

Chapter 2

Understanding Democracy as a Prerequisite for Spreading Democracy

Some of the differences between narcissistic and authoritarian societies, that is to say societies that foster narcissistic and authoritarian personalities, respectively, will be made obvious once we realize that ever since America got involved in World War I as the first of a series of wars to end all wars, we have faced domestic disillusionment because of our messy failures at encouraging democracy around the globe. If anything, nations seem to be accepting political democracy because they are ready to do so, not because America is ready to push them to do so.

But why? Why do we in America so strongly believe in the virtues of our political system, but so often fail to convince others? Partly this may be because we too are unclear on the concept; in fact, how our political culture differs from so many other political cultures around the world. For example, because of the peculiarities of the British settlement of America, moral revival as a cultural goal had already started in Britain and was particularly prominent among those who settled in the British colonies of America. Thus, limited government is a political goal in America because the desire for government to create social order is not a particularly strong social goal; it has already been achieved by the people themselves and is taken for granted. This is unlike the situation of many other societies who are tempted to authoritarian government just because social order is not taken for granted among them.

Here, I will be building on the work of Max Weber, that famous German lawyer/economist founder of sociology, known for writing the book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2001), who had some influence on the writing of the German Weimar Republic Constitution. He of course was not a bulwark against the rise of neither Communism nor Nazism, and much of his post-World War II fame came because of the discrediting of these intellectual rivals for explaining social and political evolution. He did not have the common touch, and he was not very good at communicating with the masses, nor was he very good at coming up with practical solutions for broad social problems, or if he came up with them how to sell these solutions politically, a defect for someone who wished for authoritarianism to evolve into something more noble, something even democratic.

Nevertheless, in an historical sense, there is something to be learned from someone who knew as much about history, and economics and sociology and law, as he did.

To start with, America laid the groundwork for mass political participation when the Protestant Reformation in Britain, which later went to even greater extremes in its American colonies, produced a sense of moral revival among average citizens in the colonies. This coupled with the increased sense of personal independence and economic power that came from frontier opportunities to start over produced many average citizens who took their moral and civic responsibilities seriously.

This was not so much the case in much of the world until quite recently. Even in Europe which is now democratic, the tradition until quite recently was not democratic. The Roman Empire and the Christian church which rose near its end were clearly governed on an aristocratic basis, which set an example for the European societies that succeeded them. The mass of people in the Roman Empire, and in many cases afterward, because of poverty, lack of political influence, and sometimes just by having a “don’t care” attitude, were expected for the most part to seek enjoyment from a “bread and circuses” existence. The aristocracy claimed the right to rule them because self-control and rationality were considered rare and unusual attainments which the aristocracy believed in general only they had achieved. In return, the mass of people to a large extent believed this also.

It was expected that for many of them, happiness would not be family life, nor the pride and dignity that come from living a life of moral conscience. Many of them believed, and if they did not their leaders believed for them, that escapism and vice (hopefully venial and not heinous sins) would be very strong, perhaps the only, sources of happiness available to them, only that sometimes they would carry this too far and the elites would have to crack down.

Think likewise of America’s present-day slums, and the sources of happiness so common in them, and this is in a society which does not believe that slum conditions and ways of life are ordained by God. Even though we are officially a democracy, their way of life is for the most part quite unlike the way of life of their country’s leaders. In the same way for many of the poor over the ages, their everyday life was not a poorer version of the lives of their leaders, which is the American ideal even when not practiced, but instead was expected to be in many ways quite the opposite.

It was not that the rich were expected to be automatically reasonable and rational. It was that they were expected to have a choice and sometimes pressured to act on that choice by their leaders, depending on their time and place in history. The poor were considered to a large extent too far gone to be expected to have any kind of choice. The poor could and would be controlled if they got too far out of line. But to be trusted to do the right thing? That was not the expectation of their leaders. That was why the sense of sin taught by religion was so often enforced by an elite that was obsessed by the sins of the poor and very rarely by their own. They used religion to create social order and to justify their own right to rule and only occasionally to judge their own venial and sometimes heinous sins.

