

REQUIEM FOR DEMOCRACY

WILLIAM OPHULS

No matter how well founded, political regimes are impermanent because they contain inherent flaws and contradictions that conspire to bring about their downfall in the long run. The corollary is that human beings are born chiselers looking out for Number One, and unless constrained by civil society they will exploit these flaws and contradictions to their own selfish ends. In effect, political regimes are subject to entropy. As their original élan and virtue leach away, regimes rot and corrupt. They are less and less able to govern effectively and ultimately lose their legitimacy. Sooner or later, they are succeeded by a new regime animated by a different political ideal. This is the eternal cycle of regimes—repeatedly observed, *mutatis mutandis*, since ancient times.

Recent events suggest that the almost 250-year old democratic era is now ending in an emerging chaos that is preparing the ground for tyranny, the regime that classically succeeds democracy in the cycle. People are all for freedom until it provokes insecurity and disorder. Then they begin to long for security and order at all costs, and this is exactly what the would-be tyrant(s) seem to offer, often accompanied by promises to restore past greatness or crush ancient enemies.

In a previous essay,¹ I described how the individual pursuit of more and more freedom has the effect of weakening the civil society that is the indispensable ground for stable governance, especially in a democracy. As in a Greek tragedy, democracy's virtue is also a fatal flaw. For it is in the nature of democratic polity to foster increased freedom, and as freedoms compound they eventually produce an unstable, ungovernable society in which anything goes.

¹ "The Perfect Storm"

The center no longer holds, precipitating a crisis out of which emerges a charismatic leader who restores order, by force if necessary.

In that same essay, I also noted that large, sprawling, diverse, polyglot societies—that is, societies without a fairly homogenous populace bound by shared ties of blood and language—have traditionally been governed authoritatively. In a recent op-ed, Ross Douthat put it this way: “One of the hard truths of human affairs is that diversity and democracy do not go easily together.”² Why? Because diversity tends to induce insecurity, reduce trust, and reanimate tribalism. Lacking a civil society grounded on shared beliefs and values, it takes an imperial polity to unite and rule over all the little communities within a divided society.

These two contradictions—a surfeit of freedom and an excess of diversity—would be enough to explain the impending failure of democratic regimes around the world. But there is also a deeper contradiction within the very nature of democracy itself. This was articulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, where he made the crucial distinction between the general will and the will of all. The former is what reasonable and disinterested persons would choose if they regarded only the interests of the community, leaving aside all of their personal concerns and preferences. By contrast, the latter is the mere summation of personal desires, which may be unfriendly or even opposed to the interests of the community. To put it another way, the general will is arrived at by disinterested reason, a sincere attempt to determine the commonweal without regard to the impact on the particular individual. By contrast, the will of all is the mere summation of short-term self-interest at best, or ignorance, passion, and prejudice at worst. Unfortunately, in large and diverse political settings with a wide franchise, the will of all will almost inevitably prevail over the general will. Even public spirited voters would often fail to discern their best interests—“One always wants what is good for

² “In Search of a Good Emperor,” The New York Times, April 15, 2017. Douthat makes a case for quasi-imperial polity in today’s increasingly fragmented world.

oneself, but one does not always see it”³—and the many would not even make the attempt. Thus collective decisions in a democracy would tend to be both short-sighted and selfish—for instance, cutting taxes so drastically that government cannot function effectively or spending lavishly on the old while short-changing the young. Democracy was therefore too good for imperfect human beings: “So perfect a government is not for men.”⁴ Besides, majority rule did not make sense: “It is against natural order that the great number should govern and that the few should be governed.”⁵

Warned by ancient history and instructed by Rousseau, as well as by Montesquieu and other theorists, the framers of the American Constitution feared that the ignorance, passion, and prejudice of “the mob” would prevail over reason and forethought, producing a chaotic and dangerous will of all. Alexander Hamilton posed the question as follows in *Federalist No. 1*: “Whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.” And the framers were certain that democracy would produce the latter: “Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or rights of property,” said James Madison in *Federalist No. 10*. John Adams echoed the sentiment: “Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself.”⁶ The framers therefore established a republican regime with a restricted franchise and separated powers. Unfortunately, as is well known, this dispensation lasted only two generations. It was replaced by the democratic regime

³ *The Social Contract*, II, 3

⁴ Idem, III, 4

⁵ Ibid. Rousseau believed that democracy was feasible only in rustic social settings—e.g., a group of peasants deciding their simple affairs under an oak tree. Ironically, Rousseau’s general will was taken up—or, rather, perverted—by the French revolutionaries who turned it into a justification for majoritarian rule.

⁶ Letter to John Taylor, 17 December 1814

celebrated by Alexis de Tocqueville, albeit with many caveats about the latent tendencies toward self-destruction that have now become manifest.⁷ In short, the greatest fears of the framers with regard to democracy have been realized—and not only in the United States.

