social reformers, top engineers, top ethicists, top psychologists, top dramatists, top novelists. Good education will reach beyond the present and local. We might even celebrate Matthew Arnold's great declaration that culture is "to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere."

Humanists should be engaging in a fourfold task. First, to stress the prescience of those Deists and Masons who not only created "we the people" but managed to craft a constitution that omitted reference to any god and freed the consciences of individual citizens.

Second, to keep alive the interpretive concept "civil religion." While humanists may not want to use it themselves, it is certainly the right key for understanding such phrases as "under God," "in God we trust," "so help me God." While these phrasings persist, they make no technical sense since there have never been serious agreements among Christians as to the nature of this "God" or his dictates (cf. Protestant vs. Catholic on Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments). Nor has there even been a functional recognition of any "Judeo-Christian tradition." On the latter point, reflect on centuries of anti-Semitism and conversion activities by Christians toward Jews. Sensitive scholars such as Jacob Neusner have long decried the truth of the elision.

Third, humanists should be stressing the current diversity of the US population in terms of religious identifications and the presence of significant blocks of non-religious citizens. The political founders could only dimly have anticipated this, but their structures made it possible for such variety to emerge without continual intergroup warfares. In fact the major civil war of the nineteenth century served to split most of the major religious denominations rather than be a war between them.

Finally, and of equal importance, humanists should be underscoring the enormous advantages of such a secularized state in maximizing the abilities of all citizens to pursue happiness as they default it, respecting the lives and liberties of their neighbors.

## **RESPECTING THE LIVES AND LIBERTIES OF THEIR NEIGHBORS**

In a globalizing world, everyone is our neighbor (and the term "citizen" is too open to local interpretation). Putting it this way suggests a vast, if implicit, social contract where the only restrictions that should be enforced would be upon those who have restricted their neighbors. This choice of simpler language would make it easier to commend democratic practices to a wider audience.

Nevertheless, the simpler word carries a heavy load of assumptions. How can I respect your liberties if I do not know your values? How can I relate when your values conflict with mine? How can I respect someone's life and liberty if I have not reflected enough on those terms to understand that they denote rights-to food, shelter, education, health, movement, expression?

At these points, our long historical experiences indicate the restricting roles of religions and ideologies. Suppose Church X says, "Error does not have the same rights as Truth." If "true" is only their arbitrary decision, no respect is involved unless everyone makes the same arbitrary decision. Or if Church Y says that "Infidels do not have equal rights to Believers," the same simplistic designating is involved. If Church Z suggests that "Suicide in the right cause will earn you Paradise," only those who believe in such transcendental realms will agree.

Surveying the present situation could easily lead to pessimism regarding this humanist agenda of knowledge-based democracy. Theocratic religions are capturing both attention and power. They claim access to a non- and supra-natural reality not knowable by ordinary means. Moreover, they move toward various apocalypticisms suggesting that this higher realm is about to establish its dominance over the world of ordinary experience of ordinary human beings. And, most disturbingly, they suggest that apocalyptic times necessitate a suspension of ordinary moralities. 11

This "special morality for times of crisis" can be seen in the more popular "Left Behind" series where the times between "Rapture" and "Final Appearance" are filled with violence and slaughter that would normally be forbidden by any "Christian" ethics.

For most of the last century, most sociologists of religion indulged themselves with a "secularization thesis" where the spread of a science-based education would erode traditional faiths that had traditionally served to endorse primitive moralities. The story is more complex, especially in the US. Not only have fundamentalisms survived; they have been flourishing.

Various explanations have been adduced. Some argue that most of us are wired for versions of supernaturalism and that only a relatively small minority can live without the transcendental anchorings. One is reminded of Martin Luther's "Man hat Gott oder Abgott" (humans need either god or idol).

Others contend that a proper education in the humanities will help people transcend the more arrogant and virulent forms of religiosity. One can certainly argue that current university educational diets (which inevitably trickle down into lower schools as well) are humanities-starved-shifting to various training systems linked to the lucrative fads of the moment.

Still others argue that more science education would free students from supernatural temptations. It is clearly the case that science education in the US has become weaker. And particularly evolution teaching, the lynchpin of much of science, has been brilliantly undercut by fundamentalist forces.

My own position would add to this more education "about" religions. Perhaps better educated foreign-policy makers, and their CIA, would have avoided those mistakes in Palestine, Iran, Indonesia, and Afghanistan that strengthened the worst in Islam. Better knowledge of Islam would have warned against close alliances with Saudis and Pakistanis. Certainly better education regarding Islam would have avoided the stupidity regarding democracy in Iraq. Some sophistication regarding Guatemala would have avoided support of an evangelical Protestant tyranny. Comparative religions may be our best insurance against bigotry, as well as being our best argument for the necessity of a secular society in which all ideologies must compete without state support or favoritism.

## NOTES

1. United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [from old catalog] and Richard Peter McKeon. *Democracy in a world of tensions*. Paris, 1951.
  2. A. D. Lindsay, *The Essentials of Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1929).
  3. From the UN press release: [http://www.undp.org/dpa/pressrelease\\_releases/2004/april/0421\\_prodal.html](http://www.undp.org/dpa/pressrelease_releases/2004/april/0421_prodal.html)
  4. Dean Hoge, *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 2004—summarizing report released in Lima, Peru, April 21.
  5. Developed in a 2003 paper by Gerardo L. Munck and Jay Verkuilen. Available at [http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/APSA2003/Munck-Verkuillen\\_APSA\\_2003.pdf](http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/APSA2003/Munck-Verkuillen_APSA_2003.pdf)
  6. <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/html/about.shtml>.
  7. Paul Krugman coined this useful phrase in a April 27, 2004, column in the *New York Times*. He was noting that it took David Kay's public statement to firm the public awareness that the WMD stories about Iraq were fallacious.
  8. Bruce Weber, "Mort Sahl, Still Simmering After All These Years," *New York Times*, Apr. 27, 2004.
  9. Alan Riding, "A Common Culture (From the U.S.A.) Binds Europeans Ever Closer," *New York Times*, Apr. 26, 2004.
  10. Fareed Zakaria, *The future of freedom: Illiberal democracy at home and abroad*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).
- II. See the 5-volume Fundamentalism Project by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Univ. of Chicago Press) and the post-final volume in which they shifted terminology to "strong religion": Gabriel Abraham Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan. *Strong religion: The rise of fundamentalisms around the world* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).