America evolved as a post-feudal society because of its unique origins. When the poor came to our shores in order to have opportunities missing from their

homelands, and in the process began to feel that they could have a moral dignity of their own, this resulted in the conclusion that perhaps, our leaders should be monitored for their own sins and not just to watch over the sins of poor people.

Of course, it took a long time for even Western Europe to reach that point of evolution, not only social evolution, but also moral evolution. Pre-industrial days there, until quite recently actually, always had the potential for elite intervention in the lives of the poor, to control them for the benefit of the state, but for the most part elites refrained from this unless they felt that it was absolutely necessary. That was why, oddly enough, governments in much of Europe grew more authoritarian rather than less as their societies became more complicated and required more social order, until quite recently actually when the direction of control reversed itself to some extent.

The elites lived off whatever rents or taxes or feudal dues could be cadged from the peasantry, and compared to these working stiffes, their leaders lived like the idle rich do now, getting involved in government, and religion, and charity, and war-mongering if it suited them, for they had the leisure to do it all. They also had the leisure to seek to live lives of pleasure, if that was what suited them, though one reason they were engaged in public service was that they knew lives of idle pleasure alone would prove ultimately unpleasurable. Nevertheless, if the leaders sought to live lives of mostly pleasure, they were not about to deny this privilege to those they led. Only that those they led were not expected to have much of an alternative to this bread and circuses existence. So while the rich could gain some pride for their accomplishments for the common good, the poor for the most part could not.

As a matter of fact, by expecting that many of the common people would be tempted to constantly live for the moment and thus live lives of constant impulsiveness, which would eventually cause them to become surprised when they learned that constant vice is actually unpleasurable, the aristocracy created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Now, when they claimed that the common people were not worthy of providing input into government, in other words were not worthy of living in a democracy, it was partly because they created circumstances where the common people were encouraged to seek escapism and thus were encouraged to fail at much else.

Even in those societies such as Germany which did go through an Industrial Revolution, and so which lost the easygoing sensuality of earlier times, the result was not the development of a tradition of self-control as much as the development of a tradition of bureaucratic, other-control, resulting in a bureaucratically controlled authoritarian society. America on the other hand even before the Industrial Revolution had a tradition of self-control dating back to the Protestant Reformation which allowed industrialization when it occurred to be thought of as a burden voluntarily chosen, at least at the beginning. Whatever authoritarian submission to authority was characteristic of America even in its early days, it was counter-balanced by the legitimacy of thinking in terms of individual conscience and individual acquiescence to social loyalty (which if not quite narcissistic yet, was the precursor to full-blown individualism).

In Germany and in other places, industrialization became forced upon them by British industry, destroying by their cheap but well-made products the old-time handicraft industries, and so just as in many other areas of life, social change was thought to be forced upon people and was not felt to be freely chosen to any great degree. This of course only reinforced feelings of subservience and of fatalism among the mass of people, which are strong precursors to authoritarian personalities. Though America constantly interprets social change as being the result of freely chosen individual decisions, sort of like interpreting a glass to be half full, for many other societies, social change is often interpreted as being just more of what they had plenty of in the past, being controlled by others. For such people, market forces are not automatically interpreted to be a good thing.

In much of Northern Europe, for example, industrialization was thought of as something forced upon the common people by elites, and therefore, the mass of people often thought of extreme self-control as a burden forced upon them in order to make others rich. Whatever fear of the master existed in pre-industrial times, it was buffered by the inefficiency and easygoing nature of those times, but in modern times, such control was taken over and extended by the bureaucratic controls that are so predominant in the modern age.