To make matters worse, modern democracies face two challenges beyond the ken of premodern theorists like Rousseau. First, democracy has become thoroughly intertwined with economic development. Thomas Hobbes, the theorist who founded modern political thought, made it a prime duty of the “sovereign” to promote “commodious living” or what we call economic development. Adam Smith and almost all later theorists followed in Hobbes’s footsteps by making national wealth and popular enrichment the goal of government. Thus political leaders, especially in latter days, began to be judged based on their success in fomenting prosperity, not just filling potholes or enforcing laws. Worse yet, the expectation grew that each generation would enjoy more and better material conditions than the previous one, so the burden on governance has only increased over time. Now that ecological scarcity has begun to bite, however, those lower on the totem pole suffer increasing disappointment and deprivation, and the outlook is increasingly bleak for the entire society. This impending economic failure calls into question the legitimacy of democratic governance itself, not just that of any particular administration. Bluntly put, when democracy no longer delivers the goods, it will be consigned to the dustbin of history by an angry mob.

Putting this point in historical perspective, we are the latest (and probably the last) generation to enjoy the luxuriant fruit of an unprecedented era of ecological abundance marked by a plethora of resources ripe for human exploitation. This abundance is usually attributed to fossil fuels, but they came later. Economic development as we know it started with Europe’s

⁷ An interesting question is whether the American republic was doomed by the democratic zeitgeist, as Tocqueville clearly believed, or whether it failed because political virtue was equated with property ownership, the inequity of which (too often dependent on inheritance) was almost guaranteed to inspire resentment and envy among the majority.

conquest of the New World, a bonanza of found wealth.⁸ Before the conquest, European societies were politically, economically, and socially closed. But once flooded by a surge of new energy from the Americas, they began to open and develop. All the philosophies, institutions, and values characteristic of modern life, above all liberal democracy, slowly emerged.⁹ Over time, as the New World bonanza was supplemented and then supplanted by fossil fuels, economic and political development proceeded in tandem to transform the world and to create the luxuries and freedoms we enjoy today. With a return of ecological scarcity, however, what abundance has given will be taken away—to what extent and how rapidly remains to be seen, but we can hardly expect liberal democratic institutions fostered by abundance and predicated on abundance to survive in their current form.

Second, contemporary civilization has attained a daunting and costly degree of complexity that has outrun by far the intellectual capacity of a democratic electorate. (We tend to emphasize the monetary and energetic costs of complexity, but its cognitive challenges may weigh more heavily in the long run.) It is not just that a majority of American citizens cannot name the three branches of their own government or find China on a map.¹⁰ In simpler times, popular ignorance was manageable, because the majority were solid citizens with an abundance of common sense and a willingness to defer to their elders and betters on matters beyond their comprehension. (They exercised their political rights primarily at the local level, in town meetings and the like.) Now that many critical public matters require a life of devoted specialization and expertise—in, say, the arcane calculus of mutually assured destruction or the

⁸ William Ophuls, *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity*, W. H. Freeman, 1977, 143-145

⁹ John Locke relied explicitly on the cornucopia of the New World to justify his liberal theory of government. See *ibid.*, 154

¹⁰ The catastrophic failure of the American educational system at both the elementary and secondary levels needs to be mentioned. Even our vaunted university system is mostly failing in its core mission: teaching students to be more universal—i.e., larger than their petty identity—by grounding them in the full richness of human history and culture. As Thomas Jefferson and the other framers knew, a sound education at every level is the sine qua non of democracy.

abstruse intricacies of climate modeling—popular ignorance, even if it takes the form of apathy on most occasions, constitutes a threat to the stability and survival of the polity. Elections fueled by passion and prejudice, instead of reason and forethought, are likely to result in ill-conceived policies that increase the risk of war or collapse. Blundering about in complex adaptive systems is a prescription for disaster, and to the extent that the political process has come to embody more emotion and less thought, that is where we are headed.

It is not that educated elites do not do stupid things. They do.¹¹ Forethought and sagacity have always been in short supply. We are dealing, after all, with imperfect human beings. Yet distilled political wisdom seems to favor a limited-franchise republic as the best compromise between democracy and autocracy and as the best arrangement for the prudent management of public affairs.¹² “In short,” said Rousseau, “it is the best and most natural order for the wisest to govern the multitude, as long as it is certain that they govern for its benefit and not for their own.”¹³ That such an arrangement is unattainable at present goes without saying. Unfortunately, that means we will have to wait until the cycle of regimes runs its course and once again offers conditions that favor rule by a “natural aristocracy” of “virtue and talents.”¹⁴

¹¹ “The Perfect Storm”

¹² See note 6 above for why property is probably not a good basis for the franchise. True, the alternative—basing it on competence—raises issues of its own. How is that to be determined? Clearly we do not want to be ruled by a corps of Chinese mandarins or Platonic guardians. (As the late William F. Buckley famously remarked, he would rather be ruled by the first 400 people in the Boston phone book than the Harvard faculty.) Perhaps some combination of intellectual attainment and practical experience?

¹³ *The Social Contract*, III, 5. See also Madison’s *Federalist No. 57* for a similar sentiment.

¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson in a letter to John Adams, 28 October 1813, wherein he contrasts natural aristocracy unfavorably with an “artificial aristocracy” of “wealth and birth”—i.e., more or less what we have now.

