

Session 1-Reading #2a: Autocracy & Authoritarianism

Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy*, 2020

The polar opposite of liberal democracy is an autocracy. Opposite in form and process: Autocracy is characterized by a concentration of power in the hands of a single ruler or a small elite, often without the meaningful participation of citizens. Autocratic regimes can take various forms, such as absolute monarchy, dictatorship, or oligarchy.

Democracy and autocracy also represent opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their goals, the kinds of societies they are trying to achieve and serve.

“With our powerful founding story, our unusual reverence for our Constitution, our geographic isolation, and our two centuries of relative success, [most] modern Americans have long been convinced that liberal democracy, once achieved, was impossible to reverse. The founders themselves were not so certain; their beloved classical authors taught them that history was circular, that human nature was flawed, and that special measures were needed to prevent democracy from sliding back into tyranny.” (p. 142)

In 1776, “it was not at all ‘self-evident’ in most of the world, that all men were created equal. Nor was it obvious in [1787], that ‘we the people,’ were capable of forming a ‘more perfect union,’ or even that ‘we the people’ were capable of governing ourselves at all. Nevertheless, a small group of men clustered on the eastern seaboard of what was then a wild continent wrote those words and...built a set in institutions designed to make them come true. They were sanguine about human nature, which they did not believe could be perfected. Instead, they sought to create a system, stuffed with checks and balances, that would encourage people to behave better.

“Neither then, nor later did their lofty words always reflect reality. Neither then nor later did their institutions always function as intended. But over time, the words proved powerful enough and the institutions flexible enough to encompass ever larger circles of fully vested citizens, eventually including not just men but women, people without property or wealth, former slaves, and immigrants from every culture. When the institutions failed, as they sometimes did, the words were recited and repeated in order to persuade people to try again. Abraham Lincoln spoke of America as the ‘last, best hope of earth.’ Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed that ‘one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.’” (pp. 143-4)

“But from the beginning there were also alternatives available, different versions of what America is or should be, different definitions of ‘the nation.’ Like a dissonant voice inside a swelling chorus, there have always been groups whose dislike of American ideals ran very deep, reflecting more than mere exhaustion with the government of the day. Since 1776, some have always found the American project naïve, frightening, oppressive, or false.” (pp. 144-5)

“In the past century and a half, the most despairing, the most apocalyptic visions of American civilization usually came from the left. Inspired by European thinkers and movements—Marxism, anarchism, Bolshevism, ...But there is another group of Americans whose disgust with

the failures of American democracy has led them to equally radical conclusions...If the left located its gloom in the destructive force of capitalism, the power of racism, and the presence of the U.S. military abroad, the Christian right located its disappointment in what it perceived as the moral depravity, the decadence, the racial mixing, and above all the irreversible secularism of America.” (pp. 145, 148)

In 2016, President-elect “Trump’s inaugural address...contained both left and right strands of anti-Americanism. It included left-wing disgust for the ‘Establishment,’ which had protected itself, but not the citizens of our country.’...It also reflected the evangelical despair about the dire moral state of the nation, ‘the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.” (p. 153)

“To the millenarianism¹ of the far right and the revolutionary nihilism² of the far left, [Trump added] the deep cynicism of someone who has spent years running unsavory business schemes around the world. Trump has no knowledge of the American story and so cannot have any faith in it. He has no understanding of or sympathy for the language of the founders, so he cannot be inspired by it. Since he doesn’t believe American [liberal] democracy is good, he has no interest”...in preserving it. (p. 154)

“This form of moral equivalence—the belief that democracy is no different, at base, from autocracy—is a familiar argument...long used by authoritarians.” Jeane Kirkpatrick argued that “Guns, weapons, even nuclear warheads were dangerous to democracies, but not nearly as dangerous as this particular form of cynicism: ‘To destroy a society,’ she wrote, ‘it is first necessary to delegitimize its basic institutions.’³ If you believe that American institutions are no different from their opposite, then there is no reason to defend them.” (pp. 156-7)

“Trump’s victory in 2016 was the victory of exactly this form of moral equivalence”...Trump has proven that, “beneath the surface of the American consensus, the belief in our founding fathers and the faith in our ideals, there lies another America—[Patrick]Buchanan’s⁴ America, Trump’s America—one that sees no important distinction between democracies and dictatorships.” (p. xxx)

“In theory, liberalism protects individuals from unjust authority, allowing them to pursue fulfilling lives apart from government coercion. In reality, it severs deep bonds of belonging, leaving isolated individuals exposed to, and dependent on, the power of the state. Our truest identities are rooted in the land in which we’re born and the kin among whom we’re raised. Our

¹ Millenarism is the belief by a religious, social, or political group or movement in a coming fundamental transformation of society, after which "all things will be changed".

² Nihilism is the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless.

³ Here, Kirkpatrick is using the term “institutions” broadly, to include the rule of law, holding our elected and appointed officials accountable, etc. as well as the more physical institutions such as the courts, legislatures, and executive agencies in our national, state, and local governments.

