

## A Warped Democracy

The ancients were right. The more things change, the more they stay the same. History is not progressive. It is cyclical. Greed, ambition, duplicity, self-interest, and above all, the lust for power - these are the things that drive history - so what's new?

The democratic twist on power was to put it in the hands of elected representatives of high repute; properly educated and respected persons with high ideals. But a recent Canadian poll attempting to rank popular occupations said politicians get a measly 4% rating for "respect" from the public. FOUR! Why, even a hose to empty a septic tank does better than that. Journalists and lawyers weren't much better, at 15% and 11%, respectively.

At least when respected sages spoke of the eternal rhythm of things and the need to be good, everyone agreed that there were, in fact, such things as goodness, truth, honesty, and courage. When they asked themselves what purpose life had, they came to the general conclusion that it must be more than mere pleasure. It was the pursuit of those higher things, for oneself, and for society. It was possible to agree on what is good.

A prominent French anthropologist, Louis Dumont, divides all civilizations accordingly. A "holistic" society - the kind everyone claims to want to live in. You know, a real, natural community - is unified by an ideology of hierarchical values. There is a shared notion of good, better, best and bad. Ye olde praise and stigma flow accordingly, unifying all in the same moral bond. Sure, that's the right word. True freedom is the freedom to bind yourself, not to "values" (a gooey notion, like the word "perspectives") but to principles and norms.

What he terms an "individualistic" society is the opposite. At the core of its ideology is "equality," the idea of freedom for all from oppressive authority. Originally, such folks just meant freedom from governmental or monarchical authority; from thumb screws and the rack.

But after the torture toys ended up in Madame Tussaud's wax museum, the equal-freedom campaign had to go on a search-and-destroy mission for ever-diminishing authority targets. Even ordinary praise and stigma would have to go, in the name of moral neutrality. Everyone would finally be diverse, pluralistic, and free from all moral judgement. That is, free from each other. You see the point. More of this kind of freedom means less community.

All societies must have individuals, of course, but the distinction here is that holistic ones begin from a different premise. They recognize the individual, but not as the sole source of norms. Rather, moral and social norms come from something higher than the individual - never from government, but from the moral demands of a spontaneous society conceived as something more and better than the mere sum of its individuals.

Dumont argues that modern collectivist movements (fascism, communism, the welfare state)

were, and are, in fact, not progressive at all. They are frantic forms of political reaction to lost community in a world that created its own spiritual void. They are an effort to impose an official holistic community from the top on societies that can no longer produce it naturally from the bottom.

The fatal paradox of our so-called "liberal democracies" is that we can't produce community because our political ideology has made a point of neutralizing the whole idea of norms on which community is based. That's why at the extreme of imposed democratic equality you get not "liberty, equality, fraternity," but secret police, the Berlin Wall, The Gulag. It's because the second term of the slogan betrays the first, that the third can only be gotten by force.

So liberal democracy is fast losing the legitimacy it had before corroding its own self. A kind of open schism has resulted, formerly suppressed by Cold War tensions, but now so visible in public distaste for (and sometimes the tragic shooting of) elites and opinion-manipulators of all kinds. It's visible, too, in the troublesome formation of private militias - a kind of alternative community poised against government. And in all democracies, as in France this week, we see demands for referendum instruments to satisfy muted electorates who can't get what they want through their own representatives. Democracy's active self-contradictions are at work.

Consider just a few key features of liberalism, and what has happened to them. Limited government? In Canada, with one government employee for every 5.5 citizens, there is no "limited" government. Canadians have more per-capita government than most countries in the history of the world, and a public debt to prove it. Equality? Entrenched in Canada's highest legal document is a mandate requiring Canada to impose differential law, social programs, and rights on specified groups and regions – this is a kind of affirmative inequality. Free Parliament and Rule of Law? Unelected judges routinely take pleasure in disqualifying the people's duly made laws, and by legal legerdemain finding fanciful unspecified rights in Canada's so-called Charter of Rights and Freedoms (so notoriously emptied of any responsibilities). And so on. Those willing to read the entrails of liberal democracy have plenty to occupy them.

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