In many highly industrialized societies, unlike America, there was no period of individual independence dating back to frontier times to remind people that independence of action and of thought was their birthright. They had no strong tradition that they could feel safe in following their own moral consciences (a kind of midpoint between authoritarianism and narcissism) because then they could reason together with their fellow citizens to choose the conditions of their subservience to higher powers, be it God or the state. This moral tradition, which served to justify political democracy later on, existed in America from its beginning and in many other places does not exist very strongly even now.

In fact, Western Europe to this day is probably more efficient in many areas of life, for example in effective mass transit and in keeping higher education affordable for those most likely to benefit from it, than America is. Of course, this is not because their conditions of life are determined from the bottom up in democratic fashion, but quite the reverse. Europe to this day is the product of social engineering, and the mass of people in terms of politics get to choose between a number of relatively (by American standards) collectivistic schemes, each a bit of social engineering where social order will be imposed from the top down. The mass of people get the social order they want, such as affordable health care, and the social order which elites want like jobs for themselves. In America, we get the freedom we want, like freedom from supporting a state-sponsored religion and the freedom which elites want for themselves, such as making large profits, not by working for the state, but by providing products that the state could provide more efficiently through economies of scale, but refuses to do so. There is also the benefit that in a sense, the very lack of social order in America traditionally keeps our unemployment rates below European levels, though how long this will last is debatable.

Nevertheless, America has become very good at muddling through, that very good and old British tradition. You also might say America is known now for its short-term solutions, for good and for ill. In fact, we have come up with an interesting way for creating massive numbers of jobs, though its effectiveness seems to be diminishing over time. These have the added benefit of not requiring much government competency in overseeing the process. We have learned that lack of social order creates jobs. It is the very inefficiency of our educational systems that causes people to spend so many years in educational institutions and creates so many jobs for teachers, even though many people after they leave higher education hardly ever open up a book. It is the very inefficiency of mass transit that produces the conditions for a robust auto industry, even though many of these companies are now foreign-owned. It is so many poorly written laws, and so many frivolous lawsuits, that produce a great demand for lawyers. This is Europe and Japan's typical complaint about America that America is not an orderly society. No doubt America has its own complaints about them.

To get back to the different cultural attitudes toward industrialization, the loss of the more easygoing lifestyles of previous eras, when not counterbalanced by a strong, puritanical conscience (the source for good and for ill of America's tradition of moral conscientiousness as a cultural prerequisite for good citizenship), has produced in the industrialized portions of Europe, even when the standard of living is high, a good deal of neuroticism, often combined with hysteria, and a good work ethic, but also a tunnel vision that often sees no real purpose in life. This sets them up to be tools for the plans of their leaders. The history of industrialization in Germany unfortunately met this pattern, though they have moved back from the brink of mass hysteria which led to two unnecessary world wars. Unfortunately, America has had an increasing tendency to start wars in the meantime, which might reflect an increasing tendency toward mass hysteria here, after a period of time when this was relatively uncommon.

Thus, a tendency toward hysteria, sometimes mass hysteria, under the pressures of social change is one not uncommon result of this state of affairs involving social change in some nations. Partly this is the result of clinging to social order in a rather unthinking manner because it is thought only intellectuals and the aristocrats who get their ideas from them should have their plans listened to. To some Americans' surprise, in much of the world, it is not the marketplace, either of ideas or of commodities, that is sought as the source of social order, but if communal decision-making cannot produce social order, then social order is sought from bureaucracies that claim to serve the community, while often ending up being its rulers. In the same manner, kings often started out being the first among equals, but not for long.

It is not really a big surprise that Hitler was voted into power democratically, because the mass of citizens in Germany for whom Democracy was not much more than a new plaything did not pay much attention to what he offered or what his Communist opponents offered for that matter. He made them feel good, torchlit parades, and all that. They were not very thoughtful, those who voted for his party, but neither were the German elite who handed him the dictatorship on a

silver platter, and consciously refrained from enforcing any checks and balances upon his rule, as long as they kept their own jobs in return. The Roman Emperors who became dictatorial tyrants under the guise of a Republic would not have been surprised. Only those average German citizens and those members of the elite, both of whom were more mediocre than they realized, who expected little more than that the German state should provide them in the future with bread and circuses were surprised when things turned out so badly.

