

NEW YORK TIMES

5 July 2019

Democracy Is for the Gods

It should be no surprise that humans cannot sustain it.

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“Why do democracies fail?”

We’ve heard that question a lot in the past few years, in books, on opinion pages and cable news shows, and in an increasingly anxious public debate. But I almost always find myself answering the question with another question: Why shouldn’t they?

History — the only true guide we have on this matter — has shown us that democracy is rare and fleeting. It flares up almost mysteriously in some fortunate place or another, and then fades out, it seems, just as mysteriously. Genuine democracy is difficult to achieve and once achieved, fragile. In the grand scheme of human events, it is the exception, not the rule.

Despite democracy’s elusive nature, its core idea is disarmingly simple: As members of a community, we should have an equal say in how we conduct our life together. “In democracy as it ought to be,” writes Paul Woodruff in his 2006 book “First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea,” “all adults are free to chime in, to join the conversation on how they should arrange their life together. And no one is left free to enjoy the unchecked power that leads to arrogance and abuse.” Have you ever heard of anything more reasonable? But who says we are reasonable?

Fundamentally, humans are not predisposed to living democratically. One can even make the point that democracy is “unnatural” because it goes against our vital instincts and impulses. What’s most natural to us, just as to any living creature, is to seek to survive and reproduce. And for that purpose, we assert ourselves — relentlessly, unwittingly, savagely — against others: We push them aside, overstep them, overthrow them, even crush them if necessary. Behind the smiling facade of human civilization, there is at work the same blind drive toward self-assertion that we find in the animal realm.

Just scratch the surface of the human community and soon you will find the horde. It is the “unreasoning and unreasonable human nature,” writes the zoologist Konrad Lorenz in his book “On Aggression,” that pushes “two political parties or religions with amazingly similar programs of salvation to fight each other bitterly,” just as it compels “an Alexander or a Napoleon to sacrifice millions of lives in his attempt to unite the world under his scepter.” World history, for the most part, is the story of excessively self-assertive individuals in search of various scepters.

It doesn’t help matters that, once such an individual has been enthroned, others are only too eager to submit to him. It is as though, in his illustrious presence, they realize they have too much freedom on their hands, which they find suddenly oppressive. In Dostoevsky’s “The Brothers Karamazov,” the Grand Inquisitor says: “There is no more ceaseless or tormenting care for man, as long as he remains free, than to find someone to bow down to as soon as possible.”

And what a sweet surrender! Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler and Mussolini were all smooth talkers, charmers of crowds and great political seducers.

Their relationship with the crowd was particularly intimate. For in regimes of this kind, whenever power is used and displayed, the effect is profoundly erotic. What we see, for instance, in “The Triumph of the Will” (thanks, in good measure, to Leni Riefenstahl’s perverse genius), is people experiencing a sort of collective ecstasy. The seducer’s pronouncements may be empty, even nonsensical, but that matters little; each one brings the aroused crowd to new heights of pleasure. He can do whatever he likes with the enraptured followers now. They will submit to any of their master’s fancies.

This is, roughly, the human context against which the democratic idea emerges. No wonder that it is a losing battle. Genuine democracy doesn’t make grand promises, does not seduce or charm, but only aspires to a certain measure of human dignity. It is not erotic. Compared to what happens in populist regimes, it is a frigid affair. Who in his right mind would choose the dull responsibilities of democracy over the instant gratification a demagogue will provide? Frigidity over boundless ecstasy? And yet, despite all this, the democratic idea has come close to embodiment a few times in history — moments of grace when humanity almost managed to surprise itself.

One element that is needed for democracy to emerge is a sense of humility. A humility at once collective and internalized, penetrating, even visionary, yet true. The kind of humility that is comfortable in its own skin, one that, because it knows its worth and its limits, can even laugh at itself. A humility that, having seen many a crazy thing and learned to tolerate them, has become wise and patient. To be a true democrat, in other words, is to understand that when it comes to the business of living together, you are no better than the others, and to act accordingly. To live democratically is, mainly, to deal in failure and imperfection, and to entertain few illusions about human society. The institutions of democracy, its norms and mechanisms, should embody a vision of human beings as deficient, flawed and imperfect.

Ancient Athenian democracy devised two institutions that fleshed out this vision. First, sortition: the appointment of public officials by lot. Given the fundamental equality of rights that all Athenian citizens — that is, free male adults — enjoyed, the most logical means of access to positions of leadership was random selection. Indeed, for the Athenian democrats, elections would have struck at the heart of democracy: They would have allowed some people to assert themselves, arrogantly and unjustly, against the others.

The other fittingly imperfect Athenian institution was ostracization. When one of the citizens was becoming a bit too popular — too much of a charmer — Athenians would vote him out of the city for ten years by inscribing his name on bits of pottery. It was not punishment for something the charmer may have done, but a pre-emptive measure against what he might do if left unchecked. Athenians knew that they were too vulnerable and too flawed to resist political seduction (their complicated affair with Alcibiades gave them ample proof of that), and promptly denied themselves the pleasure. Man-made as it is, democracy is fragile and of a weak constitution — better not to put it to the test.

After Athens’ radical experiment in equality, democracy has resurfaced elsewhere, but often in forms that the ancient Athenians would probably have trouble calling democratic. For instance, much of today’s American democracy (one of the best versions on the market right now) would by Athenian standards be judged “oligarchic.” It’s the fortunate wealthy few (hoi oligoi) who

typically decide here not only the rules of the political game, but also who wins and who loses. Ironically, the system favors what we desperately wanted to avoid when we opted for democracy in the first place: the power-hungry, arrogant, oppressively self-assertive political animal.

Yet we should not be surprised. “If there were a people of gods, it would govern itself democratically,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote. “So perfect a form of government is not for men.” Democracy is so hard to find in the human world that most of the time when we speak of it, we refer to a remote ideal rather than a fact. That’s what democracy is ultimately about: an ideal that people attempt to put into practice from time to time. Never adequately and never for long — always clumsily, timidly, as though for a trial period.

Yet democracy is one of those elusive things — happiness is another — whose promise, even if perpetually deferred, is more important than its actual existence. We may never get it, but we cannot afford to stop dreaming of it.

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