

## The Problem of Democracy.

Alain de Benoist

A wonderfully complete catalog of the shortcomings of what is called democracy

de Benoist starts with the very definition of democracy. The word was coined by the Greeks 2500 years ago to describe a system of government used by some city-states. Its roots are demos - people and cracy – power.

The Greek city states were small. The number of people who enjoyed citizenship was even smaller. No slaves. A citizen had to be born of two citizens. Even at that, the affairs of state were sufficiently complex, and the voters so numerous, that they generally had to delegate responsibility rather than decide questions by direct vote.

The Greek situation was substantially different from any modern democracy in another respect. The people – polis – were an organic unit. They were of one stock, genetically and culturally. Society was more than a mere collection of individuals: in general, the well-being of society was considered more important than the well-being of any individual. They would sacrifice an individual such as Socrates for the good of the society. If he was subverting the youth as charged, it was right to put him to death.

Modern democracies are atomistic – composed of individuals. The remaining nation-states such as the Scandinavian countries are being sufficiently diluted with immigrants that the consensus that a welfare state supports “people like me” is being severely tested. de Benoist writes about the exactly the problem they face – a plurality of values:

“The harmony Plato dreamed of nonetheless remains a commendable goal. Pluralism is a positive notion, but it cannot be applied to everything. We should not confuse the pluralism of values, which is a sign of the break-up of society (since, while values only have meaning in respect to other values, they cannot all have equal footing), with the pluralism of opinions, which is a natural consequence of human diversity.”

The Greek idea justification for democracy was that it would establish a meritocracy, opening leadership roles up to the entire populace. Given that, they assumed that the actual leadership itself would always be comprised of an elite. They had no problem with elites and social classes – their concern was for the quality of government. This was Plato’s major theme in “The Republic.” The best government would be that of a philosopher-king. A good man. They come along occasionally in history – Pericles, St. Louis in France, Edward I in England, and maybe Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore. But they are rare, and even these men have their detractors. As Churchill said, democracy is the best of a bad lot: “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried.” Another memorable quote: “The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.”

Abraham Lincoln said in the nineteenth century that all men were equal under the law. Twentieth century democracy has transmuted this to the notion that the purpose of democracy is to ensure equal outcomes for all people. The Communists attempted to do it by brute force. Today's western democracies are attempting the same by softer forms of coercion – income redistribution, affirmative action and school curricula so dilute that they can no longer recognize superior intellect when it is encountered.

This has come about by the continual expansion of the voting franchise. The founders of the United States set up a republican system, representative government, because they did not trust the common man. Yet, the common man of that era had to be self-sufficient – there was no welfare. He was generally literate. In other words, a better specimen than today's average citizen.

The franchise was gradually extended. In the United States, it first went to propertyless white men about 1825, the time of de Tocqueville and Andrew Jackson, when the country started to be known as a democracy. Then it went to ex-slaves. Then it was extended to women. In the 1970s it was extended to teenagers. Now it is being extended, state by state, in fact if not in law, to felons and illegal immigrants. Each European state has its own, somewhat similar, history. Whenever one political faction has power and feels it can strengthen its position by adding more voters, they do it.

The result everywhere is government by some kind of oligarchy. In the United States it is a professional political class, dependent on special interests for the campaign contributions which keep them in office. Attempts to control the flow of money in politics are no more than window dressing, usually designed to handicap one party or the other with the threat of legal liability, while all players keep up the same old games.

The oligarchies of the West are out of step with the interests of the people. Significant majorities in most countries oppose unlimited and illegal immigration, for which the oligarchs, their putative betters, put them down as rubes. When polled, the people say they are generally queasy about the European project, including the single currency, the New World Order, affirmative action programs and much of the progressive program. Nationalist parties emerge, including the Front National in de Benoist's France, and are widely disparaged by the rest of the political establishment. Yet, the technocrats and the moneyed interests behind them, most of all the banks, seem to survive. They have the power to make the platforms of the major parties all more or less favor them, to exclude "extremist parties" which threaten them, and to coopt independent legislators should they happen to get elected.

As I write, Italy is in gridlock, with what appears to be a genuinely unaligned movement, Beppe Grillo's five-star movement, dead set against the continuance of business as usual. The banks in Cyprus have all collapsed and the people are up in arms. It appears as though the model cannot be sustained.

This brings one to the weakest aspect of the book. For all of its exhaustive list of the shortcomings of democracy, it offers no alternative. There is no evolutionary path away from control by oligarchs who use the structures of democracy to acquire and hold power. This is true as well in Eastern Europe,

China, Japan and the Arab world. The alternatives have not changed too much since Plato's time, and none of them are clearly better than what we have now. Churchill was right.