Yet with the rule of American elites greatly criticized in recent years, and admittedly the German elite did not do such a bad job in the nineteenth century until their own privileges came under attack from Marxists which is when they snapped, the question remains: Why has the moral example of America become so weak in inspiring other nations in even more recent years?

Perhaps, it has a little to do with our hypocrisies. We to this day have not had another president like Abraham Lincoln who could articulate why democracy required not only schemes to raise the standard of living of the masses, but also to raise their moral dignity as well. Instead, our advice has been seen by much of the world as incompetent if not self-serving.

One example is the way America after World War I had nothing comparable with the post-World War II Marshall Plan to help rebuild Europe, partly because America had no interest in encouraging lack of tariff barriers between states in those pre-European Union days. And so Europe's economic problems discredited all free-market economies, including the one we stood for.

For that matter you would think with years of criticism of the Soviet Union, we would have had some practical advice on how to prevent the successor states of the Soviet Union from becoming the pawns of the same kinds of apparatchiks that ran them in Communist days. No such luck. For that matter you would think during the Cold War, we would have put our actions where our mouths were and supported the Hungarian rebels against Soviet tyranny. No, that was too scary. Overthrowing governments in Guatemala, Iran, and Chile, simply because it was easier there than in Eastern Europe, rather than because it was required by political morality, earned our opprobrium around the world as hypocrites.

America does not seem to provide enough good advice anymore, as if we have forgotten a great deal of our own cultural values, let alone how to apply them to other circumstances. America did not do a good job of inspiring democracy in Europe after World War I, but Western Europe on its own was inspired to create democracy there after World War II. In fact, European democracy is still aristocratic and bureaucratic by American standards, though not as much as it used to be. No doubt there are people who would say in some ways (but only in some ways) it now has a more competent leadership class than we have, though I doubt the majority of Americans would agree. Partly this depends on what one means by "competent" since Europe still has a bias toward paternalism and government for the people, and America still has a bias toward maintaining liberty and deferring to the will of the people, that is, to say government by the people (on those occasions when the public gets aroused against a ruling group of politicians and replaces them).

True, the bread and circuses attitude is still common enough among average Europeans. That is why Europe has the phenomenon of soccer hooligans who go to sports matches to get their sadomasochistic jollies. They chant racist slogans throughout the game, for example, as if the purpose for modern sport (invented in Britain for the most part) has been reinterpreted for darker, more hysterical, more sadistic purposes. In fact, soccer hooliganism has declined in influence in Britain which has a rather experimental attitude toward its cultural inventions, while it has a stronger influence in much of Central and Eastern Europe where authoritarian loyalties serve to stabilize identity diffusion, so that mere loyalty to ways of doing things makes it somewhat harder for people there to admit that their cultural experiments are not working.

Thus, fascistic attitudes live on in Europe, and we still do not have a clue on how to combat them. More hysterical and authoritarian people than are common in America, though they exist there too, have taken America's institution of entertainment, quite necessary in our rather puritanical culture where people do not much enjoy each other's company anymore without this crutch, and have returned it to its bread and circuses roots. For that matter, American pornography probably has a much more destructive effect on societies where sensuality is more central to people's personal identities and thus for whom erotic obsessions and perversions are a more serious danger. This is unlike among us where for now all this is still merely a source of entertainment, though it may be changing for the younger generation and not for the better.

Yet as long as we do not care how our institutions are translated into other cultures with other values and other ways of doing things, as long as we do not have much of a concept of which of our values derived from our own original "natural law" tradition can be demanded from all cultures, and which values cannot, and as long as so many of us do not even remember our own core values anymore except through a glass darkly, so that Americans' moral reproofs are just as muddled and hypocritical among foreign cultures as among ourselves, we will have a hard road ahead of us. It will be difficult for America to teach others about the cultural prerequisites of democracy, when we barely remember them ourselves.

