

## Newcomb Response to The Great Experiment

### HAVE WE REACHED THE END OF DEMOCRACY? :A CASE FOR OPTIMISM

1. Our nation has found itself in similar circumstances before and continued to survive (though not as such a “perfect union” as the writers of our Constitution have hoped
  - a. The decade of the 1850’s – the Kansas-Nebraska Act; Dred Scott Decision; separation of the Whig party and formation of the Republican Party
  - b. The American Civil War – and the role of Abraham Lincoln as preservationist of the UNION
  - c. The decade of the 1890’s – rise of corporate trusts, Jim Crow laws institutionalizing lynchings, segregation based on race, consolidation of city-states in Europe
  - d. The period of 1917 – 1928 – recently captured anew by Adam Hochschild in [American Midnight](#) – especially the discussion regarding fears of immigration and socialism and a fascination with fascism.
2. While necessary, pessimism is not a sufficient place upon which to stand
  - a. Yascha Mounk asks “Can We Build a Meaningfully Shared Life” [The Great Experiment](#)
  - b. Francis Fukuyama asks “Can revisiting classical liberalism (aka “humane liberalism”) address the diversity that already exists?” [Liberalism and Its Discontents](#)

3. In a 2017 book ruefully entitled *The Optimist Leftist*, Ruy Teixeira makes his case:

“....pessimism dramatically undermines the appeal of the left. Why on earth would anyone sign up with a movement that believes the situation is so hopeless? What’s so inspiring about that?

Teixeira, Ruy. [The Optimistic Leftist](#) . St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

4. Yascha Mounk makes perhaps the most cogent argument:

*It would take blind optimism not to see that our democracies are in desperate need of improvement. But it would take even more blinding cynicism to believe that we have become incapable of building on the progress of the past fifty years or that our societies are condemned, whatever we do, to remain forever defined by racism and exclusion. The road to making the great experiment succeed will be rocky. But the costs of failure are far too high to settle for a lesser destination or to give up in the middle of the journey.*

Mounk, Yascha. [The Great Experiment](#) (p. 22). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

This list generates two thoughts:

1. In response to Mounk’s warning – what are the costs (if any) of the failure to which he refers?
  - a. One source is his own article which appeared in *The Atlantic* in May 2022 [The Doom Spiral of Pernicious Polarization](#) – I was most interested in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Study of modern democracies and its key source – the “Variety of Democracies” data set. Students of history and the keepers of the V-Dem data set point to “pernicious polarization” – the hardening of cultural, societal, ethnic, religious siloes as deciding factors in the failure of states throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

b. To be fair, Mounk also attempts to articulate what failure might look like “on the ground” He describes a “status quo” in which immigrants and minority groups always remain second-class citizens, that this second-class citizenship will generate a socioeconomic underclass, and sadly, that the state will have to intervene to prevent these groups from crimes and terrorist attacks, “a fundamental threat to the core values of developed democracies”.

2. In response to my Observation #2 above, I am aware of the inundation of the “marketplace of ideas” with analysis and solutions. Prof. Mounk aptly names the “Chapter 10” problem – what might be some practical means to both think about and act upon ALL the things we know and have learned to help our diverse democracy succeed.

a. I begin with the good work that groups such as Topical Seminars, Socrates Café (and its off-shoot, Food4Thought) have done to continue the practice of civil discourse with an emphasis on listening and curiosity as primary values over charisma and spin. –

i. September’s readings and discussion on “Classical Conservatism” highlight the origins of the views that there are some hierarchies to be respected, that there is a role for a virtuous aristocratic class of rulers and that indeed there are core values of peace and safety and the pursuit of “Happiness” that stand the test of time.

ii. October’s reading and discussion on The Role that Values Play in the Interpretation of the US Constitution – attempting to find a balance between strict originalism and the “living document” also brought forth many thoughts about how best to use the institutions created by the constitutions and how they are adapted to growing cultural and normative changes within our nation

iii. This month’s discussion provides the opportunity to do the deeper dive into “Classical Liberalism” – defined by Francis Fukuyama and others and a proposal that indeed “neo-liberalism” and “identity politics” are examples of extreme applications of liberalism that threaten the future of democracy from both the left and the right.

b. I found that both Fukuyama and Mounk called out the paradox of judgments based on human diversity – with differences of the rights of those considered “other” based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender identity – being highly supported and defended on the left while dismissing and judging classes of speech and thought based on their origin or connection to the older, white, patriarchy. Both writers acknowledge and write extensively on the boundaries placed on both sides - while also making the strong case that the stories of key parts of both history and modern times need to be told with courage and a perspective that often lies outside of the “home”, clan, tribe, nation and state.

As I write this note on the day before the 2022 midterm elections, I hold on to the optimists’ view that OVER TIME liberal democracies that are able to manage their [public park](#) and respond to the emergencies that occur in their [neighborhoods](#) will survive and prosper. I am sad that too many people and their families and communities will suffer too greatly before we can find the balance between the best and worst of what we understand as the human condition to allow us to move forward with the greatest level of freedom, peace and abundance for the greatest number of us.

Pat Newcomb

November 7, 2022