⁴ Patrick Buchanan is an American paleoconservative author, political commentator, and politician. Paleoconservatives stress American nationalism and Christian ethics, and press for restrictions on immigration, a rollback of multicultural programs and large-scale demographic change, the decentralization of federal policy, the restoration of controls upon free trade, a greater emphasis upon economic nationalism, and non-interventionism in the conduct of American foreign policy.

lives are given order and meaning because they are embedded in the larger structure and struggle of our people. Liberalism and, to some degree, Christianity have poisoned our cultural soil, setting us adrift in a world that prizes pleasure and derides tradition. In theory, liberalism proposes a neutral vision of human nature, cleansed of historical residues and free of ideological distortions. In reality, it promotes a bourgeois view of life, placing a higher value on acquisition than virtue. In theory, liberalism makes politics more peaceful by focusing on the mundane rather than the metaphysical. In reality, it makes political life chaotic by splintering communities into rival factions and parties.”⁵

“About a third of the population in any country has what [can be called] an authoritarian predisposition...one that favors homogeneity and order... [It] can be present without necessarily manifesting itself...Authoritarianism appeals, simply, to people who cannot tolerate complexity...It is anti-pluralist...suspicious of people with different ideas. It is allergic to fierce debates...It is a frame of mind, not a set of ideas.” (p. 16)

“The authoritarian-nationalist, anti-democratic wave” that has arisen in central Europe is “the result of specific actions of people who disliked their existing democracies. They disliked them because they were too weak or too imitative, too indecisive or too individualistic—or because they personally not advancing fast enough within them. (pp. 55-6)

What moral cultures before us—Ancient, Medieval, and Modern—had in common was a belief that human beings had a *function* in the world. Philosophical thought was grounded in the notion that humanity has a *telos*, an ultimate end or aim. This formed the basis of moral conversation. Now, however, we don’t tend to believe the universe is ordered and meaningful, nor that there are meaningful ends for us to pursue. We don’t believe in a continued quest to come closer to perfection. History has become circular for us, as it was for the ancient Greeks; there is no end of history, with liberal democracies ascendant. The liberal order is now fragile, able to be overcome by foreign subversion of social media, an attempted coup (such as that on January 6, 2021), or the onset of an autocracy. A progression of different types of governmental in countries like Greece is “how it will be, because that is how it has always been, all the way back to the original Athenian republic.” (p. 57)

“When people have rejected aristocracy, no longer believe that leadership is inherited at birth, [and] no longer assume that the ruling class is endorsed by God, the argument about who gets to rule—who is the elite—is never over. For a long time, some people in Europe and North America settled on the idea that various forms of democratic, meritocratic, and economic competition are the fairest alternative to inherited or ordained power...[But the] losers of these competitions were always, sooner or later, going to challenge the value of the competition itself. (p. 58-9)

“[T]he principles of competition, even when they encourage talent and create upward mobility, don’t answer deeper questions about national or personal identity. They don’t satisfy the desire

⁵ Klein, Ezra, *The Enemies of Liberalism Are Showing Us What It Really Means*, NYT; 4/3/2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/03/opinion/putin-ukraine-liberalism.html>

for unity and harmony. Above all, they do not satisfy the desire of some to belong to a special community, a unique community, a *superior* community.” (pp. 58-9)

Fukuyama argued that the spread of Western values and culture to all parts of the world was an irresistible force, because liberal democracy is arguably free of the fundamental internal contradictions of other modes of governance.

However, different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the citizen and the state, parents and children, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy.⁶ Liberal democracy is anathema to many of these views, and is unlikely to win out in those societies over the long term. Different societies may be perfectly willing to live with their set of internal contradictions in order to maintain their internally developed sets of values. Efforts by “the West to promote its values of democracy and liberalism as universal values, to maintain its military predominance, and to advance its economic interests [will inevitably] engender countering responses from other civilizations.”⁷

Authoritarians cannot succeed on their own. They need “people who can use sophisticated legal language, people who can argue that breaking the constitution or twisting the law is the right thing to do...They need members of the intellectual and educated elite...[to] help them launch a war on the rest of the intellectual and educated elite...” (p. 17)

“An authoritarian sensibility is unquestionably present in a generation of far-left agitators who seek to dictate how professors can teach and what students can say...But although the cultural power of the authoritarian left is growing, the only [ones] who have attained real political power in Western democracies...are members of movements that we are accustomed to calling the ‘right.’...[Regardless,] all of them seek to redefine their nations, to rewrite social contracts, and, sometimes, to alter the rules [and norms] of democracy so that they never lose power.” (pp. 18-21)

In the third decade of the 21st century, unless ‘American exceptionalism’ is much more than just a self-constructed belief, even we Americans must admit that, “Given the right conditions, any society can turn against [liberal] democracy. Indeed, if history is anything to go by, all of our societies eventually will.” (p. 14)

“The post-1989 liberal movement” was an exception. “Unity is an anomaly. Polarization is normal. Skepticism about liberal democracy is also normal. And the appeal of authoritarianism is eternal.” (p. 56)

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⁶ Huntington, Samuel P., “The Coming Clash of Civilizations Or, the West Against the Rest,” NYT; June 6, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/06/opinion/the-coming-clash-of-civilizations-or-the-west-against-the-rest.html>

⁷ Ibid.