In a sense, the problems of nation-building exist in all nations, rich and poor alike. Only the severity of the problems, the costs of failure particularly, differ. One way to look at the standards for government, including democratic government, is to look at the following functions of government:

1. Representativeness of government (in terms of representing the will of the people, or at least understanding their problems).
2. Efficacy of government.
3. Accountability of government (can the people control or at least influence them after they gain power, especially if they do a bad job?).
4. Relevance of government (is government relevant both in terms of problem-solving but also in terms of personal identity?).
5. Relevance of political parties (is there a tradition that whoever wins 51% of the votes can destroy or at least ignore the interests of their rivals, or is factional

conflict limited by a spirit of compromise and cooperation between political rivals?).

6. The social and cultural qualities of the overall national community (for example, is there a tradition of distrust and manipulation between the leaders and the led?).

One of the reasons “nation-building” arouses so much public debate from all sides of the political spectrum is that there is no clear consensus on whether there really is a consistent evolutionary framework to social and political change, which can be encouraged or even understood by outsiders, let alone serving to allow them to monitor other people’s situations. One of the reasons Max Weber, that great German sociologist of the early part of the twentieth century, who in effect helped create that field out of techniques derived from law, history, and economics, became famous was for his ambition to develop a detailed explanation of social change (and implicitly social evolution), not for his success. In fact, he was not successful, though he came closer than almost anyone else. Perhaps, to explain social evolution in such detail is beyond the abilities of any individual scholar and even any single field of scholarship.

Nevertheless, explanations of causality in social science have their place, as a goal if nothing else. Max Weber aimed to provide explanations of causality of the sort common to both law and economics, where judgments of the fit between means and ends assume that all the options can be known beforehand, by the observing scholar, and presumably by the actor. Emotional sources of motivation were to a large extent treated by him as residual factors that cannot be predicted beforehand, and so must be used for ad hoc explanations, using the method of *verstehen* (empathetic understanding). Such emotionally involved motivations as duty, fear, custom, and self-interest both can be understood as standardized for cultures and individuals and also can be understood as leaving room for idiosyncratic manifestations of the personality.

Taking into account such complexities allows “scientific” social science to get away from “one size fits all” explanations of social change. Thus, there are differences between revolutions strongly influenced by previous attacks on traditional culture (the Islamic Revolution in Iran), by weakening of economic opportunities often caused by increases in population (common to many revolutions), by the need to protect middle-class wealth from excessive or unfair taxation (American and French Revolutions), by the desire of upper-middle-class people to have the economic opportunities now hogged by a hereditary upper class (French Revolution), by the desire to have a say in government (American Revolution and the British Revolution of 1688), by the desire to bypass a period of middle-class economic growth because there is little middle class to begin with (Russian and Chinese Communist Revolutions), and revolutions that combine protection of traditional values, desire for increased economic opportunities, particularly for the middle class, and a desire to partake in government (American Revolution).

The individualism which is so striking in American culture, but which can evolve into narcissism, encourages faith in individual decisions in a market

fashion, including voting in elections, and less faith in the ability for communal pressure to be brought to bear on politicians between elections. This is one reason more communitarian, that is, to say collectivistic societies place elections less on a pedestal and place more emphasis on ongoing social pressure between elections and so place more emphasis on “legitimate” and “illegitimate” influence peddling between elections than is common in America, though even in those societies this may be true more in theory than in practice.

No doubt relatively individualistic societies (e.g., America) and relatively communitarian societies (e.g., much of the rest of the world) can learn from each other because after all their ideal, the golden mean between extremes, is often the same. It is just their starting points, and their understandings – substitute understandings for senses of what is feasible and what is not, and what kinds of hypocrisies to tolerate and what not to tolerate, is what differs.

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